

Book Reviews:

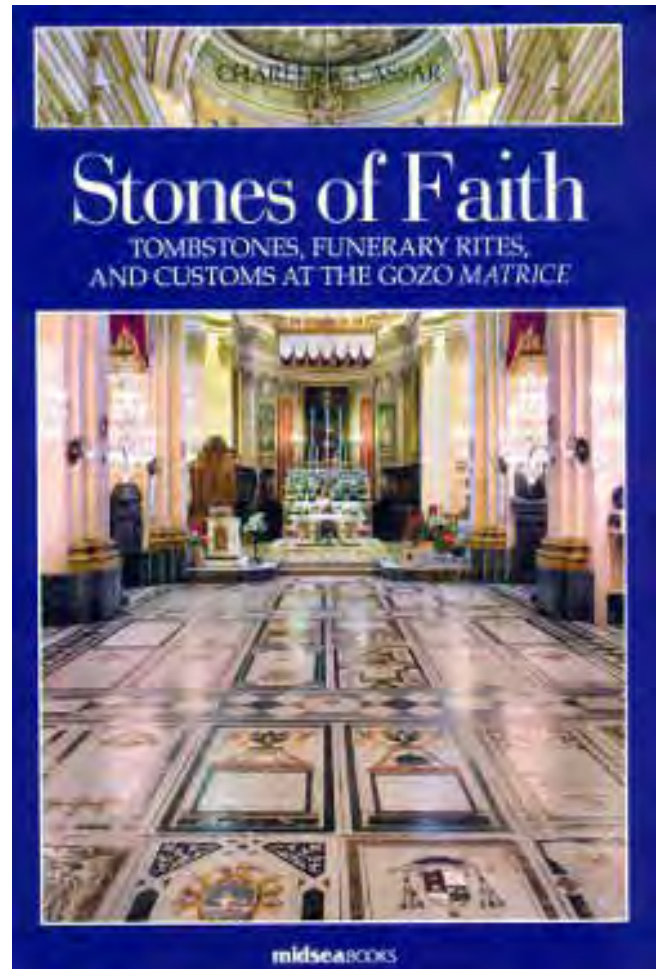
GEOFFREY G. ATTARD

Stones of Faith. Tombstones, Funerary Rites, and Customs at the Gozo Matrice

**Charles R. Cassar,
Malta, Midsea Books, 2012, pp. 204.**

Stones of Faith. Tombstones, Funerary Rites, and Customs at the Gozo Matrice is the name of a sumptuous publication which I have just finished reading, having enjoyed every bit of it and not wanting it to end. In fact, the book is another milestone in the history of the Church in Gozo in the fact that is not simply a narration or analysis of a particular phase in the annals of the Gozitan church but rather a scholarly piece of work that attempts to help the reader to plan his next visit to the Gozo Cathedral with a greater sense of awe and appreciation.

In my opinion the speciality of the book lies in its very subject; Mr. Charles R. Cassar of Victoria has been studying the stone-slabs that enrich the splendid floor of the Matrice Church of Gozo thus bringing to life every inch they cover. It has to be said that until lately, the stone slabs of the Cathedral Church have not been the subject of a focused study. This does not mean that nothing has ever been written about them; on the contrary Cassar provides the interested reader with a great amount of bibliographical notes at the end of each chapter. However it would be fair to say that *Stones of Faith* is the first systematic analysis of these stone slabs. Of course what I have just stated applies only to Gozo since the theme had been the subject of a researched study regarding the Conventual Church of the Knights in Valletta. In his fascinating book *Memento Mori*, researcher Dane Munro transcribed, edited and even translated the inscriptions of the tombstones of the Order into English. However, Mr. Cassar's book has an entirely different aim from Munro's book. In fact the author states quite plainly in



the preface that 'not being versed in the classical languages, it would have been presumptuous on my part to attempt to translate these inscriptions into English, as such translations require a methodical approach in epigraphy and a thorough knowledge of the different inflections of the Latin language' (cfr. xiv). Even without such an accompanying translation, *Stones of Faith* makes for interesting reading. Strictly speaking, Cassar has, perhaps without intending to, laid the table for any researcher who would

like to take into consideration the translation and annotation of the afore-mentioned slabs.

The book should be of interest to both the general reader and the history student. History is however quite a general term and it does have its various connected branches. Epigraphy and heraldry are two such arms. The lover of coat-of-arms and crests could easily feast his eyes on this book. In Gozo, where local noble families were never in their dozens, it was the Church which provided the possibility of flaunting heraldry to its advantage. As to those who might have developed a special fancy for the macabre, *Stones of Faith* is a must. The reader should not forget that in the Catholic Church, parish churches served as cemeteries from time immemorial and it was only the civil law that forbade such use of sacred places through the prohibition of October 1974.

The entire book makes for interesting reading; once you begin reading, it is difficult to put it down. Chapter five is one of the most enticing, providing a couple of curiosities about some particular tombstones. The glossary in the first appendix is very helpful especially for the beginner. The second appendix would be of interest mostly to the researcher. The book has definitely proved itself unique in the fact that it provides between its two hard bound arms the first ever photographic collection of all the stone slabs in the Gozo Cathedral. I would suggest to those who have the history of Gozo close to their heart to obtain a copy of this timely publication. I have no doubt that I will see it referred to in scholarly papers and Melitensia publications in the near future since it has focused on a theme which has until lately been abandoned on the wayside of history.