





Saint Cathaldus chapel, Rabat (after restoration). (Photo credit Dr. Conrad Thake)

The Restoration of St Cathaldus Chapel, Rabat

Conrad Thake gives a short history of the ancient chapel and describes the recent restoration of its exterior.

The first phase in the restoration of the St Cathaldus chapel in Rabat has recently been completed. The chapel had over the years suffered from lack of maintenance and ill-advised interventions. The application of a thick layer of cement-rendering on the lower part of the façade had further accelerated the deterioration of the building fabric. The restoration of the external fabric of the chapel has been undertaken upon the initiative of the archpriest Fr Louis Suban, on behalf of the local parish church authorities.¹

History of the Chapel

The baroque chapel is dedicated to the Irish bishop St Cathaldus. Saint Catald of Taranto (also known as *Cataldus*, *Cathaluds*, *Cat(t)aldo*, *Cathal*), a friend of Saint Patrick, was an Irish monk who lived approximately from 400 to 480 AD. He was proclaimed a saint around 685. Although his early life was spent at a monastery in Lismore, County Waterford, an apparent desire for a life of solitude saw Catald travel to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage. On

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right:
Statue of Saint
Cathaldus, Taranto, Italy

below:
Saint Cathaldus
chapel, Rabat (before
restoration)



opposite:
Plan of San Katald
Catacombs, Rabat
(Survey drawing by Prof.
Mario Buhagiar)

the journey back home, he was shipwrecked off the Italian coast, near the city of Taranto. Within a few years the people of Taranto in Southern Italy had selected Saint Cataldo as their Bishop. Some of the miracles claimed in Cataldo's name include protecting the city against the plague and floods that had occurred in neighbouring areas.²

According to local legend the dedication to Saint Cathaldus was due to the fact that the saint had also stopped briefly in Malta whilst returning from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The site on which the chapel was built was certainly a venerated site from early medieval times. A crypt and an overlying church were built above the Christian hypogeum and the church was popular with devotees of the saint.

Historical documentation on the actual construction of the chapel is sparse and tenuous. The area where the first chapel was built was the site of an extensive network of underground burial chambers.³ Since the times of the early Christians it was a site highly venerated by the faithful.

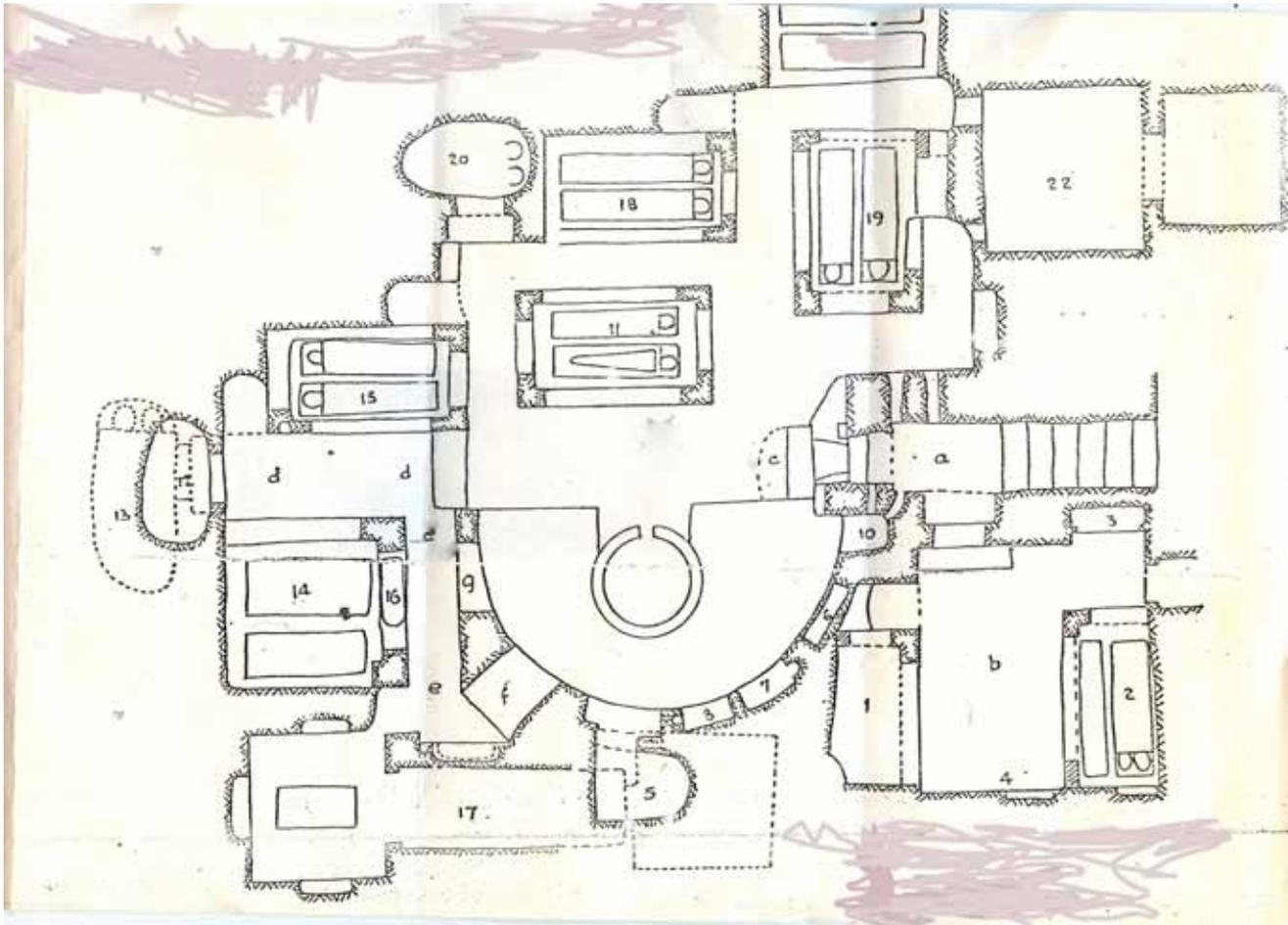


Saint Cathaldus chapel was located at the boundaries of the area known as '*Hal Bajjada*' which was a residential neighbourhood in its own right. The area is known for its high concentration of early-Christian period rock-cut burial chambers including the crypts of St Agatha. During the Roman period the walled boundaries of the ancient capital of Malta, *Melita*, extended all the way up to the site of the present St Paul's parish church. According to the Roman rules and customs at the time, the dead had to be cremated or buried outside the city walls, and so the hypogea started from the area next to the parish church and extended *fuori le mura* (outside the walls) covering an area of approximately two square kilometres.⁴

The first church dedicated to Saint Cathaldus dates to medieval times and, in the absence of any written documentation, we can only assume that it took the form of the typical arched, mono-cellular chapels that were built on the island during the fifteenth century. The chapel must have been reduced to a poor state, however, for it was closed to the public in 1575 following the report of the Apostolic Visitor, Mons. Pietro Dusina.

Subsequently, the medieval chapel was redecorated and re-opened to the faithful, until it was demolished in 1739. The demolition paved the way for the construction of a larger and more imposing chapel in the contemporary Baroque style. The existing chapel was built over the medieval crypt with its underlying Christian hypogeum. In its current form it was completed in 1745.⁵ To date no archival documents have surfaced which reveal the name of the architect or master mason.

The local devotion to Saint Cathaldus remained steadfast. Mass was celebrated on a regular basis within the church and a number of *ex-voto* paintings and silver offerings were made in honour of St Cathaldus.⁶ The titular painting behind the main altar depicts Saint Cathaldus portrayed as a bishop and was painted by the French painter Antoine de Favray (1706-1798).⁷



The church dedicated to Saint Cathaldus is a fine example of mid-eighteenth century Baroque architecture. It also serves as an important historical landmark within the urban context of Rabat, situated as it is between the parish church of St Paul and the nearby early Christian catacombs dedicated to St Paul and St Agatha. Contemporary with the construction of the church is also the statue of Saint Cathaldus, raised as it is on a plinth. Both monuments serve as points of reference or *genius loci* within the urban fabric of Rabat.

Restoration of the chapel

Prior to its restoration, the building fabric of the church was suffering from several conditions which were having a long-term, adverse effect on the building. The most damaging was a thick layer of black cement-rendering and non-porous emulsion paint that had been applied to the lower part of the façade and had contributed to raising dampness and as a consequence the deterioration of the stonework. There were also expanses of stonework that had open mortar joints which were conducive to the percolation of water within the masonry walls. The stone mouldings around the main entrance portal were severely deteriorated and the stonework was flaking and in a powdery state. Also, the roof of the

church and that of the dome and lantern were very poorly maintained. The respective roofs need to be sealed so as to ensure that there was no water penetration. It was not only a matter of poor maintenance but at times also of insensitive intrusions such as the number of metal brackets supporting overhead electricity cables that were rudely hammered into the cornice of the chapel. Besides constituting a visual eyesore, the metal inserts gave rise to adverse spalling of the stonework.⁸

The first step in the restoration process was the preparation of a comprehensive documentation of the chapel in its current state. Detailed drawings of the chapel with elevations highlighting the extent and different types of deterioration were prepared. A detailed restoration method statement was an integral part of the application submitted to MEPA in seeking permission to restore the chapel.

The first stage of restoration entailed the removal of the cement rendering along the lower part of the façade. The façade had previously been subjected to considerable hacking which was both unsightly and tantamount to further stone deterioration. There were a number of alternatives to consider; the total replacement of the hacked stonework was considered to go against the underlying restoration principle of minimum stone replacement whilst the option of applying plastic mortar repair over such a large area would have resulted in a sharp visual contrast between the lower



left:
Detail of entrance portal.
(Photo credit Dr. Conrad Thake)

below:
Detail of façade following
restoration. (Photo credit Dr.
Conrad Thake)

opposite:
Detail of façade following
restoration. (Photo credit Dr.
Conrad Thake)

Notes

- 1 Financing for the restoration was obtained from the local Rabat parish church and a generous heritage grant from Malta Environment Planning Authority (MEPA).
- 2 Today the popularity of Saint Cathaldus in Southern Italy is equal to, if not greater than, the popularity of St. Patrick in Ireland. Over one hundred and fifty churches are dedicated to him in that country and the Cathedral-Basilica in Taranto proudly bears his name. He is the Saint Protector of Corato (Bari), of Gangi (Palermo) and of many other places. A town in Sicily is called San Cataldo. In 1071, during the reconstruction of the Basilica in Taranto, the tomb of Cathaldus was discovered and opened. With his body was found a gold Celtic cross bearing his name the word Rathcau, and a stick carved from Irish oak featuring Celtic design which was to become Catald's emblem. His feast day is celebrated on the 10 May.
- 3 The hypogeum is accessible by means of a flight of steps from the crypt. There are three different types of tombs: the 'Canopied table-grave', the 'Window grave' and the *Loculi* – small graves located on the walls for the burials of babies. All such tombs are located around the main

and upper part of the façade. Under the circumstances, the less intrusive intervention was that of smoothening- out the hacking marks and retaining the original stonework.

There were instances of severely, deteriorated stonework such as the jambs of the doors with intricate mouldings which warranted substitution by identical stone blocks.

There were also missing elements such as the stone Greek-cross that was inscribed above the stone lintel over the main entrance and a couple of broken finials at roof level, which had to be reconstructed. In instances where the stonework was only superficially affected, plastic repair employing lime-based mortars was utilized. Following the restoration of all the stonework including that of the dome, lantern and bell-cote, the façades were manually cleaned under low-pressure water jets to remove fungal growths and water stains. The joints between the stonework were raked-out manually and re-pointed using hydraulic lime with additives to match the colour of the stonework. The actual physical restoration of the exterior of the chapel was conducted over a period of ten months.⁹

Following the completion of the chapel's external restoration, the next phase of the project is the restoration of the chapel's interior and the installation of an adequate lighting system for the underlying catacombs. Once these works are completed the chapel will once again be fully operational and restored to its former glory.





chamber known as the *Triclinium*. A distinctive characteristic of Maltese Christian-era catacombs are the Agape Tables. These are rock-cut tables used for celebratory meals after the burial of the deceased. A prominent canopied table-grave faces the agape table which was decorated by frescoes, faint traces of which are hardly visible today.

- 4 Manuel Ciantar, typescript note dated 18th April 1988.
- 5 Achille Ferres, *Descrizione Storica Delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, 1866 (facsimile edition, 1985), Midsea Books Ltd, p. 105, note II.
- 6 The *ex-voto* paintings retrieved from the chapel today form part of the collection of the Wignacourt College Museum, Rabat. The three *ex-voto* paintings are the following: 'A priest on his knees prays to St Cathaldus', oil on panel, 28cm x 34 cm, dated 1752; 'A priest in his bedroom invokes St Cathaldus', oil on panel, 28cm x 34 cm, 1798; 'A Naval Battle

– Seascape'; oil on canvas, 32 cm x 43 cm; 1796; cited in Can. John Azzopardi, *St Paul's Grotto Church and Museum at Rabat, Malta*, 1990, p. 426.

- 7 For security reasons the original oil on canvas painting has been removed from the chapel and replaced by a photographic facsimile.
- 8 Cited in 'Restoration Method Statement' written by Perit Conrad Thake and submitted as part of the MEPA application to restore the chapel.
- 9 The archpriest of the Rabat parish Canon Fr Louis Suban commissioned the restoration project of the chapel. The architect in charge of the restoration works was Dr. Conrad Thake; all survey work including detailed scaled drawings was undertaken by Mr Chiarlo Dalli; the building contractor in charge of the restoration work was Mr Robert Lia and associates.