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## Parish Clockworks in XIX Century Għaxaq

Time stands still in the small picturesque village of Għaxaq due to a mechanical problem in its church clock. The belfry which houses it was completed by the latter half of the 1750s, when the construction of the new church to the design of architect Sebastian Saliba (1709 – 1782) was in full swing.<sup>1</sup>

The middle years of the eighteenth century bear witness to the construction of two important clocks. The Pinto turret clock at the Grandmaster's Palace was inaugurated earlier in 1745 whilst the still functioning church clock of the Conventual Church of St. John's dates to the late 1760's.<sup>2</sup> No records revealing the author of the Għaxaq parish church clock have been traced to date, although technical data points to eighteenth century methodology of construction.<sup>3</sup>

The earliest known references date to 1814 when Maestro Carlo Balzan was paid 7 scudi and 6 grani "per tre corde per l'orologio."<sup>4</sup> More important however is an interesting document dated 1865, which testifies to an intervention in this parish clock by the well-known clock maker, Michelangelo Sapiano (1826-1912). This noteworthy horologist had by then achieved widespread recognition for his skills. His genius had been confirmed by a certificate and a gold medal awarded by the Malta Society of Arts, Manufacture and Commerce in 1857.<sup>5</sup> Sapiano was also awarded the Silver Medal in the Maltese Industry Exhibition in the year preceeding the Għaxaq commission.<sup>6</sup> All these achievements seem to put the procurator's choice for the repair of his church clock as an obvious one.

The entry in the Veneranda Lampada<sup>7</sup> records, forming part of the Għaxaq parish archives, describes the payment as affected by the procurator Don Giuseppe Demicoli in favor of a 'restoration' exercise undertaken by Sapiano.<sup>8</sup> Yet, in his receipt, Sapiano justifies a total sum of 165 scudi paid '*per lavori fatti in una riparazione e rinovazione*'.

Furthermore, he lists '*trenta centri di bronzo*', a pendulum and '*quattro assi*', as well as three '*ruccelli*', two '*ruote della sfera*' and a '*ruota dello scappamento e lo scappamento*'.<sup>9</sup> All these parts are listed as having been changed or radically modified by Sapiano himself. These replacements as well as the total sum quoted for the intervention seem to weigh more in favor of a renovation exercise than mere repair works. In this context, the said sum is, on the other hand, surprisingly high when compared to the cost of church clocks produced by Sapiano during the same period. The one for Casal Chircop constructed in 1862 had cost 27 scudi whilst an earlier version for Gudia (1860) had cost 30 scudi.<sup>10</sup> A later example constructed by Sapiano for a private client in 1871 amounted to 42 scudi.<sup>11</sup> It is difficult at this point to justify this exorbitant expense. If the figures quoted by Castagna are correct, a commission for a new clock could have been more feasible. On the other hand, there could well exist the possibility that the reasons behind this greater expense outweighed the installation of a new clock. Technical data about the clock does confirm that eighteenth century birdcage type models keep time rather precisely.<sup>12</sup> This latter proposal is further supported by a concern for correct time keeping which is sensed in particular entries in the parish records. In 1851 the procurator agreed to pay the church sexton 18 scudi for three years in advance '*per dar cura all'orologio mentre negli antecedenti anni li davano erroneamente dalla fondazione Caterina Mallia Gauci*'.<sup>13</sup>

Sapiano's intervention is recorded after a series of seemingly regular '*accomodate*' to the parish clock which seem to betray an inherent mechanical problem. In 1824, Agostino Calleja and a blacksmith were paid 6 scudi and 2 grani '*per accomodata del battente*'.<sup>14</sup> Expenses in respect of '*catene dell'orologio*' are also recorded in the same entry.<sup>15</sup> A mere five years later, a payment of six scudi is recorded '*per porto e riporto delle ruote dell'istesso orologio*' and '*per due roccelli dell'orologio*'.<sup>16</sup> A seemingly important intervention occurred a few years later in 1833 when the procurator of the Veneranda Lampada paid 81 scudi '*per accomodata dell'orologio*'.<sup>17</sup> In 1837, Maestro Paolo Sapiano was paid the sum of 7 scudi by the procurator once again in favor of restoring the church clock.<sup>18</sup> Further payments are noted in 1840 in favor of Maestro Pietro Tanti,<sup>19</sup> and later in 1843.<sup>20</sup> Mro. Pietro was called a second time during the same year '*per l'accomodata dell'orologio*'.<sup>21</sup> These successive payments betray a recurrent concern for the regular functioning of the church clock. Sapiano's intervention appears to have

been decisively successful since no entries in respect of 'accomodature' or other related works are recorded after his intervention. Payments for repair works in the church clock are only noted as late as 1899 when Pasquale Sapiano was paid a mere 4 grani for works in the same clock.<sup>22</sup>

An unhappy occurrence seems to have given a helping hand in making good for the necessary expenses. During the same year the island was hit by a severe outbreak of cholera between the 20th June and the 20th of November. In the micro context of a small village, this event is reflected in the record of expenses related to the titular feast of the village. External festivities were kept to a minimum and collections money was thus saved.<sup>23</sup> Don Giuseppe Demicoli was thus left with a balance of 99 scudi, which he willingly defrayed '*per il compimento dell'orologio*.'<sup>24</sup> At face value this appears to be a mere accountancy exercise. But a deeper analysis of parish revenue, as far as the titular feast is concerned, hints at noteworthy aspects which although typical of an agricultural society, tell us much about the inhabitants of this village in the mid nineteenth century.

The collection of monies for the celebration of the titular feast in 1865 can be distinguished as deriving from two sources; collection of money from the parishioners and collection of wheat and cereals from the local farmers. This division does reflect the social stratification of this small community although a degree of overlapping cannot be excluded. Besides, this method of income is not only pertinent to 1865 but is current practice throughout the nineteenth century. The published table sums up the situation over a ten year period between 1863 and 1873 with the collection divided into three categories. These can be defined as collections of wheat and cereals, monies collected on a door to door basis (*raccolte per giro del casale*), and monies collected from individual parishioners which parish records define as elites.<sup>25</sup> It is immediately evident that monies collected were far less when the intake of grain and cereals by the parish priest is taken on record as low, perhaps due to bad harvests. This is the case in 1867 when due to the small amount of produce collected for this purpose, the revenue for the feast dropped from the 236 scudi of the previous year to 186 scudi. The same happened in 1864, when revenue had dropped from 321 to 244 scudi and were it not for a separate collection by two '*deputati in giro per il casale*,' the total sum collected would have been a mere 198 scudi. On the other hand, a good intake of agricultural produce meant

a substantial increase in the sum collected. This seems to have been the case in 1873 when the produce collected fetched 107 scudi. The year 1868 registered the greatest amount in so far as value of produce collected; 137 scudi worth of wheat (*grano duro e mischiato*), as well as cereals, were collected out of a total of 261 scudi.

The agricultural component is thus an important source of revenue for the parish church. It eventually supported the important events of the community as well the embellishment of the same parish church symbolically completed in 1784.<sup>26</sup> Parish records often betray a concern of identifying this collection of agricultural produce with a specific purpose. This is also applicable in the context of cotton cultivation, which had nonetheless decreased drastically on a national scale by the middle years of the nineteenth century. Parish records refer to '*raccolte del cotone*' recorded as directed towards particular needs and projects. In 1857, monies collected '*rimase in sussidio delle spese della cupola*' whilst in 1862 and 1863, monies acquired from the same '*raccolta*' were diverted to Don M.A. Farrugia who was collecting money for a new bell.<sup>27</sup> In the context of the 1865 intervention on the village church clock, it is understandable that the agricultural strata of the community could have possibly exercised greater emphasis leading to its overhaul. Incidentally, Giuseppe's financial troubles were eased during the same year thanks to a good collection of agricultural produce. From its sale he managed to collect the sum of 106 scudi. On the other hand, he refrained from requesting the usual contribution from the village elites due to the unforeseen sanitary circumstances. It is however curious to note that Michelangelo Sapiano had nonetheless already been paid in full well before the titular feast, before the outbreak of the cholera epidemic and perhaps even before the collection of money for the titular feast had even started.<sup>28</sup> In this context, the procurator seems to have had a try at catching two birds with one stone. By diverting the surplus money from the feast collection to pay for Sapiano's toils, he not only sought to ease pressure on Veneranda Lampada funds but could have also come up with a justification to 'spend' this excess income in favor of a desired necessity. This could have possibly been the very reason which was given to the contributors for the village feast amongst whom those donating agricultural produce were as usual the most noteworthy.

Michelangelo Sapiano's services were once again requested in 1874 to repair a clock in the sacristy of the parish church.<sup>29</sup> Earlier in 1868, a mere two years after his successful intervention in the village

clock, he was also commissioned a winch to be used for hoisting the canopy of the parish church.<sup>30</sup> Sapiano's generosity was furthermore acknowledged by Don Giuseppe Demicoli when in 1865, the former donated a clock to the newly constructed filial church of the 'Redeemer' known as 'Santu Kristu'.<sup>31</sup> Don Giuseppe remunerated him with a donation, in the same year that Sapiano performed his necessary intervention in the parish church clock. Incidentally, Don Giuseppe also happened to be the person responsible for this rural church. Demicoli was to be symbolically complimented for his toils and troubles later in 1895, when the procurators of this filial church commissioned the renowned Maltese painter Lazzaro Pisani (1854 – 1932) to paint a portrait of this generous and hard working personality.<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> C. Mizzi & A. Mangion, *Il-Knisja ta' Hal Għaxaq: 200 Sena Kkonsagrata*, (Malta 1984), 25.

<sup>2</sup> G. Bonello, *Histories of Malta – Figments and Fragments*, Vol.2, (Malta 2001), 80.

<sup>3</sup> S. Zammit, *The Għaxaq Parish Church Clock*, Unpublished technical report, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> A. P.GH., *Veneranda Lampada 1798-1820*, f. 21.

<sup>5</sup> "Michelangelo Sapiano" in *Heritage*, Vol. 2, 409.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Veneranda Lampada records are computations of revenue and general expenses of the church in question as against revenue and expenditure belonging to confraternities.

<sup>8</sup> A. P.GH., *Libro Esito della Veneranda Lampada – Liber R 1848*, f.75v. The payment is recorded as 'pagati in tre volte.'

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> P. P. Castagna, *L-Istorja ta' Malta bil-Għejjer Tagħha*, 251. Castagna, further adds that the Kirkop church clock was constructed to operate on two faces whilst the Gudja version and the one at Dragonara only operated on one face (*quadrante*).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Verbal Communication with Mr. Stephen Zammit (20 September 2002).

<sup>13</sup> A.P.Gh., *Libro Esito Veneranda Lampada – Liber R, 1848*, f.66. The full entry reads thus – "Al medesimo serviente per tre anni fino tutto il corrente anno per un assegnamento di scudi 6 annui a ragione

*di dar cura dell'orologio mentre negli antecedenti anni li davano erroneamente dalla fondazione Caterina Mallia Gauci."*

<sup>14</sup> A.P.Gh., *Veneranda Lampada* – Esito B, f.116.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., f.126.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., f.133. (24 March 1833).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., f.142. (30 October 1837).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., f.145. (5 April 1840). "A Mro. Pietro Tanti per accomodatura dell'orologio: 22 scudi".

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., f.149. (13 March 1843). "A Mro. Bronzaro per due dentature nella ruota dell' orologio - 9 scudi".

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., f.150. (17 November 1843). A payment of 8 scudi is noted.

<sup>22</sup> A.P.Gh., *Libro Esito Veneranda Lampada* – Libro R, f.107.

<sup>23</sup> A.P.Gh., *Spese per la Festa Titolare*, unnumbered folios. *Introito per la solennita del titolare -1865: "in questo anno non si fece la luminazione causante il morbo colera."*

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> The collections frequently list the usual number of elites who generally donate between 2 scudi, 6 grani and 5 scudi each. In respect of 1866 reference is made to a Console Lorenzo Farrugia as well as to a second Console by the name of Slajt (Sleigh). Various members of the Naudi family are listed as contributors throughout the years under review. Foremost amongst the Naudis one finds enlisted a Signor Illustrissimo Giudice Naudi who was also a leading member of the confraternity of the blessed sacrament within the same casale.

<sup>26</sup> C. Mizzi & R. Mangion, *Il-Knisja ta' Hal Ghaxaq*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> A.P.Gh., *Introito* – *Veneranda Lampada*, f.57.

<sup>28</sup> Sapiano's receipt is dated 24 May 1865.

<sup>29</sup> A.P.Gh., *Libro Esito* – *Veneranda Lampada* – Libro R, f.85.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., f.78. The cost of this winch amounted to 46 scudi and is once again comparable to expenditure by other parishes in the construction of a new clock.

<sup>31</sup> A.P.Gh., *Libro Introito ed Esito della Fabbrica della Chiesa del Ssmo. Redentore* – *Casal Asciak*, f.100.

<sup>32</sup> A.P.Gh., *Registro dell'introito ed Esito della Ven. Chiesa filiale*, f. 129. Entry dated 18 August 1895. The painting cost £7 and is an excellent portrait executed in oils which compares favorably to the best works of the artist. This painting has been discovered by the author during his research and is being published for the first time in this article.