



# CARAVAGGIO

AND PAINTINGS OF REALISM IN MALTA



The St John's Co-Cathedral Foundation

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## GIULIO CASSARINO (1588–1637) A Biographical Outline

The discovery of a faint signature on two local paintings, situated at the church of the Carmelite friars and St John's co-cathedral both in Valletta, scrawled in oil colours and carrying the word *Cassarino*, has raised interest amongst the local art lovers in the identity of an otherwise largely obscure painter. A thorough search reveals that the name *Cassarino* is signed on at least another work in Malta.<sup>1</sup> The three paintings are: *St Maurus healing a Sick Child* at the small church of the Virgin of Liesse in Valletta; *St Sebastian tended by St Irene* at St John's co-cathedral (Fig. 1); and *St Theresa of Avila* at the church of the Virgin of Mount Carmel, Valletta.<sup>2</sup> Though the paintings may be signed *ad futuram rei memoria*, this particular artist appears to have escaped posterity for a long time. Now, however, the local art scene is intrigued. The interest in this painter is all the greater as he appears to have been a contemporary of the great master Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. More importantly, he seems to have been one of the very few artists in Malta who painted in a manner that was influenced by Caravaggio. In fact, he has been heralded as one of the significant Caravaggists working in Malta.<sup>3</sup>

Very little is known about Cassarino, to the extent that even his identity is a historical enigma. The biographical riddle is complex as Cassarino appears to lose visibility within the historical record immediately after his demise. He is forgotten by the eighteenth century<sup>4</sup> and no mention of him is made in chronicles from the nineteenth century. Interest in Cassarino was, however, revived in the second half of the twentieth century by a veteran of Malta's art history, Vincenzo Bonello.<sup>5</sup> Cassarino was again the subject of an essay by John Cauchi in 1977,<sup>6</sup> by which time international scholarship on Caravaggio had established itself to an extent that it made the time ripe for reassessments of Caravaggists too.<sup>7</sup>

This paper will attempt to shed new light on a man called Giulio Cassarino who, in all probability, is the artist who signed these works. It should be made clear, however, that despite the fact that at least one of the records quoted in this paper refers to Giulio Cassarino as *Magister*, thus possibly designating him as a painter, such a title could also be used for persons who enjoyed particular social esteem.<sup>8</sup> No document has yet been discovered which contains specific reference to painting



Fig. 1. Giulio Cassarino, *St Sebastian tended by St Irene*, St John's co-cathedral, detail

commissions given to this Giulio Cassarino or, indirectly, to his work.

My research departed from a thorough check for the appearance of the surname Cassarino in the local parish registers around the time that this painter was thought to have been active in Malta. Cassarino's presumed stay followed that of Caravaggio and his works were pinpointed as having probably been executed during the second and third decades of the seventeenth century. Furthermore, it should be stressed that two of the three signed paintings discovered up to now provide the only surviving reference to the surname Cassarino. Further research reveals that the artist had signed his name in full on the painting of *St Maurus*. Unfortunately, the signature suffered damage along the years and the middle letters went missing, to the extent that what has remained is the following <Gv... ..rino>.<sup>9</sup> Yet, what has been salvaged seems to point out that the artist has left his mark in full, with the first two letters standing for Giulio and the other four letters, representing the last letters of his surname.

From my research, it appears that the surname Cassarino was only registered in Valletta.<sup>10</sup> This research, at least, established that the surname really existed

in Malta during the time when these paintings were executed. The research was also extended to the first decades of the seventeenth century and the last decade of the sixteenth. There was, however, no other Cassarino recorded in the parishes in Malta at the time. The only one to bear the surname is the 'Giulio' who turned up in the Valletta register.

Here it should be said that the two major studies that refer to Cassarino are by Dominic Cutajar and Giovanni Bonello. Cutajar appears to mix the identity of Giulio Cassarino with that of a local villager, Giulio Felice.<sup>11</sup> According to Cutajar, the full name Giulio Cassarino appears for the first time in the Baptismal Register of Porto Salvo in Valletta, in an act dated 10 January 1610.<sup>12</sup> The author quotes in support of this claim the first Baptismal Register of the Parish of Porto Salvo, giving as reference for this information folio number 43r.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, when the present author sought to check this entry at the Parish of Porto Salvo, this baptismal register was missing. Instead, what is available is a copy of this register. When all the entries of this volume were checked, the entry bearing the date 10 January 1610 did not carry any information about Cassarino. Instead, it recorded the baptism of Giovanni Larocca, son of Antonio and Grazia. His godparents were D. Sig. Giovanni Divino and Margerita di Guilglem.<sup>14</sup> Further checks were undertaken and, thanks to the sterling research of two past history students, J. Testa and H. Zammit,<sup>15</sup> all the records of Porto Salvo could be rechecked. Once again, the name of Giulio Cassarino did not turn up in the list of children baptized during this period or in that of parents or godfathers.<sup>16</sup>

Presumably, if the 1610 reference is correct, Giulio Cassarino appeared in the records of Porto Salvo in the guise of a godparent. It is a great pity that the authenticity of this information cannot be checked in the absence of the original

of the volume in question. However, until such a reference is recovered, the first time that this name appears in Malta is in connection with a *Status Libero* document.

In fact, the first time the full name of Giulio Cassarino appears in the local archives is in a document at the Curia Archives in Floriana. The document is a *Status Libero* Act dated 22 February 1614. The *Status Liberi* documents record court proceedings instituted by the local ecclesiastical authorities to establish that foreign individuals in Malta who wished to marry here were not already married abroad. Since Giulio Cassarino was seeking permission to marry in Malta indicates that he must have established his residence in Malta sometime before 1614. Giulio Cassarino put forward his claim early in 1614. He affirmed that he hailed from the town of Avola, in Sicily, and was 24 years old. He also stated that he had been married to Paola de Marino but that his wife had died about five years earlier; he presented witnesses to support his claim.<sup>17</sup> The first witness was Vincenzo Dito from Rhodes who confirmed the demise of Cassarino's wife. The second witness was Fra Lutio Candia from Platea.<sup>18</sup>

This document also confirms the fact that the name Giulio Cassarino stands for a distinct individual and that one can correctly talk about the identity of two separate individuals, that of Giulio Felice and of Giulio Cassarino. As both Giulio Felice and Giulio Cassarino were recorded in two separate documents to have died on the same day at the Sacra Infermeria in Valletta, it was thought that they were one and the same person.<sup>19</sup> Despite what has been written in the past regarding the possibility that Cassarino could be a diminutive of the surname Cassar, this document confirms that Cassarino is a Sicilian surname. This is confirmed by Girolamo Caracausi who, in his dictionary of Sicilian surnames, shows that this surname was quite common in Sicily

and was present in Palermo, Trapani, Castelveltrano, Syracuse, and in the city and provinces of Caltanissetta and Ragusa. According to Caracausi, this surname was common also outside Sicily, around Cosenza and Naples.<sup>20</sup>

Once Cassarino obtained the necessary permissions from the local Church authorities, he proceeded to marry Silvia Bezzina at St Paul's church, Valletta on 6 April 1614. The parish priest added another important piece of information, as he indicated him as *forestiero*, i.e. 'a foreigner'. This in part confirms that he was the same person who had applied, at the Curia, to get married. The word *forestiero* was only used by parish priests for individuals who were marrying in the parish but hailed from abroad: that is, the groom was not born and baptized in any one of the parishes falling under Maltese ecclesiastical jurisdiction, which during this period also included Gozo. The second confirmation comes from the fact that his state of widowhood was also indicated in his marriage act by the Latin term *viduo*, meaning 'widower'.

The act demonstrates that the man bearing the name Giulio Cassarino had links with local craftsmen. He is recorded marrying the daughter of a *maestro*, Domenico Bezzina and Caterina. The marriage act gives her name as Salva but she was registered as Silva in the baptismal register of Mdina.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Cassarino's wife was born at Rabat in 1601, after the Bezzina family moved residence to this town from their home village of Zebbug. Furthermore, all the witnesses present for this marriage had an exogenous surname (that is of non-Maltese origins), and two out of the three witnesses registered carried the title of *maestri*. The parish priest of St Paul's, Don Giovanni Pace, who recorded the marriage ceremony, indicated the presence of other witnesses, but failed to spell the names. If proof were needed about Giulio Cassarino's craftsmanship,

this appears in the baptismal records where he was constantly identified as an artisan. In fact, he was endowed with no title in his marriage act but was always recorded by the title of *maestro* in each and every baptismal record of his offspring.

Giulio Cassarino's *Status Libero* made it also possible to trace his family back to the town of Avola in Sicily. At Avola, Cassarino was born to *Maestro* Mariano Cassarino and Antonina Bambana. He was their second child, born on 3 January 1588, and his proper name was Giovanni Giulio.<sup>22</sup> The parish birth registers of Avola record three other siblings: Francesco (1583),<sup>23</sup> Mario (1591),<sup>24</sup> and Antonio (1599).<sup>25</sup> In Sicily, Giulio Cassarino married Paula Masa, who was also born at Avola, but their marriage act is missing. The same holds for the registration of the death of his wife. Whatever the circumstances, the death of his wife Paula prompted Giulio to move to Malta, where he set up anew.<sup>26</sup>

Once remarried, Giulio Cassarino settled down in the parish of St Paul's in Valletta, where he had his first-born, Giovanna, on 6 November 1616. On 18 July 1617, the name of Giulio Cassarino appears in the registers of the Hospitallers' chancery. He was appointed a *familiare* or member of the household of the Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt. It was a prestigious title for those days, in particular for someone who did not hail from the nobility.<sup>27</sup> The Bull does not explain why Giulio Cassarino was appointed member of the household, but one is tempted to explain such an appointment by Grand Master Wignacourt in terms of a recognition of Cassarino's artistic merits.

There is a hiatus in the records of about fourteen years. Nothing is known about Cassarino's life during this period, especially whether he was still in Malta or whether he had returned to Sicily. He is definitely again on the island in 1631. In that year his wife Silva, together with her eldest sister, opened a court case against a

certain Gio Paolo Agius, from which we learn that Giulio Cassarino was at the time living next to the slave prison in Valletta. In fact, Cassarino lived his last years in the house of his father-in-law, Domenico Bezzina. Bezzina's residence was situated '*sotto le prigioni de' Schiavi*'. In other words it was in the area of Valletta known as *l-Arcipingu*, probably at the lower end of St Ursula Street.

Furthermore, this court case reveals that Giulio Cassarino had in the meantime enhanced his social status, as he is now called '*magister*'.<sup>28</sup> During this period, the couple had their next child, Alfonso, born on 5 October 1631. The third and last child was Blasio Emanuele, born on 24 January 1635. The fifteen-year gap in the records raises the possibility of a small anomaly, for in those days it was not the norm for a couple to experience such big gaps between the birth of one child and the next.

The choice of marriage witnesses for Giulio Cassarino's remarriage shows that the groom and the bride enjoyed a certain status. Then a widower, Giulio Cassarino had no difficulty in marrying the daughter of an artisan. Once he had arrived in Valletta, he immediately succeeded in finding his place in the circle of artisans active in the Valletta society of the time. As already indicated, two marriage witnesses were described as *maestri*; M(aestro) Gioan Paulo di Lucia and M(aestro) Filippo Varcana. The third witness was Vincenzo Violubre. Judging from the surname of these individuals, one can rightly conclude that they were foreigners living in Malta, presumably working in the different tasks that the building of a city entailed at the time. The death records of St Paul's church in Valletta give the date of Giulio Cassarino's demise as 15 May 1637. The parish act further specifies that he had died at the Sacra Infermeria.<sup>29</sup> In those days, the majority of the deaths occurred at home with the result that death in hospital was normally associated with individuals who

had no roof over their head or perhaps had been victims of an accident.

The above information fits in perfectly with the date of execution of the paintings attributed to Cassarino although the exact date of arrival of Giulio Cassarino in Malta is not yet known. Fra Lucio de Candia, the knight who was called by Cassarino to appear at the *Status Libero* hearings, stated that had known Cassarino for the previous five years, but failed to state whether he knew him at Avola or during Cassarino's stay in Malta. Did Giulio Cassarino leave Avola for Malta exactly after his wife's death? If it were so, it would mean that he arrived in Malta around 1608–09, coinciding with Caravaggio's departure from Malta. What is certain is the fact that Cassarino was in Malta from 1614 onwards and resided in Valletta at least until 1616.

The fact that in Giulio Cassarino's court case no reference is made to any sojourn in Malta prior to 1614 can be taken as a possible indication that he had not previously visited the island and that he arrived in Malta for the first time in that particular year. This may appear rather peculiar in the context of research covering past migratory trends, as usually when short-distance migration was in play the prospective migrant would have already visited his eventual new home before finalizing the move and settling down. Unfortunately, the testimony given by the witnesses, or better still what was recorded by the court clerk, is rather scanty and no definitive conclusion can be reached about this point.

However, this study can help us in the reassessment of a number of works that until now have been attributed to Cassarino. In fact, most of the paintings attributed to Giulio Cassarino were believed to have been executed during the time that Fra Pedro Urreo de Camerasa

was Grand Prior of the conventual church of St John (1601–24). The fact that a number of the paintings carry the coats of arm of this Grand Prior may suggest that these paintings could be the work of the same artistic hand.

The working hypothesis put forward by Cauchi was that Cassarino's period of activity in Malta extended from 1601,<sup>30</sup> the year that Fra Pedro Urrea Camerasa was elected Grand Prior, until 1624, when he died. Thus, whilst it is possible that Camerasa engaged Cassarino, the first commission would have been given either in 1613 or 1614, provided that the painter had not visited the island before (though such a visit seems to be highly improbable, as explained earlier on).

Furthermore, the biographical notes on Cassarino, as they emerge from the current documents, seem to exclude the possibility of an enormous output of paintings, in the sense that most probably Cassarino's activity during the Camerasa period would have been between 1613/14 until the Grand Prior's death. Research confirmed that he signed and dated the *St Maurus* painting as finished in 1623. Taking into consideration that the name of Giulio Cassarino appears again in the documentation available until now after a gap of eight years means that the artist was in Malta around that year, and most probably had a continuous sojourn from 1616 to 1623. Once his name and surname reappears again in the Acts, in 1631, his presumed patron, Camerasa, had already been dead for about 7 years.

The research on the figure of Cassarino has hopefully helped to better define the figure of this mysterious artist. Aesthetic judgments remain, of course, the province of art critics and historians. My evaluations of the relevant biographical and social context surrounding Cassarino must remain secondary to those judgments.