

TREASURES OF MALTA

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CHRESTION AVG. B.
INSULARVM MELI ET
COLUMNS CVM FASTI
ET PARIETIBVS TEMPLI
PROSERPINAЕ VETVS
RVINAM INMINENTIBV

TITVIT SIMVL ET PIL
INAVRAVIT.

4. THOMAS CONSTANTIVS
VETEREM LAPIDEM IN MULTA FRUSTA DI
EXTANTIBUS COMPACTIS
ET DEPERDITIS EX ANTIQVARIORVM SCHEDIS
AD POSTERITATIS MEMORIAM RESTA



Fig. 1
The Chrestion Inscription:
The slightly faded parts are
the only original parts of the
inscription. The rest is the
fruit of the reconstruction
undertaken on the initiative
of Count Gio. Antonio
Ciantar. This inscription was
originally at the Jesuit College
in Valletta. It got broken after
this college was taken over by
Grand Master Pinto in 1768.
(Photo: Daniel Cilia)

The Proserpina Temple and the History of its Chrestion Inscription

Simon Mercieca lists and clarifies the information surrounding
this famed inscription

If there is one Roman remain found in Malta that has intrigued many scholars, this is the Chrestion Inscription. Interest in this inscription was prompted by the desire to know the exact meaning of its Latin wording and the legal implications that these words could have for the general history of Malta during Roman times.

A few months before he died on 1st April 2014, Rev. Dr Joseph Busuttil handed me some papers, which he had written but never found the time to publish. For this reason, I have started editing them to make their publication possible. The Chrestion Inscription is the subject of one of them. Busuttil had translated this inscription and dated it after 27BC. His English translation is as follows, but the last words in the brackets are my addition:

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Chrestion the freedman of Augustus, procurator of the islands of Melita and Gaulos restored the columns together with the gables and the walls of the temple of Proserpina which was in grave danger of collapsing through old age; at the same time he also gilded the pillar [of the statue].

Rev. Dr Busuttil had made this translation followed by a detailed analysis, which is going to be the subject of a separate study to be published in the next issue of this publication.

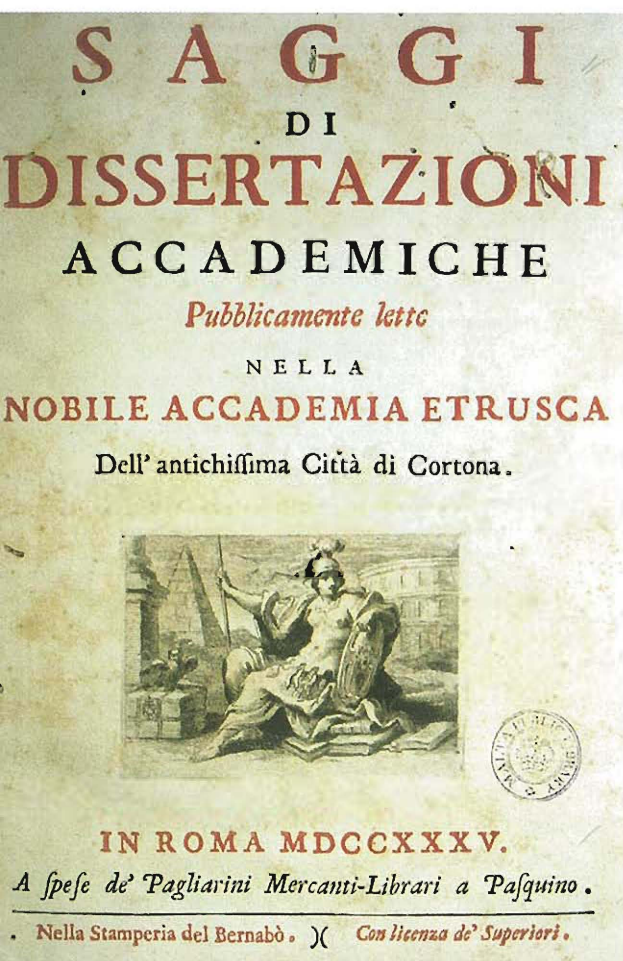


Fig. 2
The frontispiece of the book *Saggi di Dissertazioni Accademiche Pubblicamente Lette nella Nobile Accademia Etrusca* (Rome, 1735), in which Giuseppe Claudio Guyot published the letter of the Maltese scholar [Thomas *sive*] Ignazio Constanzo.

This was written when he was still teaching Classics at the University of Malta. In the meantime, four important publications about Roman Malta appeared which refer to this inscription:

- The first is by Anthony Bonanno, *Malta Romana*, published in 1992, wherein the author bemoans the fragmentary state of this inscription, '*dunque di non facile interpretazione*'.¹
- In the second, Anthony Pace reproduced a black and white photograph of this inscription in the frontispiece of his book *Melit. & Gaul* (1995) but makes no reference to its history.
- In the third, Horace Vella translated for the first time this inscription into Maltese.²
- In the fourth, Bonanno returns to the text in his book *Malta, Phoenician, Punic and Roman* published in 2005. This time, Bonanno places the inscription within the wider framework of Roman Malta but with great caution states that Chrestion 'seems to be an example' of a personal agent of the Roman Emperor known as 'procurator'. It commemorates a certain Chrestion's generosity towards the temple of Proserpina. According to Bonanno, the last sentence of this inscription is not clear and has been read variously as 'at the same time he gilded the pillar'. Bonanno rightly asks: 'which pillar?' Bonanno thinks that the Latin word '*pila*' refers to the fact that Chrestion 'also gilded the cult statue'.³ In my opinion, this word '*pila*' could easily refer to the statue's pedestal.

In the light of these observations, Busuttil's work assumes great importance for the history of Malta. Not only does he give us a learned opinion as to the correct interpretation of the text but more importantly, he places the inscription within its correct historical context solving, in the process, riddles related to the history of Malta during Roman times.

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Fig. 3
Ludovico Muratori's transcription of the Chrestion Inscription. It was published in Volume 3 of his book, *Novus Thesaurus Veterum* (Milan, 1739).

According to a study carried out in the second half of the eighteenth century by Giuseppe Jacopo Testaferata, this inscription was discovered by Petro Burlo. The first person, however, to reproduce this tablet was Giorgio Gualtieri in a publication that appeared in Rome.⁴ It is not clear in what condition it was found. Most probably, it was discovered shattered after peasants tilling their land scattered the fragments.⁵

Giovanni Francesco Abela specifies that the inscription was found on the Mtarfa hill, a few metres away from where other ruins of the temple of Proserpina were lying: these were in the precincts of the Church of St Michael next to the sief known as 'al giardino ditto del Rē'.⁶ Abela also locates the exact position of this Temple on the map of Mdina and its environs that he included in his book. But he was far more interested in the fragments of this inscription, which he picked up for his museum-home at Marsa.

The next task was its transcription and to account for the words or letters that had gone missing by then. The inscription had been transcribed by both Burlo and Gualtieri, but Abela was not happy with these transcriptions and interpretations and ended up seeking the advice of a certain Don Pietro Carrera, reputed to be an outstanding Latinist.⁷ The inscription was in such a bad state that there were even problems deciphering a number of words. But as Joseph Busuttil affirms, the work was good on the whole, even if there was a word or fragment missing and could not be reconstituted. Instead the missing text was indicated by Abela through a series of diacritic symbols. Another word was spelled incorrectly: 'Fastidiis' (meaning loathing) should have been 'fastigiis' (meaning gables).

There was a debate whether the first words on the inscription were one or two separate words. If read as one word, it stood for a person, the subject of this paper, Chrestion Augustus (as Gualtieri insisted), but if they were separate, as Carrera recommended, they stood for two separate persons; Chrestion and the Emperor Augustus. Unfortunately, none

of the original parts with the letters and/or words has come down to us that could help elucidate further.

Abela's reproduction was to become the authoritative text regarding this inscription for all future scholars. It was at this point that another important scholar of Maltese classical history comes in; this was Tommaso Constanzo. Constantius restored the broken tablet and as was the custom at the time, added a short note stating that he, 'Thomas Constantius put together the ancient fragments which were broken in many pieces and filled the missing words using old drafts for

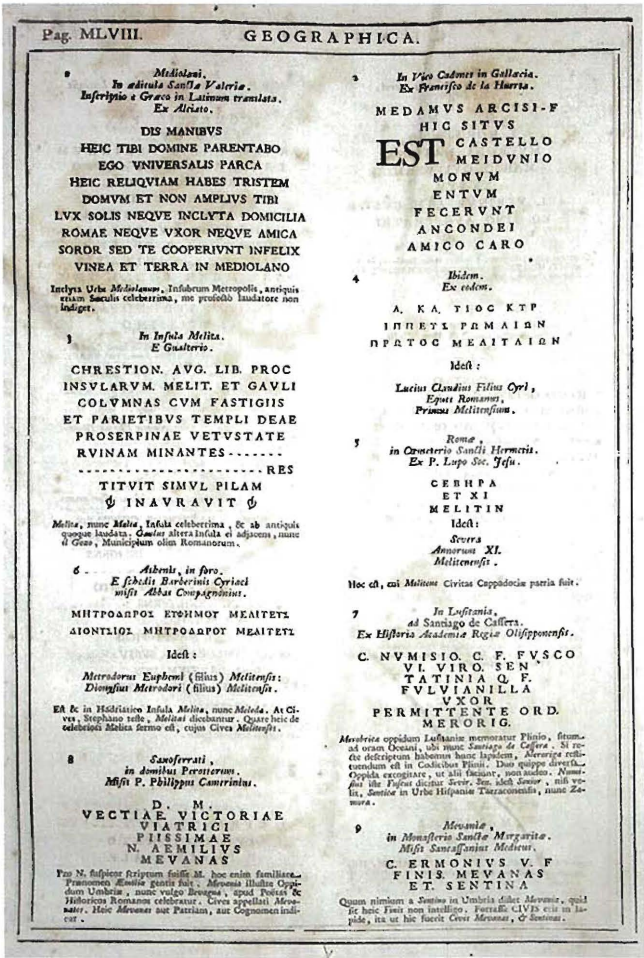




Fig. 4
The Cippus from the Temple of Tas-Silg. It was published by Giuseppe Claudio Guyot in the book *Saggi...*, p. 25. The cippi were discovered at Marsaxlokk after 1647 and Abela took them to decorate the entrance corridor of his villa at Marsa.

future memory'. However, it is not clear whether Tommaso Constanzo put the surviving marble pieces together before or after Abela published his work.⁸ Like Abela, Constanzo used the diacritic signs to indicate the missing piece of this inscription. It is this restored inscription by Constanzo, which ends up at Abela's home at Marsa.

Tommaso Constanzo was born in Valletta on 1608, the son of the physician Giuseppe Costanzo and Speranza Garibo.⁹ More importantly, he is the same Don Ignazio Tommaso Constanzo, who later on in the century appears as Canon of the Cathedral Chapter of Malta and adviser to the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Malta. Furthermore, Ignazio Tommaso Constanzo was an important advocate, became a Prelate, or to be more exact, appointed to the *Prelatura di San Pancrazio* in Rome. He had a personal interest in art and was the person who paid for the decoration of the Cathedral vault.¹⁰ Saverio Ignazio Mifsud states that this Ignazio Constanzo was the author of a manuscript work.¹¹ The final confirmation that Ignazio Constanzo and Tommaso Constanzo were one and the same person is given by Antonio Bulifon. Bulifon published a letter by Canon Ignazio Constanzo, dated 1694, wherein the latter discusses his archaeological excavations at Ghar Barka¹² and the two Cippi that were in Abela's collection.¹³ This confirms Ignazio Tommaso Constanzo's interest in classical antiquity.¹⁴

It was this restored tablet that Jacques Spon saw when, accompanied by Monsieur Galland, they visited Malta a few years after Abela's death. He was interested in gathering as much information as possible on Malta's classical remains since he was planning a publication about ancient antiquities. Eventually, he ended up publishing two books, both carrying references to this inscription. In the first, he attested that some marble remains dating back to Roman and Greek times could be seen in the Grand Master's garden. No doubt he must have been referring to Abela's house, known as *Casa di San Giacomo* at Marsa. This house with its big gardens was bequeathed to the Order of Saint John¹⁵ but its 'usufruct' was passed to the Jesuits. Nevertheless, the Knights Hospitaller seem to have taken their time to implement Abela's wishes. In all probability the Grand Master must have been making use of this residence outside Valletta before handing it over to the Jesuits.

When reading these ancient Greek and Roman inscriptions, Spon relied on Abela's and Gualtieri's publications but had also consulted a manuscript, which contained inscriptions recorded by Abela and Gualtieri.¹⁶ In his next publication, Spon published the text of the Chrestion inscription.¹⁷

This late seventeenth-century assiduous interest in Chrestion's inscription caught the attention of Grand Master Caraffa (ruled between 1680-1690) who ordered the recycling of stone and marble from the Temple of Proserpina to be used for making baroque trophies and sculptured coats of arms for the embellishment of the façade of the Auberge d'Italie.¹⁸

At the turn of the eighteenth century, this inscription was studied by two illustrious European scholars; Ludovico Muratori¹⁹ and Sebastiano Paoli.²⁰ Their main interest was to reproduce the Latin text. However, Paoli goes three steps further:

- First, he was interested in juxtaposing the inscription with the type of administration Malta had during Roman rule.

DISSERTAZIONE II.

DEL COMMENDATORE

F. GIUSEPPE CLAUDIO GUYOT DE MARNE

LORENESE DELL' ORDINE GEROSOLIMITANO

SOPRA UN' INSCRIZIONE PUNICA, E GRECA.



SSENDO nell' Isola di Malta, vennemi fatta osservazione in una quasi sotterrata Inscrizione, che stava nel Giardino del Vicecancelliere Abela, dato poi in custodia a' RR. PP. Gesuiti, la quale essendo quasi tutta sepolta, tennemi il suo significato per gran tempo in agitazione, fino a tanto che, essendomi da me con non poca fatica del tutto scoperta, ritrovai essere un' Inscrizione Punica, e Greca; la quale non credendo da altri

publicata, giachè nè pure il sopradetto Abela della medesima posseditore ne ha fatta menzione; benchè molte Inscrizioni, Monumenti, Medaglie, ed altre Antichità concernenti quell' Isola riporti, ho stimato, che non farà discaro agli Eruditi, se io porrò la medesima sotto gli occhi loro, e spiegherò intorno ad essa i miei sentimenti.

E' necessario primieramente saperli, che due furono i Marmi nel sopradetto luogo ritrovati, ambedue della medesima forma, grandezza, ed Inscrizione, il che mi fa giudicare, non essere, questa memoria sepolcrale, ma piuttosto Voto a qualche Tempio affisso, ovvero Memoria per altra cagione posta in luogo pubblico, in cui entrandosi, o nell' uscire, o nelle parti laterali dell' ingresso, o nel portico fosse questa memoria duplicata, acciò più facilmente da' curiosi leggere si potesse. In ognuna adunque di queste Inscrizioni, di due sorti osservansi i caratteri, il superiore Punico, e Greco l'inferiore: onde m'immaginai a prima vista, che quest' ultimo non fosse, che una traduzione del Punico: ma considerando essere troppo prolissa per contenersi nella frase Greca, tanto più, che nelle lingue Orientali, non scrivevansi le vocali; ed in fine, perchè la parola ΣΑΡΑΠΙΩΝΟΣ nella Punica non vi farebbe, che una volta, dove repetuto lo abbiamo nella Greca; cangiata opinione, credo non poterli altro argomentare, a tenore di questa seconda Inscrizione,

D

se

a Abela Malta illustrata.

Fig. 5

The *Dissertazione* or study by Giuseppe Claudio Guyot de Marne (1735).

- Secondly, he furnished his interpretation of the Latin word which Abela or Carrera could not account for in the inscription, and wrote that it was 'collaps'.²¹
- Thirdly, Paoli informs the readers as to its whereabouts. In 1730, the inscription was decorating the garden of Abela's villa, which was now in the hands of the Jesuit Fathers.²² This means that in the meantime, the Jesuits had come into possession of Abela's house with all its contents of ancient memorabilia.²³ Paoli stated that what he transcribed was what he had seen on inspecting the Chrestion inscription. However, the wording of the inscription was not reproduced correctly in his publication, as a whole line was left out.²⁴

The fact that the Jesuits were in possession of Abela's ancient artefacts is again reconfirmed by Giuseppe Claudio Guyot in 1735. Guyot reaffirmed what Constanzo had stated to Bulifon about the two famous *cippi* with Greek and Punic inscriptions and that these were in the Jesuits' possession.²⁵

The inscription was then studied by Jacques Philippe d'Orville and Pietro Burmanno,²⁶ Gabriele Lancillotto Castelli,²⁷ Francesco Agius De Soldanis²⁸ and Giuseppe Jacopo Testaferrata. Of all these scholars, Testaferrata is the most important. Ignazio Saverio Mifsud encouraged Testaferrata to write about the history of its discovery, but more importantly to place it within the context of Malta's Roman history besides giving a full transcription, including the reconstitution of the word not deciphered by Abela. In a letter sent to Testaferrata by Franciscus Agius (De Soldanis) from his home in Nadur, one gets to know that Agius held the work of Testaferrata in high esteem.²⁹ Moreover, Testaferrata adds that by his time, the inscription was being housed at the Jesuit's college (present day University) in Valletta.³⁰ This means that in between the publication of Paoli and Testaferrata, the Jesuits had transferred Abela's museum to Valletta.

Unfortunately, the marble tablet passed through bad times after the expulsion of the Jesuit Society from Malta in 1767. Gio. Francesco Ciantar offers clues about what had happened. He affirms that by the time of the publication of his book in 1772, this inscription had very few original pieces of marble. This means that the reconstruction made by Constanzo was smashed and a number of pieces went missing. In fact, Ciantar informs his readers that very few marble pieces were 'recovered by us' and the whole reconstitution was only possible 'following the publication and the study made by him [Abela]: so that with the passage of time nothing is lost, because it had the tragedy of having fallen into the wrong hands who carelessly preserved it'.³¹ To protect the inscription from further acts of vandalism, Ciantar states that it began to be housed 'at our museum'.³²

At the turn of the nineteenth century, interest in the inscription was rekindled by Onorato Bres. Bres accounts for the new place of this inscription, and in so doing, indirectly informs us where Abela's collection, after the suppression of the Jesuits, had ended. After 1812, these artefacts were exhibited in a room at the National Library in Valletta.³³

In the second half of the nineteenth century, A.A. Caruana refers to this inscription in two of his publications. In his report on Phoenician and Roman Antiques published in 1882, he states that there were no ruins left of the Proserpina Temple in the Mtarfa area.³⁴ In *Frammento Critico*, Caruana



1. Cattedrale antica Palazzo di S. Pubblio.
2. Palazzo del Vescovo
3. Seminario
4. Convento, e Chiesa del Carmine.
5. Casa del Magistrato.
6. Armeria.
7. Monastero di S. Pietro.
8. Palazzo del Principe.
9. Curia.

10. Grotta di S. Paolo
11. Ove il S. Appostolo predicava.
12. Tempio di Proserpina
13. Convento, e Chiesa di S. Agostino.
14. S. Francesco
15. Chiesa, e Convento di S. N. di Gesù
16. Convento, e Chiesa de PP. Domenicani
17. Sito dell' antico Tempio di Apolline.

reproduces the text of the inscription, while pointing out that 'the marble, fixed to the wall of the museum of the Public Library lacks some of its fragments: but the Commendatore Abela, who for many years had it as a whole at his museum of S. Giacomo, had transcribed it'.³⁵

The current state of the tablet confirms this and Ciantar's story. The inscription now has only eight small

bits of original marble, the rest is the re-cast made under Ciantar's supervision between 1767 and 1772, in line with Constanzo's model.

Despite the fact that very few original fragments survived, Abela's work began to receive international accreditation, and the Chrestion inscription was included in the authoritative series of *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*

opposite: Fig. 6
A reconstructed site-map of Mdina and its environs as it was supposed to have appeared in Roman times. It was published by Gio. Antonio Ciantar in his book *Malta Illustrata* (1772). (Photo: Daniel Cilia)

(CIL). These volumes started being published in 1862, bringing together all the inscriptions from the Classical Age.³⁶ This inscription also found its place in the selection made of the epigraphic corpus by Hermann Dessau in 1913.³⁷ Busuttil used these standard texts, as published in these two authoritative works, as his source of analysis. These two latter works however, did not include the word ‘collaps.’ (which Abela represented by diacritic symbols) proposed by Paoli and Testaferatta among others.

Thus, the study of this inscription is not only important for the investigation of Malta’s classical period, but can throw new light on what was happening in Malta both in the field of classical erudition and politics during early modern times.

Notes

1 Anthony Bonanno, *Roman Malta, Malta Romana: The Archaeological Heritage of the Maltese Islands* (1992), 69.
2 Horatio Vella, *Malta u Għawdex fl-Era Klassika* (Malta: PIN, 2002), 70-71.
3 Anthony Bonanno, *Malta, Phoenician, Punic and Roman* (Malta: Midsea Books Ltd., 2005), 203.
4 Giorgio Gualtieri, *Siciliae Obiacentium Insular[um] et Bruttiorum Antiquae Tabulae cum Animaduersi omib[us]* (Messina, 1624), 341. See also Gio. Francesco Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano: con le sue antichità, ed altre notizie* (Malta: Paolo Bonacota, 1647), 209.
5 Josephus Jacobus Testaferatta, *De Epigraphe Templi Proserpinae* (Valletta, 1759), 18.
6 Abela, op. cit., 209.
7 Ibid., 207-208.
8 Testaferatta, op. cit., 17.
9 Parish Archives Valletta, St Paul’s, *Baptismal Registers*, Act 12, August 1608.
10 N(azionale) L(ibrary of) M(alta), Lib. 1142, no. 124.
11 Saverio Ignazio Mifsud, *Biblioteca Maltese* (Malta, 1764), 412.
12 Antonio Bulifon, *Lettere Memorabili, Istoriche, Politiche, ed Erudite* (Napoli, 1697), Vol. 4, 119.
13 Ibid., 129.
14 NLM, Lib. 1142, no. 124.
15 Anthony Bonanno, ‘Giovanni Francesco Abela’s Legacy to the Jesuit

College’, *Proceedings of History Week 1983* (The Malta Historical Society, 1984), 27-38.
16 Jacob Spon, *Recherches Curieuses d’Antiquité Contenues en Plusieurs Dissertations sur de Médailles Bas-Reliefs statues, Mosaïques et Inscriptions Antiques* (Lyon: Thomas Amaulry, 1683), 461-462.
17 Jacob Spon, *Miscellanea Erudite Antiquitatis* (Venice, 1679), 190-191.
18 Giovanni Antonio Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata* (1772), Vol. 2, 570.
19 Ludovico Muratori, *Novus Thesaurus Veterum Inscriptionum in Praecipuis earum dem Collectionibus Hactenus Praetermissarum*, Vol. 3, MLVIII.
20 Sebastiano Paoli, *Codice Diplomatico del Sacro Militare Ordine Gerosolimitano* (Lucca, 1737), 504.
21 Paoli wrote ‘Fastoditiis’ instead of ‘fastigiis’; ‘De’ instead of ‘Et’ and ‘vetustate collaps.’ instead of *VET(ustate [in]) RVINAM. IN[im] ENT[is]*.
22 Paoli, op. cit., 504.
23 Testaferatta, op. cit., 16.
24 Unfortunately, Paoli or his publisher skipped a line (*ruinam imminentibus*) when reproducing the text of this inscription.
25 Giuseppe Claudio Guyot, ‘De Marne Dissertazione II’ in *Saggi di Dissertazioni Accademiche Pubblicamente Lette nella Nobile Accademia Etrusca* (Rome, 1735), 25. The cippi were discovered at Marsaxlokk after 1647, and Abela took them to decorate the entrance corridor of his villa at Marsa.
26 Jacques Philippe d’Orville and Pietro Burmanno, *Sicula: quibus Siciliae Veteris Rudera, Additis Antiquitatum Tabulis Illustrantur: Edidit, et Commentarium ad Numismata Sicula* (Amsterdam: Gerard Tielensberg), 492.
27 Gabriele Lancillotto Castelli, *Siciliae et Obiacentium Insularum Veterum Inscriptionum Nova Collectio Prolegomenis* (Palermo: Tipografia Regia, 1784).
28 Gio. Francesco Agius De Soldanis, *Għawdex bil-migjub għall-Malti minn Dun Gużep Farrugia* (Malta, 1936), 83.
29 Testaferatta, op. cit., 5.
30 Ibid., 16.
31 Ciantar, op. cit., 567. The following text was added by Ciantar and is not part of Abela’s original text: ‘da noi ricuperta dopo l’impressione, e la memoria che egli ne fece: accioche in progresso di tempo affatto non perissero. poich’ebbero la disgrazia d’essere prima capitate alle mani di chi trascurò di conservarli’.
32 Ibid., ‘Conservata nel nostro museo’.
33 Onorato Bres, *Malta Antica Illustrata* (Rome, 1816), 334.
34 A.A. Caruana, *Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiques in the Group of the Islands of Malta* (Malta, 1882), 88, 136.
35 A.A. Caruana, *Frammento Critico della Storia Fenicio-Cartaginese, Greco-Romana e Bisantina delle isole di Malta* (Malta, 1899), 289: ‘il marmo, murato nel Museo della Pubblica Biblioteca manca di alcuni frammenti: ma il comm. Abela che l’ha avuto integro nel suo Museo di S. Giacomo per molto tempo ci ha trascritto’.
36 CIL, 10, 7494.
37 Hermann Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, Vol. II (1) (1913), 122, No. 3975.