

REMAINS OF A LATE MEDIEVAL CHURCH AT RABAT, MALTA

Dr. PAUL CASSAR B.Sc., M.D., D.P.M., F.R.Hist.S.

and

Rev. Fr. VICTOR CAMILLERI S.S.P.

During the Middle Ages the Maltese Islands formed part successively of the domains of the Normans, the Suabians, the Angevins, the Aragonese and the Castillians like the neighbouring Island of Sicily. The Mediterranean was, during most of that period, the scene of endless warfare between the Christian powers on the one hand and the Moslems and North African corsairs on the other. The Maltese Islands, owing to their strategic position in the centre of this sea, were inevitably drawn into this conflict and suffered much at the hands of both Christian overlords and Mohammedan enemies. The latter often descended on the defenceless Islands to plunder and to carry off the inhabitants into slavery while the feudal lords extorted as much wealth as they possibly could from a small agricultural community. Such conditions of insecurity were certainly not conducive to that tranquillity and material comfort which are so essential to the development of artistic expression; hence the scarcity of works of art in Malta during a period that extends from the Norman conquest in 1099 to the end of the Castilian domination in 1530 when the Maltese Islands were handed over as a fief to the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. It is precisely this paucity of works of art that has prompted the writers to draw attention to the existence of a number of decorated stone blocks, belonging to this period, bearing bas-reliefs in a medieval style of sculpture. Some of these stones are embedded in the facade of the church of Saint Agatha at Rabat at a short distance from the old boundaries of the ancient capital city of Mdina; the rest are preserved in the museum of the Society of St. Paul attached to the same church.

A chapel or church dedicated to St. Agatha was erected at Rabat in 1504 (1) over the crypt dedicated to the same saint. This ancient crypt, dug out of the limestone rock, communicates with an extensive catacomb which forms one of a number of Christian underground cemeteries in that area and which are believed to have been in use in the fourth century A.D. during the Roman occupation of Malta (2). The foundation date of the church is recorded in a Latin inscription, now in the museum, which reads as follows: —

OPUS HOC FIERI FECERUNT VIRTUOSI CIVES ET INCOLE
MELIVETANI AD HONOREM DEI ET SANCTE AGATE VIRGINIS ET

(1) Bres, O — *Malta antica illustrata co' monumenti e coll'istoria*, Rome, 1816, p. 446

(2) Caruana, A.A. — The Crypt of St. Agatha in Hal Bajada District, Malta, 1899, p. 3.

Ferrua, A — "Antichità cristiane. Le catacombe di Malta" in "La Civiltà Cattolica", Vol. III, 3 settembre 1949, p. 505.

MARTIRIS INCEPTUM FUIT DE MENSE MADI DIE EIUSDEM XXV
ANNO INCARNACIONIS CRISTI MCCCCCIIII VII INDICIONIS (3)

In 1670 the church was replaced by a larger one on the same site. It appears that the 1504 structure was not completely destroyed to make room for the new one but was only partially pulled down. Only its facade, back wall and roof were demolished, its sides being retained and incorporated in the building of 1670. In fact up to the beginning of the year 1960 part of the side walls of the 1504 church could still be easily distinguished. They measured ten feet in length and twelve feet in height. The edifice of 1670 is now being altered and enlarged; these modifications have brought about the obliteration of what remained of the original walls of the 1504 church.

No contemporary documents have come down to us which could throw some light on the size and appearance of the early sixteenth century church. This lack of literary evidence is not surprising as Maltese history in general is very obscure and fragmentary for the medieval period.

During the present structural alterations, begun in 1959, the toothing stones linking the 1504 and 1670 walls were plainly evident on the gospel side of the church while three imposts of the arches forming the vault were still in situ on the top course of the wall. On the epistle side, part of the old wall was plastered over in 1951/52 when the chapel of Our Lady was built. A stone water-gutter which drained the rain water from the old roof of the church was still fixed in its original position on the exterior face of this wall until the early part of 1960 when it was removed and destroyed by the workmen engaged in the present work.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STONES.

The carved stones that are to be seen on the facade of the present church were inserted there in 1670 apparently to preserve them from destruction when the 1504 structure was partially demolished. Until 1899 there were also the shields of Aragon and of Malta and the date 1504 on the dexter side (4) but they are no longer there. Many of the stones that are now in the museum previously formed a frieze along one wall of the sacristy — now pulled down — or were recently found among the debris of the foundations of the 1670 church during the structural work now in progress. There are ninety of them representing various subjects but three are so badly weathered and defaced that their iconography cannot be made out. They all have the same height — eleven inches — but their width varies from six to sixteen inches. The part that was embedded in the wall is roughly hewn and, in some instances, was two feet deep. The following attempt at classification of the iconography is of an arbitrary kind and is only meant to convey an idea of the main sources from which the carver drew his inspiration. Sometimes more than one

(3) "The pious citizens and inhabitants of Malta erected this building to the glory of God and St. Agatha virgin and martyr. It was begun on the 25th May in the year 1504 from the incarnation of Christ. Seventh indiction." An indiction was an ecclesiastical method of calculating time and denoted a period of fifteen years.

(4) Caruana, A.A. — op., cit., p. 5.

kind of subject is shown in the same carving; for instance, human figures, animals and inanimate objects may be represented in the same composition; in other cases the panel is divided into two lateral halves each of which represents a different class of subject such as a flower vase in one half and an animal in the other. The following are the headings under which the stones have been grouped:—

I. Sacred Emblems (15 stones) showing

- a) A representation of Christ in loin cloth hanging from the cross (1 stone).
- b) Angels flanking a rosette or a circle (3 stones).
- c) The monogram of the Holy Name in Latin and Greek letters — "i h s" "x p s" (2 stones).
- d) Crosses of various designs (5 stones). They do not appear to have been consecration crosses; in fact three of them have a pedestal while the remaining two are enclosed in a lozenge flanked by animals and ornaments.
- e) St. George in the act of spearing the dragon. There are two stones in one of which the saint is on horseback and in the other on foot.
- f) Men ringing bells in a steeple (2 stones).

II. Scenes of Rural Life (10 stones).

These include women carrying jars on their heads and in their hands; a man holding a staff in one hand and a rabbit in the other; a huntsman armed with bow and arrow accompanied by dogs chasing a bull (?); a wayfarer trudging along and carrying an axe on his shoulder followed by a donkey and a dog; a man works an overhead wheel while another one holds out a jug as if in the act of filling it.

III. Combat Episodes (3 Stones).

Two men armed with long lances (?) are at full tilt against each other; two other men, carrying small round shields, cross swords; a further pair of men, in loin cloths, oppose one another with huge swords held by the hilt with both hands.

IV. Birds (17 stones).

These are of various forms and are carved in different attitudes. Some of them are certainly symbolical such as the pelican pecking at its own breast; the bird watching over its nestlings; and two birds flanking a chalice and dipping their beaks into it. Others are reminiscent of heraldic bearings, such as the one-headed eagle with wide-spread wings. One stone represents what appears to be seagulls with fish in their beaks.

V. Quadrupeds (9 stones).

These show the stag, the bull, the donkey and the dog. The last occurs most frequently and in two carvings it is pursuing or else attacking a bull.

VI. Ornamental Motifs (28 stones).

These may be subdivided into three groups:

- a) Geometrical designs (18) consisting of circles, stars, rectangles, rosettes, etc.
- b) Stylised floral patterns (5) such as foliage with fruits or flowers, bare branches, sprigs, etc.
- c) Vases with flowers (5).

VII. Coats-of-arms (2 stones).

a) A large lozenge is divided into four smaller ones by two lines crossing each other in the form of an X. The upper and lower lozenges bear three vertical bars, while the side lozenges show an eagle with wide-spread wings. Two angels, one above the other, support the large lozenge on each side. This escutcheon suggests the arms of the House of Aragon. Probably this is the stone, already alluded to, which up to 1899 was still fixed on the dexter side of the facade of the present church.

b) A shield surmounted by a crown formed of triangular projections. The field has four quarters, the first and fourth containing a tower with three turrets; and the second and third a lion rampant. These are the arms of the Castilian Kings who ruled over Malta from 1416 to 1530. This escutcheon is embedded in one of the walls of a room in the first floor of the house adjoining the church.

VIII. Inscriptions (2 stones).

Both are in the current ecclesiastical script of the 15th and 16th centuries:—

- a) One bears the date thus,
m.cccc
iii. sij in
dicionis.

b) The other inscription is the one already reproduced at the beginning of this paper with its original spelling.

Craftsmanship.

The execution of the reliefs is on the whole rude and lacks polishing and elegance; in fact their workmanship is so rough at times as to suggest children's art. There is no attempt at perspective and the objects and figures are represented against a blank background. In some cases there is marked disproportion in the relative sizes of the items in the same composition. For example in the relief showing the man ringing the bell in a steeple, the height of the man is four inches and that of the steeple is eight inches. In other carvings a dog is shown of the same dimensions as a bull, and a bird is as large as the man who is chasing it. The disposition of the various elements in the composition is naive but is not without a distinct charm while the carver has succeeded in conveying the idea of movement and action of both animal and human forms with marked liveliness and conviction especially in the Scenes of Rural Life and Combat Episodes.

Provenance and Dating.

The opinion has been expressed that these stones came from the underground burial place already mentioned (5) but no proof has been brought forward for this assertion except that some of the carvings represent religious symbols. It must be pointed out in this respect that of the surviving ninety specimens only a small proportion shows themes that might be of a funereal character. The majority represent secular and religious subjects not usually associated with burials. Had these stones been derived from the catacomb one would expect them to be less concerned with wordly themes and to be more representative of the mystic symbolism of the early church on the analogy of the iconography of the Roman catacombs with some of which the cemetery of St. Agatha is more or less contemporary. In actual fact, however, one looks in vain in these reliefs for such primitive Christian symbols as the anchor, the Good Shepherd and the fish. One also would expect to find the carvings in the form of slabs or plaques for closing the loculi of the tombs and not in the form of stone blocks; indeed it is difficult to imagine the function of these blocks in the catacombs and the places in which they might have been fixed in the narrow passage ways of the underground cemetery.

Stylistically the carvings may be assigned to the late middle ages. The literary evidence at present available favours the possibility that they represent the remains of the masonry of the 1504 church in which they may have been disposed in the form of a frieze. If the two inscriptions already mentioned and bearing the year 1504 are accepted as being contemporary with the other stones (and there is nothing against this supposition), then the question of the dating and provenance of the rest of the masonry would be solved.

These bas-reliefs are of interest historically and artistically for the following reasons:—

- a) they are medieval in character and spirit;
- b) they are the only known specimens of this type of sculpture in Malta; and
- c) they are a pointer to the cultural and artistic contacts of the Maltese Islands with the continent of Europe previous to the better known period of their later history that begins with the advent of the Knights of St. John in 1530. In fact they seem to indicate that the influence of the Renaissance had not yet reached Malta at the beginning of the sixteenth century and that medieval forms of art still lingered in Malta long after they had been superseded by other styles on the European mainland.

(5) Vassallo, C — Guida al museo, Malta, 1871, p. 23.