

# MALTA'S OLDEST GOOD FRIDAY PROCESSION

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Rabat has numerous relics of the devotion towards the Passion of Our Lord. John Bezzina calls it "Malta's cradle of Christianity"(1) because there are many localities to remind us of S.Paul who first brought us our faith, and religious orders first established themselves here. The first relic of the Good Friday devotion goes back to the late, Roman-Early Byzantine period, in the crypt of l-Abatija tad-Dejta, limits of Rabat, there is an affresco in the apse representing the Crucifixion. This shows Jesus as the central figure with Mary and Angel Gabriel on the right, and St.John the Evangelist and a female saint to the left. In catacombs were found a number of clay lamps with Christian symbols, also early relics of the Passion. There is also the popular tradition that in 1224 the Arabs resident in Malta plotted a surprise attack on the Maltese, selecting Good Friday as the day to carry out the plot, knowing that the Maltese would be occupied in the cathedral church, attending Good Friday devotions.(2) Whilst demolishing the mediaval church of Saint Agatha in the 16th century, a number of square stone slabs were found, showing carved images of the Crucifixion. All these factors paved the way for the development of the Good Friday devotions and the procession, with the formation of the sodality of Saint Joseph. This confraternity is said to have been erected in 1345 and officially recognised by the ecclesiastical authorities.(3) But according to a document presented to Fr.Didacu ecc. on 29th June 1760, this sodality already existed before 1245. It first aimed at spreading devotion towards S.Joseph, later developed into a guild for carpenters. By 1500 the Minor Franciscans arrived

in Malta,(4) and the sodality built its chapel next to their church which was dedicated to Our Lady of Jesus (=Ta' Giezu). The friary was built on land bought by Mgr. Giacomo de Valguanrea on orders from Pope Alexander VI. This may have put the confraternity within the sphere of influence of the Franciscans, who, as custodians of the Holy Land, cherished the promotion of devotions towards the Passion of Our Lord and Our Lady of Sorrows. An altar dedicated to the Crucifix was soon set up in a prominent place(5) in 1500, in the Friary. By 1591, this procession had long been established,(6) supported by a document of 1591 claiming that the procession had been established for a long time. Perhaps only a cross was carried in this procession at first. Its organisation was strengthened by the formation of the Congregazione della Settimana Santa within the confraternity,(7) with Felic Taliana as first procurator and Alessandro Tanti as rector.

The Archconfraternity of St. Joseph

The confraternity had a chapel in Rabat

dedicated to this saint. Its members were not only carpenters, but also elite of Rabat, and Mdina, and by the 17th century it included monsignors and the nobility. During the 18th century members were from the elite of Mdina including notaries and chancellors,(8) Before the uprising against the French, the confraternity's rector was Notary Emm. Vitale who commanded the Maltese from 1798 to 1800; this tradition of electing a nobleman from Mdina is still carried on, with Alexander dei Marchesi Apap Bologna as its present rector since 30 years ago.(9) In 1584, the local government accepted their plea for exemption from military service(honeribus et angariis). In return, members took oath 'on the four gospels' to bury the dead. In 1508 government had decreed the feast of St. Joseph as a public holiday. In 1673 the confraternity was affiliated to that of Rome thus starting to enjoy the same privileges.

Mons Duzina combined this confraternity with that of Saint Mark in the Augustinians' Church of Rabat, on 19th March 1575. This union lasted till 1662.(10)

The sodality cared for the poor when sick, and interred the dead and performed many other charitable duties, including teaching and assisting the condemned to death.(11) Penitential activities were organised during Lent, as recorded in a manuscript in their archives dated 1668. Later on, every Friday, they organised a short procession with one of the Passion statues, at the end of which the confreres held penitential sessions, which included flagellation and self mortification, by tightening their clothing and singing the miserere psalm and other prayers, and used their waist cord for self discipline. Women and children were not allowed in the oratory during these ceremonies.(12) These Lenten processions were five, with a different statue being carried out in procession every Friday. The first was the Agony in the Garden, and was followed the weeks after, by the Scourging at the Pillar, the Crowning with Thorns, the Carrying of the Cross and the Crucifixion group.

Origin of the Procession The first procession involved no statues, but a nailed figure of Christ may have been included. The first statue introduced in this procession was that of Christ in Repose, (=il-Monument) showing Christ reclining beneath a canopy representing the tomb, Although no longer in use, the original canopy is still to be seen. It was imported from Sicily, more than 400 year ago.(13) This statue shows 'a direct influence from Spain, while another one also indirectly leads to Spain through Sicily where similar processions introduced on the pattern of the Genoese Casazze in the 16th century were gradually elaborated under Spanish influence during their period of domination... Finally, Malta's dependence on the See of Palermo up to 1707, may well account for close parallels met with in various localities in Sicily'(14)

Palermo is a case in point. In 1590, the Rooyal Spanish Confraternity of Our Lady of Soledad which was set up at Palermo, imported from Spain a statue of Our Lady of Sorrows.(15) This statue was carried in the Good Friday Procession of that year. Marius, an eye witness, claimed that for the first time, the confraternity carried the image of the corpse of Christ in a crystal urn, within which there was also the image of the Madonna of Soledad.(16) Hence there is a close parallel between these two processions. The next statue to be imported from Sicily was that of the Scourging at the Pillar (=Il-Marbut). In Palermo, the confreres of Soledad flogged themselves publicly in the Good Friday Procession. This was introduced in Rabat in 1668, when members of the local confraternity flogged themselves after the Lent processions of Fridays. What makes the Rabat Procession unique in the cult of the Passion in the Mediterranean, is the Weekly Lenten Procession, as this pre-dates that of Palermo, as proved by an edit of the Maltese Synod of 1591, describing these processions as an old custom.(15)

Before the Order of St. John ruled Malta, it was part of the Spanish Empire. Maltese ambassadors, mainly from Mdina, went to Spain to claim privileges from Spanish Kings. These missions took place in early spring, and the Maltese nobles of Spanish descent must have seen Good Friday Processions there.(16) Moreover, Malta's links with Sicily were even stronger. The Sicilian viceroy played an important part in the running of the local government. For many changes and innovations, Malta had to seek permissions from the viceroys, as in 1467, when they requested that craftsmen should not aspire for high posts in the Council(=Consiglio Popolare). Between 1370 and 1495 A number of religious orders with convents in Malta, were linked with those of Sicily. Malta also depended on Sicily for provisions of food, and depended on it also for economic, administrative and religious purposes

The Spread of Good Friday Processions

Rabat was followed by eighteen other parishes. Six processions were established in the eighteenth century.(17) By 1764, the Qormi procession was well established. It was most probably initiated in the second half of the 17th century. It then spread to Vittoriosa(c 1719), Zebbug (c.1742) and Cospicua (c1762). It was introduced in Valletta in 1645.(18) The next century saw an increase in these processions; Ghaxaq (c1820), Victoria Parish of St.George,Gozo(1830), Naxxar(c1833), Zejtun(c1839), Mosta and Gharghur(c1866).(19) In this century appeared those of Nadur(1913), Xaghra(1914), Zebbug(Gozo)(1918-1920), Xewkija(1922) and Paola(1944). Another procession was organised at the Citadel,Gozo, 1968.(19)

The Rabat Procession

The Rabat procession used to leave the church in the evening at 8.00pm, and end round about midnight. In 1798, Mons.Vinc.Labini prohibited the holding of the procession after sunset as there was a general feeling of insecurity.(20) After the French rule, it seemed that things returned to normal as Mons.Conte Carmelo Sciciluna five years after his election, ordered that all processions must return to the church an hour after the Ave Maria.(21) Fra.M. Giovanni Balaguer Casarasa, and Mons.Pietro Pace, also made adjustments to the entering time of the processions.(22) Since these processions came out on different days of the week, Mons. Sciciluna decreed that they should all be held on Good Friday proper, because to that day only the Rabat, Vittoriosa and Cospicua were held on Friday. In 1879, Mons.Carmelo Sciciluna discontinued participation of brass bands in processions, since people crowded around them, smoking, and generally disrupted the occasion. (23)

The Rabat procession has several characteristics. The procession used to stop in front of two churches, namely that of St.Augustine and of St.Francis.(24) It used to be preceded

by a flute player and a drummer, derived from the custom associated with official enactments or Bandi.(25) Today we find buglers in front of the Carrying of the Cross(=Redentur). These are found also at Qormi, Naxxar, Vittoriosa and Cospicua. In many processions these are substituted by boy scouts buglers, as at Mosta, Ghaxaq and Rabat, but in the latter preceding the procession. Rabat and Qormi have introduced the "Tronku" which is an enormous cross held upright by the carrier. At Mosta, Naxxar and Rabat we find devotees dragging chains attached to their heels. Some carry crosses on their shoulders, a custom which may have originated from one of the four Vittoriosa processions, which included the Order of St. John's galley crews together with baptised slaves and prisoners wearing chains.(26) In olden days such processions used to enter the city of Mdina.(27) The cross of the Crucifixion group(=Il-Vara l-Kbira) used to have a mechanical device to enable the statue to enter through the gates of Mdina. Moreover, it used to be preceded by a group of altar boys from Mdina Cathedral, who used to carry branches of cypress on their shoulders, while singing the Miserere with the Mdina dignitaries.

The Statues One of the more important elements of any Good Friday procession is the statues. That of Rabat has ten. Six of the previous set were replaced. The collection has the traditional set of eight with two new passion scenes. The first is the Agony in the Garden(=l-Ort), papier mache' made by Antonio Mifsud (=in-Najci ) of Mosta 1825, replacing a previous one. Together with that of The Crowning With Thorns, it is the best work of the artist.(28) A silver halo was added to it in 1882, round Christ's head, and paid for by Ursula Ghech Delicata Castelletti. Bezzina dates this statue 1824-1826(29) but Anthony Casha and D.Micallef as 1825.(30) Salvu Tonna carved the Predella(carrying platform)and paid for by Joseph Tonna, both from Rabat. The second statue

represents the Betrayal(=Ta Guda), made by Alfred Camilleri Cauchi, a Gozitan, 1982, with Christ and Gudas who hold a bag of coins in a concealed hand. The Third Statue represents the Scourging at the Pillar(=Il-Marbut; =Il-Kolonna;=Tal-Kanolla in Cottonera area). It is one of the two remaining original statues, and is carved out of solid wood from a tree trunk, heavy, and made in Sicily over 400 years ago, paid for from collections made by a lay brother of the Franciscans Monor. Believed to be one of the oldest in the islands. The fourth statue represents Jesus crowned with thorns(=l-Accjomu;=Il-Porpra;=l-Ecce Homo) made by Antonio Mifsud(1760-1830)(=In-Najci) between 1824 and 1826.(32) Micallef dates it 1850.(33) A silver filigree crown was made for it in 1850, paid for by Joseph Zammit. The fifth statue is that of Christ Falling Under the Weight of the Cross(=l-Imghobbi; =Ir-Redentur). In April 1832, Bishop Caruana granted 40 days indulgence daily to whoever recited the Creed before it. Its platform was made in 1978, designed by Karmenu Azzopardi, executed by Pawlu Muscat, and paid for by Mrs.Sapienza Vella and Miss Ganna Tonna who made collections for it, all being members of the Confraternity of St,Joseph.(34) The sixth statue is that of the Veronica replacing an older one, financed by Baron De Piro Gourgion, made in papier mache' by Carlo Darmanin(1825-1909). The previous one was destroyed a century ago. Veronica is an unknown woman,(vera Icon = The True Image) carrying a veil with the imprint of Christ's face. This was made in 1880. The seventh statue represents the tenth station of the cross, made at the express wish of Archbishop Michael Gonzi in 1962. Made at Bari, Italy, paid for by Guzeppi Zahra of Rabat. shows Christ derobedon Calvary by court attendants, with Longinus on guard.(35) The platform was designed by Joseph Galea and made by Salvu Tonna,both of Rabat. It is the only one of its kind in the islands.

The eighth statue shows the Crucifixion(= Il-Vara l-Kbira), with four figures. St. John and Mary were made by Carlo Darmanin, and some also attribute Mary Magdala to him. It is not known who made the figure of Christ. On the latter's head there is an aureole donated by the sodality in 1741, and that of the Madonna was donated by Baroness D'Amico Inguanez in 1883. The upper arm of the cross had hinges to enable it to pass through Mdina Gate. The ninth statue shows Jesus laid to rest(=monument) within an urn covered with a canopy tasseled with gold, with curtains embroidered in gold.(36) This canopy was restored several times. The present one was made in 1953 by Joseph Muscat, carved by Carmelo Tonna, and gilt by Guzeppi Farrugia of Mdina, all members of the sodality. It is lit by 44 lamps. Christ's aureole was donated by the baroness mentioned above in 1863. The previous urn is preserved in the oratory, and was brought from Sicily over 400 years ago, as was also the figure of Christ. When the procession, in the past, stopped in front of the Augustinian and Franciscan churches, the friars therein sang the antiphon 'Christus' when the urn was brought in on its own for the purpose. The tenth and last statue is that of Our Lady of Sorrows (=Id-Duluri), showing Our Lady seated beneath the cross, a ladder nearby, and an angel holding a crown of thorns and nails,(37) all made by Carlo Darmanin.(38) Vincenzo Borg donated the dagger, and Felice Portelli the diadem of the Madonna. The carriers of this statue are either members of the confraternity, or fulfil a vow, at the expense of a considerable donation.(39) They bind themselves legally, to maintain the statue in good order, as happens also at Naxxar.

Besides the two new additional statues, the Rabat set, therefore consists of the traditional eight, those of the Agony in the garden, the Scourging at the Pillar, the Crowning with thorns, The Veronica, Jesus Carrying the Cross, the Crucifixion,



Christ Laid to rest, and Our Lady of Sorrows.(40) Bezzina, who made a detailed study of the statues says: "...up to the last war, the sets comprised eight statuary groups, except for Qormi, which had an added group representing the betrayal of Christ by Judas."(41) Therefore Rabat followed the customary Maltese pattern. "Since the war, there has been a move, first to imitate the example of Qormi.."(42) Zejtun was the first to have a betrayal statue(1961). Then came those of Mosta (1963), Xaghra (1964), Zebbug(1978), Naxxar (1975), Cospicua(1972), Paola(1971). That of Rabat had only two figures, similar to that of Qormi. Mosta has a third figure of a Jew, and Naxxar of St.Peter. The idea here was to elaborate certain episodes already represented, (42) as in the Zejtun Crowning with thorns(1962). Rabat adopted the latest development of introducing new passion scenes never before represented, as the unique tenth station, the work of Salvatore Bruno of Italy.

#### Biblical Costumes

Most Good Friday Processions now feature groups of people in biblical costume.

Before the inclusion of statues, members of the lay confraternity and children carried passion emblems. Biblical costumes were introduced first at Rabat in the second half of the last century on the idea of Baron Giuseppe De Piro Gourgion, then rector of the confraternity. After his death, the custom died out at Rabat, but was taken up at Qormi. The custom was revived at Rabat in 1970, when Guzeppi Azzopardi became procurator of the procession. Many biblical figures were introduced in costume, and older ones renewed and replaced by others from rich cloth.(43) He also introduced a replica of the Ark in which the Jews carried the ten commandments.

#### Music and Banners

The Band of L-Isle Adam participated in this procession, and started to do so since between 1870 and 1880. It plays hymns to accompany a children's choir, and other locally produced compositions. One is

Populae meus by Lorenzo Gatt, director of the band 1884-1888. Another Eri Mancipio by Carmelo Camilleri, director 1888-1894. Musical marches include Vers le Calvaire(Giuseppe Stivala), Alla Memoria del Maestro Giuseppe Stivala(Generoso Muscat), Fuq il-Qana' ta' Kristu(Joe Galea), and Stabat Mater(Willie Attard), all written by the directors. Formerly, music of foreign origin were featured, as Marcia Funebre Opus 35(Chopin), Cordoglio(Cristaine). Another feature is the sound of the flute and drum of the past, but these were later replaced by Notabile scouts, and the First Rabat Scout Group.(44) There is also the custom of buglers preceding Christ bearing the cross. At Rabat, bandsmen wear as Roman soldiers, as is done at Cospicua.(45) A former custom was that of altarboys from Mdina Cathedral who sang the Miserere in front of the Christ in repose; nowadays this is done by girls.

Richly embroidered banners accompany the procession. Two special banners bear the wording: Passio Domini Jesu Christi, and S.P.O.R. (=Senatus Populus Que Romanus=The Senate and The People of Rome) There are also the seven banners representing the last words. (46) There are children who carry passion symbols. These banners and symbols may indicate a medieval origin from mystical plays,(47) as appears to be the first banner announcing a passion play "Passio Domini Jesu Christi.The Rabat Good Friday Procession is a pioneer and has influenced other processions all over the islands of Malta and Gozo.

Ref./Further reading (1) John Bezzina:Good Friday Processions. Ranat's Pageant is the Oldest.Times of Malta,4-4-1971; (2) op cit.p4;(3)E.R.Leopardi Malta's Heritage 1969,p85; (4)George Aquilina:Maltese Minor Franciscans and Marian Devotions in the 17th and 18th centuries, in Marian Devotions in The Islands of Saint Paul, (1983),p.333; (5)Aquilina,op cit.p336;

(6) Il-Purciissjoni tal-Passjoni ta' Sidna Gesu Kristu fir-Ranat Duminku Micallef, 1980, p5; (7) Micallef op.cit. p5; (8) Bezzina op.cit. p12; (10) Lehen is-Sewwa 16-3-1935; (11) Lehen is-Sewwa, 18-3-1941; (12) Micallef p.5; (13) John Bezzina Good Friday Procession at Rabat p7; (14) J. Cassar Pullicino: Studies in Maltese Folklore, 1976, p29-30; (15) Bezzina: Good Friday Procession at Rabat Malta 1970, p7-6; (16) Bezzina Sunday Times of Malta 4-4-1971; (17) Cassar Pullicino, op.cit. p33; (18) Joseph P. Grima gives these dates: Vittoriosa and Cospicua (c1700), Senglea (c1719), Zebbug Malta (c1742) and Luqa 1795: Democrat 11-4-1981; (19) Cassar Pullicino gives these dates: Ghaxaq 1820, Luqa 1830, Rabat Gozo 1830, Naxxar 1833, Zejtun 1839-40, Mosta and Gharghur 1866. op.cit. p33; Charles Galea Scannura gives these dates: Ghaxaq c1820, Rabat Gozo c1830, Naxxar c1833, Zejtun 1839-40, Gharghur 1866, Holy Week Traditions in Malta, in Il-Gimgha Mqaddsa F' Paceville 1978, p.25; (20) M. Galea, The Life and Times of Vincenzo Labini Bishop of Malta p3-6; (21) Micallef, op.cit p6; (22) J. Grima, op.cit. p6; (23) C. Galea Scannura, op.cit.; (24) Galea Scannura, op.cit.; (25) Bezzina Good Friday Procession at Rabat p.6,9,16; (26) During the 18th century, three processions were held at Vittoriosa, Wednesday Holy Week (=Erbgha tat-Tniebri) from the church of Mount Carmel. It included the Order's Galley Crews and prisoners with chains. The second left the Annunciation church on Maundy Thursday (=Hamis iġ Xirka); the third from the parish church on Good Friday, in which the city jurats took part. Another procession in Greek rite was organised by the Papas. (27) Anthony Casha Il-Purciissjoni tal-Gimgha l-Kbira fir-Rabat, In-Taghna, 8-4-, 982; (28) Galea Scannura, op.cit.; (29) J. Bezzina op.cit. p11; (30) Anthony Casha op.cit., & Micallef op.cit. p11; (31) J. Bezzina op.cit. p13; (32) Bezzina op.cit p.15; (33) Micallef, op.cit. p15. Casha agrees with him, In-Taghna 8-4-1982; The Ecce Homo statue was replaced by a new one in 1984, the work of Alfred Camilleri Cauchi. The

Crowning with Thors by Antonio Missud was replaced because it was in a bad state of preservation. Camilleri Cauchi also prepared the new statue of the tenth station of the Cross, carried around in the procession for the first time in 1984. This last replaced that of Salvatore Bruno as the latter was thought to be out of tune with the rest. Both these statues were paid for by benefactors. (letter from Giuseppe Micallef, secretary to the Confraternity, 30-7-1984); (34) Micallef op.cit. p17; (35) J. Bezzina p.20; (36) J. Bezzina p25; J. Bezzina p26; (37); (38) P.P. Castagna Lis Storia ta Malta Bil Gzejjer Tahha p213; (39) Sunday Times of Malta p.12; (40) Times of Malta 26-3-1970; (41) Cassar Pullicino op.cit. p33; (42) Cassar Pullicino op.cit. p34; (43) Micallef op.cit. p3; (44) Micallef p.6, Bezzina p22-23; (45) Bezzina p.15; (46) The banners were made by Mrs Carmen Barbara nee Azzopardi from Rabat; (47) Bezzina p.6; (48) George Scerri, Monografia Storica dell'Antichissima Arc. del Glorioso S. Giuseppe eretta nella V. Chiesa dei Frati Minori del Rabato della Citta Notabile. 1935.