

THE *ĊUQLAJTA* DURING HOLY WEEK

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During Holy Week, ever since the Middle Ages, church bells have customarily been replaced by a wooden clapper or scraper throughout the Christian world. Bells are usually silent from Holy Thursday to the *Gloria* on Holy Saturday. In Malta, during this period, several different types of wooden instruments have traditionally been used.⁽¹⁾ They are all known by the name *ċuqlajta*, *ċuqlajqa* or *ċoklajta*, irrespective of their type or of their mode of sound production.

Ancient instruments known as *Semanteria*, are still used in Greek Orthodox monasteries, as a call for prayer and meals throughout the year. These are not usually used during Holy Week, but are used instead in conjunction with bells to announce the risen Christ. They therefore carry joyful connotations, contrary to those in Malta. The instruments themselves are also substantially differently-shaped constructions which are usually struck manually.⁽²⁾ Hand twirled ratchets, frequently incorrectly referred to as cog-wheel 'rattles', are also found in Greece, but likewise tend to be connected with the Resurrection rather than with Passion Week. Malta's instruments, though undoubtedly related, carry different associations and do not appear to be *direct* descendants of these Greek idiophones.

Affinities with other instruments

Malta's customs and practices of Holy Week tend to be more strongly influenced by Spain, Southern Italy and Sicily. Some very striking similarities can be found not only in the type of instruments, but also in their traditional use in these areas of the Mediterranean. These can easily be explained historically. Between the years 1282-1530, Malta and Gozo (as well as Sicily) were under Aragonese rule. By the early 15th century a group of prominent families had moved into the islands from Sicily and Aragon. When the Knights of St John arrived in Malta in 1530, there was a continuation of strong Spanish influence. These instruments therefore could very well

have reached the islands directly from Spain as early as the Middle Ages, or via Sicily and Southern Italy, with whom there was constant contact.

In considering the origin of these instruments in Malta, one should not forget that Malta and Gozo were, on occasion, populated by people from Sicily and southern Italy. These inhabitants would have brought their own customs with them. In the pre 1530 years, we know that several Sicilians were exiled to Gozo.⁽³⁾ Later in 1551, after Gozo's population had been totally depleted by the Turkish invasion, it was repopulated by a number of Sicilians.⁽⁴⁾ When the knights decided to build St. Elmo and St. Michael, there was an influx of labourers once again from Sicily.⁽⁵⁾ Some years after this, in 1568-69, when the knights were building the fortifications of Valletta, large numbers of workers were also brought over to Malta from Sicily and Calabria. Another point worth remembering is the fact that Malta depended on the See of Palermo up to 1807, and it would therefore have been likely that there were several factors in common with this locality.

The large cross-shaped instrument with mallets used in many Maltese belfries (Fig. 1) bears a decided resemblance to the Spanish *matraca* (or *matracca*) which is a large construction that is also struck by wooden hammers (Fig. 2) The *matraca*, like Malta's larger instruments, is hung in the belfry and used during Holy Week. This instrument may be considered a rotary development of the more primitive *tric-trac*, usually having one clapper or hammer,⁽⁶⁾ or of the *triccaballacca* of Naples, which consists of three or more percussive clappers.

The most obvious parallels can in fact be drawn with instruments used in Italy and Sicily. The closest similarity in terminology that I have come across can be found in Pian de' Greci in Sicily, where the instrument is known as *ciocch*⁽⁷⁾ In Gozo, the instrument is generally referred to by the name *çoklajta*. It was so-called by De Soldanis and was also thus known in some parts of Malta such as Haż Żebbuġ in the 18th century.

The form of *çuqlajta* with a central handle and a tied flap on either side is an instrument commonly found in several countries. It is very interesting to find that it has certainly been known in Malta as far back as Roman times (Fig. 3).⁽⁸⁾ Similar instruments are used in Sardegna during Holy Week and also in many parts of Italy.

A very conspicuous affinity is evident in the type of instrument with hinged flaps found in several Maltese Churches such as Mdina, Siggiewi and Gharb, Gozo (Fig. 4). This variety of *cuqlajta* may be seen in precisely the same shape and dimensions in specimens from Calabria and other areas of Southern Italy.⁽⁹⁾

The clapper with metal handles attached, is a very old type of instrument. Very worn exemplars are still found in some of Malta's churches such as Valletta, Lija, Haż-Żebbuġ. This instrument is also to be found in parts of Italy such as Trentino Alto Adige, in identical shape and dimensions.⁽¹⁰⁾ It is particularly interesting to find this same instrument portrayed by the Jesuit Bonanni in 1723 (Fig. 5) in his *Gabinetto Armonico* in an engraving entitled *Crepitacolo per le chiese* (eng. CXII).⁽¹¹⁾

The ratchet type of instrument is to be found in varying sizes, some large enough to be played on Church roofs (eg. Nadur, Qala), others of much smaller dimensions found inside churches (eg Naxxar, B'kara). A largish 18th century ratchet of this kind is portrayed by Filippo Bonanni in engraving CXIII (Fig. 6). Similar specimens from Calabria and Trentino Alto Adige may be seen in the Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari in Rome. This type of ratchet sometimes has a very complex construction which requires more than simple carpentry. One of these more complex large instruments is still in use in the B'kara parish of St. Elena.

Relatively few of the smaller hand-twirled ratchets have been found in Maltese churches, but these were also commonly used in the homes. They were often given to children during Holy Week instead of their usual toys.

In Italy these wooden instruments have exactly the same strong associations with Holy Week as we find in Malta. They are considered to have an exorcistic function, clearly dating from pre Christian days when wooden instruments were thought to chase away evil spirits and therefore to purify a holy place.

Noise expells evil

It is worth recalling that the original function of bells was, and still is in some cases, exorcistic.⁽¹²⁾ It was not unusual for the older Church bells to be inscribed with the words "Daemones Expello Tempestates Que Sereno" (I expel devils and calm the

tempests). A traveller to Malta writing in 1839 describes one such bell in the Citadel Cathedral in Gozo.⁽¹³⁾ Indeed, up to the first quarter of the 20th century, church bells were certainly still considered to possess the power to calm strong winds (eg. Siggiewi), or to chase away approaching tempests (eg. Birgu). One much-distressed correspondent from Senglea wrote the following in a local paper in 1906:

“We had a thunderstorm approaching the island not very long ago. At the third clap of thunder, the belfry of San Lorenzo was rushed by youths who successfully rang the storm away, and the danger once passed, rang a second peal of jubilation!”⁽¹⁴⁾

It is interesting to discover that bells in Malta had yet another function which was also associated with the expulsion of evil. In the early 16th century we discover that bells were used to announce a person’s excommunication from the Church, here again indirectly serving a function of dispelling evil.⁽¹⁵⁾

Instruments such as scrapers and clappers were considered to have similar purifying powers. To this, a Christian medieval association with Judas Iscariot was also added.

The instruments of Holy Week carry several different shades of meaning in the minds of the common people; the crowds shouting out to hang Jesus, the suffering of Jesus, mourning for Jesus, the Roman soldiers approaching, repentance for sins committed by the crowds and by Judas Iscariot, or crushing the bones of Judas. The purifying element features in the disassociation from the sins of Judas and the symbolic act of crushing his bones for the evil done. This element remains well in keeping with the original function of wooden instruments.

In Malta, we find that up to a generation ago, there was a very strong association of noise with purification during Holy Week. This was a deep-rooted belief that had long been integrated into Christianity. Of particular relevance is the old pre Vatican Council custom which used to take place in the Easter Triduum, on Wednesday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. On Wednesday, known as *l-Erbgha tat-Tniebri*, literally ‘the Wednesday of Darkness,’ the Church used to be hermetically sealed from all light. Fifteen candles placed on a special candlestand (*Il-Barabba*) near the altar were then lit. One candle at a time was snuffed out at the end of every one of the 14

Psalm readings. When eventually only the last central candle was left, and the Benedictus and antiphon had been recited, the last candle was lifted for the congregation to see, and was then also snuffed out to symbolise the death of Christ. The clergy promptly began to stamp their feet on the wooden choir. The congregation followed suit by knocking against the confessionals and stamping chairs, thus causing a most frightening cacophony of sound. This was generally said to symbolise the earthquake that took place after Christ's death. However, in the minds of the people it was usually also associated with chasing away the evil Judas who betrayed Jesus.⁽¹⁶⁾

There is one reading from the Gospel which originally inspired this type of reaction from the congregation. A very powerful passage in Matthew shows that the very elements showed their disapprobation of the crucifixion of Jesus. The earth quaked, darkness fell and the dead were seen rising from their tombs. This reading must have had a strong terrifying effect on the faithful who listened to it in a church which was in total darkness:

Matthew 27: The death of Jesus

45. From the 6th hour there was darkness over all the land until the 9th hour. And from the 9th hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?", that is "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" But Jesus, again crying out in a loud voice, yielded up his spirit.

51. And suddenly the veil of the Sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth quaked, the rocks were split, the tombs opened and the bodies of many holy people rose from the dead, and these, after his resurrection, came out of the tombs, entered the holy city and appeared to a number of people. The centurian together with the others guarding Jesus had seen the earth quake and all that was taking place and they were terrified and said, "In truth this man was son of God."

In this custom of clattering wood in Maltese Churches, we find a strong element of fear of the calamities that will befall evildoers and we see the same association with chasing evil, a continuation of the ancient belief in the power of noise to keep away evil.⁽¹⁷⁾

Documentary records of the *ċuqlajta*

Out of the 50 or so churches I visited in search of the *ċuqlajta*, very rarely could I be told who constructed the instruments or when they were made. In one parish, that of Gharghur, it is recalled that the cross-shaped *ċuqlajta* in the belfry was made in the early 1930's by a carpenter by the name of Mikiel Aquilina.⁽¹⁸⁾ Only in one case, in the parish of Qrendi was a large belfry cross-shaped *ċuqlajta* found actually carrying a date, 1933. However, it is not certain whether this is a date of construction or a date of repair. Instruments of this kind were not usually considered of much importance and therefore were not normally signed or dated. Records of them were only rarely kept in church registers. In most cases it can be concluded through living memory, that all the instruments are definitely a minimum of 50 or 60 years old. Most are clearly very much older.

It is indeed very fortunate when one comes across any form of documentary evidence, such as that found by Dun Salv Caruana in the Haġ-Żebbuġ parish.⁽¹⁹⁾ Among the Church payments, a fee of "Scudi 0, tari 4" was paid to one Antonio Zammit on 27th March 1787 "*per aver accomodato la cocclaeta.*" The word "accomodato" is considered by Dun Salv to mean "repaired" rather than "newly-constructed." It carries the same meaning in several other of the Church records.

The Żebbuġ records prove that the Żebbuġ church was definitely using some form of *ċuqlajta* in 1787, but we cannot be entirely certain as to what type. Whether this *cocclaeta* is the same large belfry cross shaped instrument still in use today, is hard to say. Repairs would certainly have been made to it several times since then, and are definitely recalled to have been made in the 1940's, after the war. All instruments kept up in the belfry need constant maintenance, eventually leaving very little or nothing of the original construction. Hammers are frequently the first to go. Several instruments have in fact been seen with broken hammers. Many also have added reinforcements, sometimes wooden other times metal. Large sections of these instruments are very often completely replaced. The parish of Żebbuġ also has an instrument used inside the church which is, however, very likely to date from as far back as 1787. The age and type of wood as well as the metalwork all indicate the possibility of such a date.

Other churches were definitely also using some form of instrument in the 18th century, since Can. de Soldanis lists the instrument in his dictionary,⁽²⁰⁾ and describes it as the instrument used in Holy Week, suggesting that it has been long-established. Churches that didn't have belfries were not likely to have the very large instruments, and would probably have had a smaller more portable form of ratchet or clapper. Inside the churches the simple clappers with metal handles still to be found in several of the older churches can easily be dated back at least to the 18th, possibly to the 17th century. The Naxxar parish probably has one of the oldest ratchet-type instruments still in use inside the Church. The instruments used inside churches generally stand a better chance of preservation because they are brought out only once a year and then are stored in a cupboard in the sacristy till the following year.

It would be helpful to find documentary evidence of the use of wooden instruments in medieval Malta. Professor Godfrey Wettinger in fact comes across a *chicaikile* being played in 1527 as a means of teasing and ridiculing an old schoolmaster priest.⁽²¹⁾ It is possible that this instrument was none other than some type of *cuqlajta*. Further delving into early records may eventually yet yield more, possibly earlier, proof of use of the *cuqlaita* on the Maltese islands.

Notes and References:

- 1 For details on the types of instruments found in Maltese Churches see Anna Borg Cardona "Grinding"Judas' Bones" *Treasures of Malta* (Summer 2002).
See Fivos Anoyanakis, *Greek Popular Instruments* (Athens: National Bank of Greece, 1979), 95-104.
- 2 Stanley Fiorini, "The 1551 Siege of Gozo and Repopulation of the Island" in *A Focus on Gozo* eds. J.Farrugia & L. Briguglio, Formatek Ltd., (Malta:1996, reprinted 1997) 82.
- 4 Stanley Fiorini, "The 1551 Siege of Gozo" 83-84.
- 5 Brian Blouet, *The Story of Malta* (rev. ed. Malta: Progress Press Co. Ltd.) 70.
- 6 James Blades, *Percussion Instruments and their History* (rev. ed. Westport, Conn.:The Bold Strummer, Ltd., 1992) 195.
- 7 G. Pitre, *Giuochi fanciulleschi Siciliani* (Palermo: 1883), 417.
- 8 A very small bone clapper dating back to Malta's Roman period (218BC - 535AD) may be seen in the Museum of Roman Antiquities, Rabat, Malta. This may have been used as a toy or as an

instrument in religious ritual.

9. Paola Elisabetta Simeoni and Roberta Tucci, eds., Museo Nazionale delle Arti e Tradizioni Popolari, Roma. *La Collezione degli Strumenti Musicali*, (Roma, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 1991) 88.
10. See Paola Elisabetta Simeoni and Roberta Tucci eds. *La Collezione*, 87.
11. Filippo Bonanni, *Gabinetto Armonico* (Rome: 1723). Bonanni (1638-1725) was a Jesuit librarian and bibliographer. In 1698 he was appointed curator of the famous collection of antiquities formed by Athanasius Kircher and preserved in the Jesuit College. His *Gabinetto Armonico* is one of the principal documents for the history of musical instruments.
12. Curt Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1942), 169-170.
13. G.P. Badger, *Description of Malta and Gozo*, (Malta: 1838), 303.
14. *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 4th January 1906, Letter to the editor signed "Distracted."
15. Godfrey Wettinger, "Priests in Court: A Harassed Schoolmaster and his Traducer" in *Melitensium Amor*, eds. T. Cortis, T. Freller, L Bugeja (Malta: 2002) 97-110.
16. A very vivid account of this is given by Dun Anton Refalo in "Il Gimgha mqaddsa fix-Xaghra ta' dari " "Liturgija u Drawwiet ta' qabel ir Riforma" in *Ix-Xaghra*, vol. VIII No 9, (Jannar-Marzu, 1994). This custom was brought to an end by the reforms of Vatican Council II.
17. James Blades, *Percussion Instruments and their History*, 195.
18. Personal communication by Dun Karm Bezzina (aged c. 80yrs) of Tabor, St John Street, Gharghur, who recalls details of construction and maintenance done on the belfry *cuqlajta*. The instrument was made in the early 1930's by Mikiel Aquilina at the time that Dun Karm Fenech was Church Procurator. It was repaired by Duminku Pullicino, and later also by Bertu Aquilina, who placed it on metal supports.
19. Zebbug Bills Register 1781-1818. For this information, I am indebted to Dun Salv Caruana.
20. Can. Agius de Soldanis, *Dizionario Maltese Italiano Latino*, Malta National Library, Ms. Libr.143, 117v. See also *Damma tal kliem kartaginis mscerred fel fom tal maltin u ghaucin*, Ms. 143, 97r.
Tabella. A stridulent instrument which is played during Holy Week instead of bells. (tr. Anna Borg Cardona).
21. Godfrey Wettinger, "Priests in Court" 97-110.

CUQLAJTA in Malta

PLACE	TYPE							
	BELFRY		INSIDE CHURCH					
	Cross & Hammers	Ratchet		Clapper strung	Clapper w/ hinged wooden flaps	Clapper w/ metal handles	Ratchet	
			+hammers				twirled	sound box
Attard	**							
Balzan			*			**		
Birgu								
Birkirkara, St. Helen			**					**
Cospicua	*					*		
Dingli		*		**				*
Gharghur	**							
Ghaxaq	**				d		d	
Gudja	**			**				
Hamrun, San Gejtanu					**			
Kirkop								
Lija			d			*		
Luqa	**							d
Mdina Cathedral	**				**			
Mellieha		d						d
Mgarr								
Mosta								
Mqabba				*				
Msida	**			**				
Naxxar	**							**
Qormi, St. George	**			**				
Qrendi	**							
Rabat Dominican Church						*		
Rabat, St. Paul	*				**			
Safi								
Senglea								
Siggiewi	*				**			
Tarxien				*				
Valletta, St. John's Cathedral						**		
Valletta, St. Augustine						*		
Valletta, Jesuits						**		
Valletta, St. Paul Shipwreck						**		
Valletta, Carmelites						**		
Zabbar	*							
Zebbug	**					**		
Zejtun	**			**				
Zurrieq	d					*		

** = in use; * = not in use; d = discarded

CUQLAJTA in Gozo

PLACE	TYPE							
	BELFRY			INSIDE CHURCH				
	Cross & Hammers	Ratchet		Clapper strung	Clapper w/ hinged wooden flaps	Clapper w/ metal handles	Ratchet	
			+hammers				twirled	sound box
Gharb	*				*			
Nadur		*						
Qala		*						
Rabat Cathedral								
Rabat, Franciscans					*			
Sannat		d		*				
Xaghra		d						
Xewkja								
Zebbug					*			

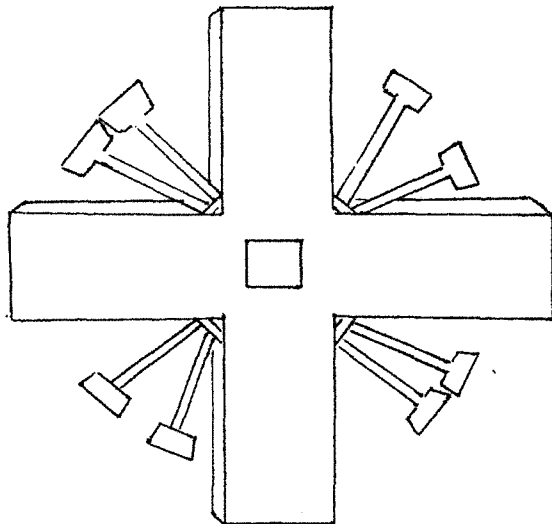


Fig. 1



Figure 1 Cross-shaped *cuqlajta* with wooden mallets. Found in several Maltese belfries. Drawing by the author.

Figure 2 The *Matrac(c)a* used in Holy Week in Spain as portrayed in Filippo Bonanni, *Gabinetto Armonico* (1723) Engraving CXIV.

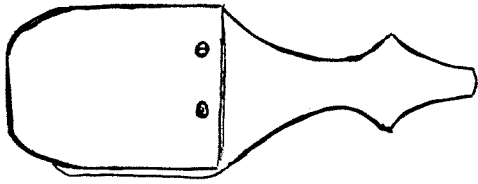


Fig. 3

Figure 3 Small bone clapper from Roman period.

Drawing by the author.



Fig. 4



Fig. 4 Clapper with hinged wooden flaps (Gharb). One of the instruments used inside the church during Holy Week in Malta and Southern Italy. Fig. 5 Filippo Bonanni, (*Gabinetto Armonico*, 1723). Engraving CXII *Crepitacolo per le chiese*, showing a clapper with metal handles. Similar instruments also found in Maltese churches.

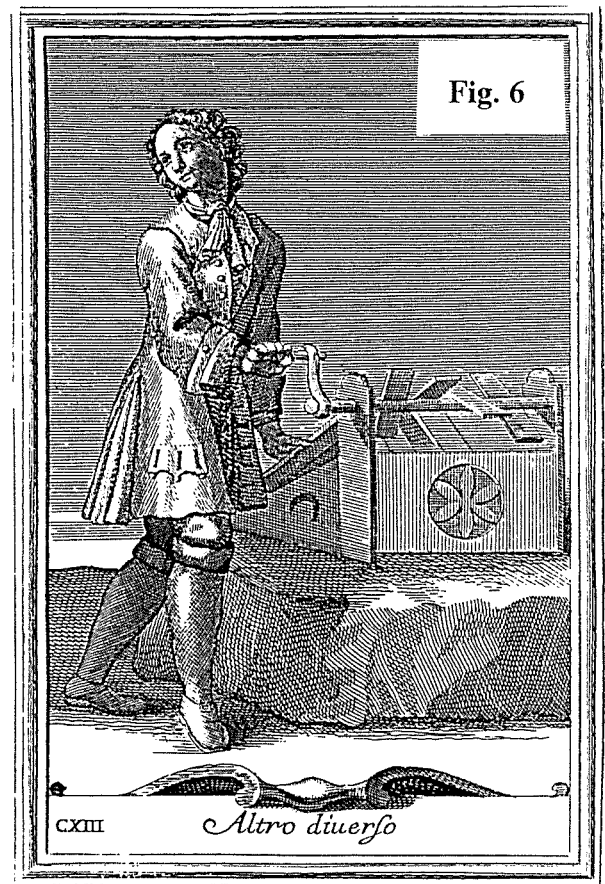


Fig. 6 Filippo Bonanni, (*Gabinetto Armonico*, 1723). Engraving CXIII. Similar large constructions are to be found in the parishes of Nadur and Qala, Gozo.