

St James Church – Carapecchia’s first commission in Malta – and the Municipal Palace, Valletta

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The Church of St. James in Merchants Streets, Valletta, once belonged to the Langue of Castille. A marble inscription in the sacristy states that it was first built in 1612, mainly at the expense of the Grand Chancellor Fra Pietro Gonzales de Mendoza.¹

Chevalier Francesco Antella’s drawing of Valletta which appears in Giacomo Bosio’s *Istoria della Sacra Religione di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano* shows that a church dedicated to St. James already existed on the same site before that date.²

It was the first of the Order’s churches to be rebuilt in the eighteenth century and has been attributed to Romano Carapecchia.³ The 1693 earthquake must have substantially damaged it because despite repairs it was still in very poor condition at the end of the seventeenth century.⁴

Rebuilding was completed in 1710 and this already makes it Carapecchia’s earliest dated work in Malta.⁵ It is however interesting that the application for quarry stone made to the *Veneranda Commissione Munimentorum et bellica* is dated 12 June 1703⁶ and the reply is dated 19 June.⁷ The request states: “*I Com. Fr. D. Antonio Pas Procuratore del Ven. Priorato ha bisogno di tagliar pietre dentro il ristretto di detto V. Priorato in servizio della presente fabrica che si sta facendo nella veneranda Chiesa di detto Priorato; supplica per tanto a V.E. degnarsi aggratiarlo, all’effetto sudetto*”.

Later, on 13 August, the Langue of Castille requested a loan of 2,000 *scudi* from the Treasury to carry out repairs on St. James “*che minaccia rovina*”. They promised to pay back the loan at the rate of 100 *scudi* a year. This request was subsequently granted.⁸

This is four years before Carapecchia’s arrival in Malta and so it raises the question of how he was introduced to the local scene. Had the Order commissioned this work from him while he was still in Rome or had he visited Malta before his arrival in 1707?

Sciocluna states that in 1700 the Prior of the church, Fra Pietro Viani, brought Carapecchia to Malta where he was admitted to the Order as a Knight and at once appointed architect to the Order, but he does not substantiate this statement with references.⁹

Alternatively, still assuming that Carapecchia built this church, an attribution which has never been challenged, the work might have originally been commissioned to another architect, possibly local, but then discontinued for some unknown reason until Carapecchia’s arrival.

Documentary evidence has to date only been provided for two of Carapecchia’s churches in Malta, those of St. Catherine of Italy, the chapel of the Langue of Italy, and St. Catherine in Republic Street, Valletta. Yet strong stylistic similarities between these churches and that of St. James indicate Carapecchia as the architect.¹⁰

A letter from Grand Master Perellos to the Ambassador

to the Holy See, Marcello Sacchetti, throws interesting light on this commission. It is dated 5 November 1703, and states: “*Questi cavalieri del V. Priorato di Castiglia volendo rifabricare la loro Chiesa di S. Giacomo hanno commesso al Pred. Scipione Costanzo Gesuita, che fa ritorno a cotesta sua Provincia di procurar loro un disegno e supplicatoci di ricercarci, come facciamo, a volergli prestare tutta quell’ assistenza che bisogna a farlo abbozzare con buoni Architetti, e risolvere ciò che loro parerà, doppo haver sentito detto Padre informato non meno del sito che della maniera di fabricare in quest’ Isola. Speriamo che lo farete e preghiamo.*”¹¹

Thus it appears that it was this Jesuit priest who established contact with Carapecchia who was still in Rome and that his instructions included details of the site as well as of the buildings methods on the island. On 16 February 1704, Ambassador Marcello Sacchetti duly informed the Grand Master: “*Il Pred. Scipione Costanzo Gesuita pochi giorni prima di partire per Livorno, ove predica nella corrente quaresima, se portò da me col Disegno già da esso fatto fare, e stabilito pre la nuova fabrica della Chiesa di San Giacomo di codesta Ven. Priorato di Castiglia di V.E. e suppongo che detto Pred l’havra effettuato con buoni Architetti senza che habbia havuto bisogno della mia debole assistenza.*”¹²

Later on, in correspondence dated 29 March 1704¹³, the Grand Master wrote: “*Abbiamo sentito con gusto che sia terminata il disegno della nuova Chiesa di S. Giacomo del V. Priorato di Castiglia ma non vedendolo comparire, ci diamo a credere esser ciò seguito per non esser stati riconosciuti gl’ Architetti che lo formarono, e incarichiamo dunque di somministrare la spesa che sarà occorsa commetterla ne vostri conti in debito al Priorato predetto e mandare al medesimo il disegno quando all’ arrivo di questa non sia stato rimesso.*”

Thus although Ambassador Sacchetti had been urged to aid the Jesuit, Scipione seems to have carried the job through himself choosing the architect and liaising with him regarding the plan, without involving the Ambassador at all, a matter which seems to have caused him some annoyance. The architect is not mentioned by name but in addition to the stylistic evidence referred to above we know that by 1706 his work must have become known to the Order because in that year Grand Master Perellos went to some lengths to persuade Carapecchia to come to Malta, a request the architect hesitantly acceded to in 1707.¹⁴

On his arrival here he was invested as a serving brother, *armorum serviens* and appointed *Architetto della Sacra Religione* and *Fontaniere*, or water supply engineer and in this capacity he was attached to the staff of François de Mondion who became Chief Engineer in 1715.¹⁵ He worked indefatigably for the Order until his death in 1738¹⁶, producing work that ranged from designs for fountains, tombstones and church furniture to some of our most beautiful church and civil buildings.¹⁷

Many of the attributions in Malta to Carapecchia are based on stylistic evidence. Documentary evidence has now been

discovered that confirms one such attribution. Between 1577 and 1721 the Valletta *Università* was housed in premises on the site of what is today known as the *Monte di Pietà*. These premises were exchanged with the Treasury for the house opposite on 30 July 1721.¹⁸ This house had originally belonged to Dr. Gio. Batta. Piotto and had been acquired by the Treasury in 1665.

The premises had been let to a series of prominent personalities, the most distinguished being Comm. Fra Giovanni Francesco Ricasoli, the generous patron of Fort Ricasoli, who lived there between 1668 and 1673.¹⁹ It also served as the premises for the *Consolato di Mare*, a commercial tribunal for maritime commerce that was set up by Grand Master Perellos in 1697.²⁰

Following the exchange of the two sites the new Municipal Palace building was reconstructed and embellished by Grand Master Zondadari as borne out by the inscription in the centre of its façade, which states: "*Marcus Antonius Zondadarius M.M./Has Aedes Commodiorem Formam Redactas/ Publicis Melitae Negotiis/ Et Publicae Pietati Aperuit/ Anno Dni. MDCCXXI*".

The *Università* documents in the National Library reveal that the *architetto*, Sig. Fra Romano Carapечchia, was paid 140 *scudi* on 20 December 1721 for the design of the façade ... "Al Sign. Fra Romano Carapечchia *scudi cento quaranta per disegno dal medesimo fatto per la facciata della casa come per mandato*".²¹

The use of the phrase "*della casa*" indicates that it was quite clear, to the writer and to eventual readers, which the house in question was. In other words we are not dealing with just any building that must be identified by specifying its location or previous ownership or tenant or whatever. No other building belonging to the *Università* is referred to in the records as being under construction.

On the other hand it is known that important work was undertaken in that period on the Municipal Palace. This would have merited the employment of an architect such as Carapечchia and so the payment must in all likelihood have been in connection with this project.

Other payments are recorded in connection with work on the façade. These were made to Mro. Giovanni Zammit, who must have been the builder and to Mro. Giuseppe Azzupard. The earliest payment regarding the building of the *facciata* is dated 14 September 1720²² when Giuseppe Azzupard and Mro. Giuseppe Zammit were paid 150 *scudi* "*per comp ti tutta l'opera come per mandato*".²³

Azzupard might be the master carpenter who was engaged by Fr. Filippo Bonici to construct all the woodwork for Palazzo Bonici, in Old Theatre Street, Valletta, in 1736.²⁴ In the case of the Municipal Palace the records indicate that he was paid for work on the *Arme*. It thus appears that he was the sculptor of the coat-of-arms on the façade.

Less clear is the reference to his receipt of 20 *scudi* on 20 October 1721 as payment for a design. We are not told what the design was and indeed whether it had anything to do with work on the façade of the Municipal Palace. It is almost impossible to believe that the design for the coat-of-arms did



Interior of St. James Church, Valletta

not form an integral part of Carapечchia's design and in fact Giuseppe Azzupard was already being paid for work on the *Arma* on 18 May 1720 (30 *scudi*, "*a buon conto*"). This is more than a year earlier than the payment for the unspecified design.

The Municipal Palace is one of the most beautiful buildings in Valletta and was first attributed to Carapечchia by De Lucca.²⁵ In contrast to the older buildings of the capital its façade was enlivened through the use of elaborate details that produced striking *chiaroscuro* effects. Yet the architect also succeeded in introducing features that recalled Cassar's auberges and the Auberge de Provence (rebuilt in the first half of the seventeenth century) thereby harmonising it with its surroundings. This lesson was not lost on later architects and the Auberge de Castille (rebuilt 1741-44) illustrates features which had appeared earlier in the Municipal Palace.²⁶

The process of integrating the baroque style into Valletta had begun in the mid-seventeenth century, mainly thanks to Francesco Buonamici and Mederico Blondel, who were, successively, the Order's resident engineers. Carapечchia was to accelerate the process of softening Valletta's original austere aspect with rich baroque touches in a fresh and different manner.

To return to St. James Church we may note that the façade is strikingly different from other earlier baroque church façades. In St. James, Carapечchia made full use of his repertoire of baroque ornament to cover the walls, crowning the ensemble with a magnificent cartouche and making use of false perspective to accentuate the depth of the central niche.

This evenly distributed decoration, combined with clustered pilasters contrasts with the blank wings, heavily moulded central bay and flattened pilasters of Blondel's churches or the uniformly straight, columnless and largely unornamented wall surfaces of Buonamici's facades. St. James in fact highlights the change that Carapecchia's designs would make to the architectural scene.

NOTES

¹ AOM 1953, f.254 r. Archives of the Order, National Library, Valletta

² L. Mahoney. *History of Maltese Architecture*. Malta: 1988: 266 n.34

³ D. De Lucca. *Architects Working in Malta during the Grand Mastership of Manoel de Vilhena*. B.Arch. Hons dissertation (typescript). University of Malta, 1975

⁴ G. Darmanin Demajo. 'Le Albergie delle Lingue Iberiche e le loro Chiese Nazionali'. *Archivio Storico di Malta*. Anno III vol iii, 1932: 88

⁵ AOM 1953, f.255 v, which states "Fu fabricata piu ampiamente e in miglior forma adornata, come si vede al presente nell'anno 1710 a spese del Vend. Priorato di Castiglia dal Emo. Signor Cardinale Arias e di molti altri signori del detto Vend. Priorato."

⁶ AOM 1016, new pagination 536; M. Pisani. *Serve per Abellire*. MA Baroque Studies thesis, University of Malta, 1999

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ AOM 135, f. 31 r

⁹ H. Scicluna. *St John's Co-Cathedral*. Rome: 1955: 225. One is tempted to consider that Scicluna may have confused the Prior of St. John's Church, the Frenchman Fra Pietro Viany, with the Prior Antonio Viani, head of the illustrious Viani family,

who was probably closely involved in the final negotiations to bring Carapecchia to Malta. Fra Pietro Viany died on 18 November 1700 aged 68, having served as Prior of the Church for 34 years

¹⁰ D. De Lucca. *Carapecchia, Master of Baroque Architecture in Early Eighteenth-Century Malta*. Malta: 2000: 119; Mahoney. *Op.cit.*: 266 n.34

¹¹ AOM 1464, f.144

¹² AOM 1316, f.20 v

¹³ AOM 1464, f.48 r

¹⁴ D. De Lucca. *Carapecchia*: 107

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 108

¹⁶ G. Bonello. 'The Melancholy Death of Romano Carapecchia, Architect'. *Sunday Times of Malta*. 13 December 1998

¹⁷ For details of these works see D. De Lucca, *Carapecchia* and Mahoney, *History*

¹⁸ V. Denaro. *The Houses of Valletta*. Malta: 1967: 18-19

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 25

²⁰ *Ibid.* 27

²¹ Univ.Lib.Maestro 258, f. 385

²² *Ibid.* f.354

²³ *Ibid.* f.406

²⁴ Records of Notary Tommaso Gatt, 16 April 1736. G. Bonello. 'Baroque Architect, industrialist, slave dealer and impresario, Andrea Belli'. *Sunday Times of Malta*, 14 April 1996

²⁵ D. De Lucca. *Architects....* - 1975

²⁶ Mahoney. *Op. cit.* 282-84