

THE TONGUE SYMBOL IN MALTESE ARCHITECTURE TO WARD OFF THE EVIL EYE

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A distinct sculptural feature that marks the external facades of a number of old houses in Valletta and other residential areas in Malta has not, as far as I am aware, drawn the attention, interest and curiosity of Maltese architects and folklorists. I refer to the antefixa, carved in stone, in the shape of the human face that protrude over the portals and from the ends of balcony brackets on the facades of large mansions. They are also present inside some of the entrance halls and interior courtyards.

DESCRIPTION

These face masks portray mainly male human visages which, however, are not sculptured in the normal anatomical configuration of the human face but in varying degrees of misshapen and grotesque guises with sinister overtones. They have a weird expression or else wear a snarling or hostile look or a threatening grin. Others are definitely repulsive and wicked-looking or else have a sarcastic or hostile countenance.

Their eyes are wide-open or bulging from under raised and bushy eyebrows with a defiant and fierce stance; others fix the onlooker with an arrogant and vengeful stare. In a few of them there is a tinge of burlesque and *bon homie*.

Many of them wear a thick and long moustache over a gaping mouth. The nose is somewhat flattened with wide nostrils.

The most striking and intriguing anatomical feature is their large protruding tongue which may be so long as to overlap the lower lip extending to the tip of the chin.

The specimens here illustrated are a representative selection of the appearance of these masks. While basically they are inspired by the same motif – the intent to repulse and drive away the evil onlooker – the facial expression of every one of them has its own individuality depending upon the imagination and skill of the sculptor or the whim of the house owner. They are uneven in the quality of craftsmanship and finishing.

THEIR MEANING

To the casual observer these masks appear to be intended as mere ornaments inspired by a queer and eccentric fantasy. On further thought, however, it becomes apparent that their peculiar location points to a deeper reason for their presence. This study ventures the suggestion that they are the expression of the credulity of man in the protective powers of apotropaic/phallic symbols – here represented by the protruding tongue – against the malevolent and destructive effects of the evil eye.

THE BELIEF IN THE EVIL EYE

The belief in the supernatural – whether benevolent or malevolent – has been a fundamental ingredient of human psychology. In earlier times men and women were unable to understand and interpret life-threatening phenomena in their environment in natural and objective terms. One of these beliefs centred round the alleged sinister powers of the so-called Evil Eye, i.e. the conviction that some persons are endowed with supernatural malevolent powers by means of which they are capable of causing disease, misfortune or material harm to those whom they hate or envy merely by looking at the intended victim or his possessions¹.

Believers in the Evil Eye have been led to devise protective measures to counteract or ward off its hostile effects. These measures took the form of amulets, talismans and other objects symbolising the phallus or male creative or generative force of nature which, owing to its life-giving properties, is capable of opposing and neutralising the malevolent influence of the Evil Eye².

By the mental process of association and extension of ideas, anything that is erect or “penetrating and piercing” has been given a masculine significance and interpreted as typifying the phallus. Among such objects is the protruding or outstretched tongue which thus came to stand as a surrogate for the embodiment of the anatomical phallus³.

The motif of the protruding tongue in the visual arts can be traced to ancient Egypt as one of the attributes of Bes – the obese, pygmy, bearded and ugly but benevolent god whose cult migrated to other parts of the Mediterranean during

¹ G. Pitre. *Usi e costumi, credenze e pregiudizi del popolo siciliano*, Palermo, 1889, Vol. 4, pp. 235-6.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 238-247. P. Cassar. Phallic Objects and Residuals in the Maltese Islands. In the course of publication. T.P. Vukanovic. Obscene Objects in Balkan Religion and Magic, *Folklore*, Vol. 92, 1981, pp. 43 & 50-52.

Phoenician times⁴. Eventually apotropaic visages with outstretched tongues were placed as antefixa over portals, gates and house entrances as vigilant guardians to counteract the harmful influences cast by evil-intentioned persons. The protruding tongue and forbidding countenances of these antefixa have a near-identity with the gorgon device of ancient Greece⁵ and of the *gorgoneia* masks of the Athenion of Gela and of the Agoria of Syracuse (Sicily). These masks have a monstrous appearance with large eyes and ears, a furrowed forehead, wide and flattened nose, an enormous mouth with a horrid grin and exposing two fangs between which hangs a large pendulous tongue extending downwards over the chin⁶.

An affinity also exists with the terracotta antefixa of the Medusa with a protruding tongue⁷ and with the carvings of gargoyles that characterise the elaborate architectural traceries of many medieval churches and cathedrals in Europe⁸. In all these representations the essential elements are (a) the repellent face that strikes terror on the adversary and warns him to keep away; and (b) the phallic tongue that flings back the menace of the Evil Eye on the person that intended to cast harm and destruction on the building and occupants.

It is of interest that the anatomical tongue still retains its symbolism in human behaviour. Charles Darwin in his comparative study of the expressions of the emotions in man and animals observes that humans protrude their tongue when they want to eject from the mouth an object repugnant to our taste and thus protect us from ingesting a harmful and evil substance. This physiological protrusion of the tongue is also availed of as an expression of our aggressive emotions when we stick out the tongue as a challenging and disparaging gesture to cast contempt or ridicule on the evil intentions of our opponents and antagonists⁹.

DATING OF THE MALTA MASKS

It has not been possible to determine exactly when the tongue symbol first appeared in the visual arts in Malta and when it eventually fell into disuse; but there are some

³ C.G. Jung. *Psychology of the Unconscious*, London, 1933, p. 293. J.C. Cooper. *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, London, 1987, pp. 102 & 174.

⁴ H. Evans. *Echoes of Ancient Egypt, The Unexplained*, Vol. 2. Issue 41, 1981, p. 807. J.C. Cooper, *op.cit.*, p. 176. S. Moscati. *I Fenici*, Milano (Bompiani), 1988, pp. 115, 246 & 288.

⁵ J.C. Cooper, *op.cit.*, p. 274.

⁶ L.B. Brea. *L'Athenaion di Gela e le sue terracotte architettoniche*, *Annuario della Scuola Archeologica di Atene e delle Missioni Italiane di Oriente*, Vol. 27-29, 1952, p. 65.

⁷ R. Hutghe (Editor). *Larousse Encyclopedia of Prehistoric and Ancient Art*. London, 1970, p. 307.

⁸ Such as the Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris.

⁹ C. Darwin. *L'espressione dei sentimenti nell'uomo e negli animali*, Torino, 1891, *Seconda Edizione*, pp. 184-5.

indications to show that it had become a current trait in domestic architecture by the early seventeenth century and that it persisted during the flowering trends of the eighteenth to decline in the first decade of the nineteenth.

The earliest representation, in the form of a historiated capital letter “I”, belongs to 1612. It is in the form of a manuscript ink drawing of a face at the beginning of the first line of an entry in the official *Liber Sacri Capituli Generalis Anno 1612 celebrati*. This entry records the inauguration of the Chapter General of the Order of St. John on the 29th April 1612¹⁰.

The first dated stone sculptured mask with protruded tongue seen up to date, surmounts a well in the courtyard of a mansion in St. Paul’s Street, Valletta. It bears the date 1738.

The next tongue symbol that can be assigned a date is in the form of a mask carved on the central bracket supporting the open stone balcony that runs along the sides of the courtyard of the Fine Arts Museum in South Street, Valletta. This edifice, known until recently as Admiralty House, replaced a 16th century building and was erected in its present state in 1763; so it is probable that the mask dates from this year¹¹.

The latest dates mark two stone masks in St. Anthony Street, Attard. They are to be seen over the doors of a high-walled garden opposite the back entrance of Sant’Anton Palace. They bear the dates 1806 and 1808 respectively.

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS SETTING

It may be noted that the vogue of these tongue-masks in Malta falls within the time of the domination of the Maltese Islands by the Order of St. John of Jerusalem with a very short trail within the early years of British rule.

The knights of St. John came from different parts of Europe and through them various lines of cultural influences and customs converged upon the Maltese Islands, including the belief, common to all classes of society, in the malevolent effects of the Evil Eye. Hence the adoption of protective antefixa on the facades and interior courtyards of their stately residences – a practice that was taken up by wealthy Maltese house-owners in Valletta and other districts. These tongue-masks

¹⁰ Archives 306, National Library of Malta, f.3.

¹¹ V.F. Denaro. Yet More Houses in Valletta. *Melita Historica*, 1963, Vol. 3, p. 17. H.P. Scicluna. Notes on the Admiralty House, Valletta, *Archivum melitense*, 1933, Vol. IX, p. 59.

are very likely derived from Europe. In fact they have an extensive geographical distribution stretching from the north of the continent to its southern tip in Sicily. For instance a mask with a prominent outstretched tongue surmounting a heraldic escutcheon is displayed in Caerlaverock Castle in Dumfriesshire¹² while a visage with a long outstretched tongue is stuck above the balcony on the facade of a *palazzo* in Pozzallo (Sicily)¹³ while another one tops a pillar in a pew in the Church of St. Lawrence in Nuremberg (Germany)¹⁴.

Considering that the members of the Order of St. John and the Maltese people professed the Catholic Faith – which disapproved of the belief in the Evil Eye – one is prompted to ask how these antefixa of pagan origin and content can be reconciled with the Catholic tenets of both the Knights and the native population of seventeenth and eighteenth century Malta. How is it, one may ask, that a vigilant Tribunal of the Inquisition ignored these overt manifestations of non-Christian symbolism? Or were these antefixa not regarded as expressions of impiety and therefore not worthy of condemnation? Or was the fear of the effects of the Evil Eye so ingrained not only among the common folk but also among the members of the lay and the ecclesiastical establishment to the extent that even such men trusted in the alleged powers of these symbols as protective antidotes against misfortune, accidents and ill-health derived from an unseen and unfriendly sources working through the supernatural powers of the Evil Eye?

DECLINE

These tongue-masks no longer convey their original message to the present twentieth century passer-by in contrast to the impact which they had on past generations enmeshed as these were in the belief and fear of the Evil Eye. As these beliefs went into decline due to the evolution of a rational view of the universe, the tongue-masks dwindled in number as architectural features having lost their protective significance so that by the early decades of the nineteenth century they underwent a stylistic sculptural devolution into mere conventional and stereotyped sculptural ornaments over doorways and on the stone-brackets of balconies in the form of lion-heads or floral designs and geometric patterns.

ENVOY

A number of the original antefixa here described have survived the ravages of time, weather corrosion, human neglect and the destruction of World War II to continue

¹² *In Britain*, September 1971, p. 32.

¹³ A. Strickland. Personal communication.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*. Personal communication.

to poke their protruded tongues at us. These mute witnesses of the supernatural beliefs of our ancestors now wait to be explored and rescued from oblivion. It is hoped that this short excursus on my part will stimulate others to carry out a systematic survey of the location of these lingering echoes of the past with as exhaustive documentation as any available literary and other sources permit and with as full a photographic record as possible. Until then they are to be spared from deterioration and destruction not only as a special sculptural form of Maltese art but also as the visual expression of our past collective imagery that prompted the erection of these silent sentinels posted on the frontier separating our homes from the hostile world outside.



298 & 299 St. Paul Street, Valletta.



20 Lower Victoria Terrace, Sliema.



Old Hospital Street, Valletta.



108, Merchants Street, Valletta.



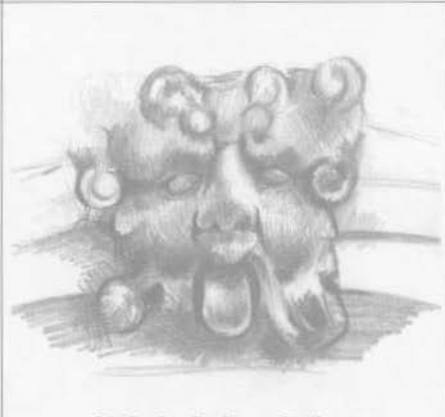
Zebbug – Near de Rohan Gate. (Rem. 1987)



34, Main Street, Lija.



47, Curate Mizzi Street, Qrendi.



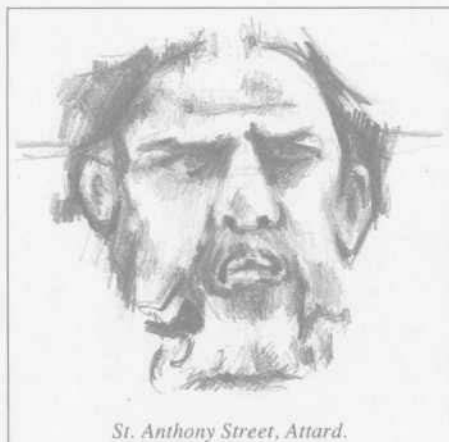
30, St. Paul's Street, Valletta.



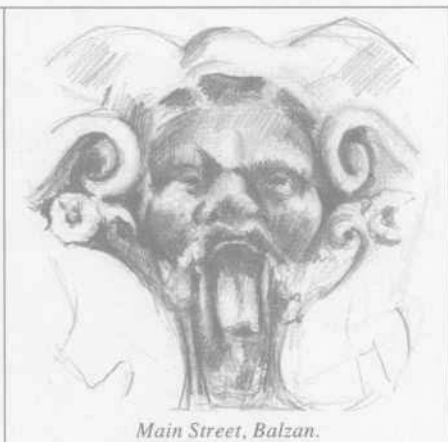
141, Old Bakery Street, Valletta.



Republic Street, Valletta.



St. Anthony Street, Attard.



Main Street, Balzan.



The Palace, Valletta.



23, 24, 25, St. Barbara Bastion, Valletta.



25, St. Barbara Bastion, Valletta.