

THE STATUE AND PEDESTAL OF ST PAUL AT ST PAUL SHIPWRECKED CHURCH IN VALLETTA

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In the report on the spiritual state of the diocese of Malta drawn up by Bishop H.M. Molina (1678-1687) in 1681, the following comments were made on the statue of St Paul venerated in the Church of St Paul Shipwrecked at Valletta. *La Statua di San Paolo Apto in atto predicante, che si conduce in processione nella domenica i Febbraio octava della conversione del Santo con ogni maggiore solennità, con tutti li conventi di Regolari, e confraternità laicali istituto pro voto in tempo del contagio del 1676, è stata fatta in Roma a spese del signore Paolo Testaferrata, sorgendosi in essa le sue armi, per la statua si spesero più di 300 scudi, ed alli 29 Gennaio del 1690, la statua votiva si condusse in processione, e l'antica statua era stata fatta a spese del fu signore Ignatio Bonnici.*¹

The above statement calls for many comments. The mentioned Ignatio Bonnici was the son of GioBatta Bonnici and Angelica Xara. In 1636 he married Antonia Cassar. The mentioned Paolo Testaferrata was born on 12 July 1656. His parents were Fabrizio Testaferrata (1598-1674) and Speranza Xara, daughter of Pietro Xara and Antonia Cagliares. Paolo married Beatrice Cassia, daughter of Pietro Cassia, baron of Gheriexen and Tabria and Castel Cicciano on 22 April 1674. In 1710, Paolo and his wife became title holders of the barony of Gomerino.²

Molina's report does not give a hint as to who was the sculptor of the statue of St. Paul. On purely stylistic considerations, this statue has been attributed to the genius of Melchiorre Gafà. The famous sculptor was born in Vittoriosa in 1636 and died in Rome in 1667. These dates may make him a candidate to being the sculptor of the statue paid for by Ignatio Bonnici, but he could not have been the sculptor of the statue paid for by Paolo Testaferrata because when Gafà died, Paolo was only eleven years old. It must be mentioned that there were other two

1 Archivum Cathedralis Melitae, Misc., 180 Visita Molina 1681, f.354-355. Thanks to confrere Can. J. Azzopardi for his help.

2 a) Cassar Desain, *Genealogia della Famiglia Testaferrata*.

b) Galea M., *Il-Knisja ta' San Pawl Nawfragu Valletta*, 102-104.

Paolo Testaferrata. One was the father of the above-mentioned Fabrizio Testaferrata and the other Paolo was the son of another Fabrizio Testaferrata, second baron of Gomerino, who married, on 13 December 1695, Maria Candida Feriol. As one can surmise from the above dates, these two latter Paolo Testaferrata did not live in the same period in which the statue was sculptured.

The report of Molina says that the statue was made in Rome and had the coat-of-arms of the Testaferrata family engraved on the pedestal. The *bozzetto* of the statue and pedestal is in the Fine Arts Museum in Valletta.³ The present-day pedestal of the statue bears the coat-of-arms of the Sceberras Testaferrata family and so could not have been the original one paid for by Paolo Testaferrata. The Sceberras Testaferrata coat-of-arms is engraved on an eight pointed cross, thus indicating that the donor was a member of the Order of St John of Jerusalem. I will now give a short biography of the members of the Sceberras Testaferrata family who were knighted, namely Pasquale, Fabrizio and Michele. The last two were both sons of Pasquale.

On the 20 April 1755, Pasquale Sceberras Testaferrata married Lucrezia Dorell Falzon. The couple had eleven children. The family lived in a large house nearly opposite the church of St Paul shipwrecked in Valletta. Pasquale (1732-1812) was one of the *familiars* of Inquisitors Gregorio Salviati and Alfonso Maria Dorini. From 1750 up to his death in 1812, Pasquale was a member of the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament of St Paul Shipwrecked Church in Valletta, and between 1769 and 1772, he was its Rector. Pasquale employed a canon of this church to give his children lessons in religion, mathematics, Italian and Latin. In 1775, Pasquale was made *Capitano della Verga* of the Notabile, which office he held up to 1797. In 1777, Pasquale was awarded the gold cross of the Order by Grand Master de Rohan.⁴

Michele Sceberras Testaferrata (1762-1832), son of Pasquale, was born on 29 September 1762 and was baptised at St. Paul Shipwrecked Church in Valletta. In 1789, he became Chamberlain to the King of Bavaria and in 1790 he was made Knight of the Order of St John of Jerusalem.⁵ In 1793 Michele, then Captain in the Bavarian army, was awarded the Cross of Merit after taking part in the attack against the French troops on the Weissenbourg. He was made Knight of the Order

3 Bonnici Calì R., 'Identification of the bozzetto of St Paul's Statue enshrined in Valletta', *Melita Historica*. Proceedings of History Week, 1984, 15-16.

4 a) National Library of Malta (NLM), Liber Bullarum, 1777, Arch. 581, f. 264.

b) Farrugia Randon R., *Camillo Sceberras. His Life and Times*, 1-7.

5. NLM, Liber Bullarum, 1790, Arch. 609, f.179.

of St George of Bavaria and aide-de-camp to King Ludwig of Bavaria. He was later promoted to a general in his army.⁶ Michele died on 12 March 1832, in Milan and lies buried there. For most of his adult life, Michele had been abroad and his connections with St Paul Shipwrecked church in Valletta were scanty indeed.

Fabrizio Sceberras Testaferrata was the second son of Pasquale. He was baptised on 3 April 1757 at St Paul Shipwrecked Church. On 12 September 1768, Bishop Bartholomew Rull conferred on him the clerical tonsure. In 1770 he was appointed Canon Co-adjutor of the canonry of Ghar Barca. On 26 April 1771, Fabrizio left Malta to enter the Clementine College in Rome and henceforth, except for a few days in the beginning of the French occupation of Malta, he never returned. On 26 November 1785, he graduated Doctor of Civil and Canon Law from the Sapienza University in Rome and the following year, he started his career as Governor and at times Apostolic delegate to the Papal States of Narni, Città di Castello, Fano and Macerata. On 12 December 1786, Fabrizio was granted the *Crucem Aureum Devotionis* by the Grand Master.⁷ In 1802, Fabrizio was ordained priest, consecrated Titular Archbishop of Beirut in *partibus infidelium* and appointed Apostolic Nuncio to all Switzerland. In 1815, he was called to Rome where he acted as Secretary to the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars up to 6 April 1816, when he was elected Cardinal. He was then nominated to the Bishopric of Senigallia where, after twenty-five years of pastoral work and philanthropic social improvements, he died and lies buried in the chapel of Our Lady of Hope, which he himself had paid for, in the cathedral of Senigallia. When Fabrizio was Secretary of the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, Bishop Mattei and the canons of St Paul Shipwrecked Collegiate Church in Valletta, wrote to him repeatedly over the right of precedence in the *Corpus Christi* procession and on the right of the canons to wear a pectoral cross at the investiture ceremony. The Bishop of Malta and the canons of the church of St Paul Shipwrecked had congratulated Fabrizio on his election to Cardinal. I never found any documents in private or public archives stating that he ever donated anything to the church of St Paul Shipwrecked in Valletta.

I have researched extensively at the Government Notarial Archives, the Archives of St Paul Shipwrecked Church, the National Archives, Rabat, the Mdina Banca Giuratale Archives and the Episcopal Archives in Floriana, and

6. Farrugia Randon R., Op. cit., 13-14.

7. a) NLM, Liber Bullarum, 1786. Arch., 601, Tom. 2.

b) Farrugia Randon R., *The Maltese Cardinal*. Biography of Cardinal Fabrizio Sceberras Testaferrata.

have had access to a few family archives. I did not find any document stating when and who made the pedestal and the statue of St Paul. I could not find who of the above knighted members of the Sceberras Testaferrata family had donated the pedestal of the present statue. It was, however, quite customary for the Sceberras Testaferrata family to make donations without making a notarial deed. Maybe for the donor, the coat-of-arms on the pedestal was enough. My humble opinion is that Pasquale Sceberras Testaferrata was the donor of the present pedestal of the statue of St Paul as shown his connections with this church were several and constant.

Some of my assertions need more proof. I hope, with time, this will be forthcoming, especially when persons in possession of private family documents which are of historical value, decide to either publish them themselves or else make them available to the scholars of our island's history.