

# **The Artistic Heritage of Gozo: A Study of Patronage Patterns in a Small Island Community**

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**T**he miniature size of Gozo with the consequential financial, social and cultural limitations of an isolated, and often impoverished, community of farmers and herdsmen, sailors and fisherman do not, *prima facie*, seem to give much scope to the study of patterns of artistic patronage. The wealth of buildings and works of art that the island possesses comes, therefore, as a surprise to both social anthropologist and art historian. The natural temptation is to seek the answer to this perplexing situation in the cultivated aesthetic values of an enlightened government and ecclesiastical establishment which realised the political, and religious, advantages of a sound cultural programme. This, however, is only partially correct, and without, in any way, detracting from the importance of state and church support for the visual arts, it is important to emphasise that impressive churches were also built and valuable works of art commissioned as a result of humbler patronage patterns that were often of the collective type and sometimes came from quite unexpected quarters.

This paper will focus on the artistic heritage of Gozo in terms of paintings but it should be stressed that the Gozitan artistic patrimony includes also sculpture and architecture.

## **FIRST DOCUMENTED REFERENCES**

The first documented references to paintings in Gozo are contained in the ecclesiastical visitation reports of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, starting from 1575 (Buhagiar, 1990: 84-85). These

mention both *icone* or small altar paintings, normally on a wooden panel, and murals which were normally more impressive. The church of the Saviour, in the Castello, was, for example, entirely frescoed with cult images that included a Golgotha scene in the apse.<sup>1</sup> In the countryside, there was an apse mural of the *Assumption* in the homonymous church at Ghajn Xejba (Bezzina 1983: 224), while icons of saints were painted on the walls of the church of St Barbara at Tal-Gruwa, limits of Sannat (Bezzina, 1989: 75).

The date and method of commission of these, and other similar paintings, are not known, but it is possible to draw analogies from Malta were itinerant artists, such as the Carmelite friar Johannes Antonius Pulcella, are recorded as being engaged to execute such paintings by the parish or church-going community (Wettinger, 1976: 111-114, 118-119). At least one Maltese commission, that of 1496, for the apse painting of the new church of Santa Maria, in the village of Attard, had been instigated by a desire to emulate and rival the apse painting of the church of the nearby village of Mosta. It is not improbable that in Gozo, similar grass roots patronage was, to an extent, also motivated by parallel incipient rivalries between the inhabitants of neighbouring rural settlements, but the matter still deserves closer scrutiny.

## PRESTIGIOUS PATRONAGE

The first apparent indication of prestigious patronage is provided the two armorial shields of Grand Master Hugues de Loubenx Verdalle [1582-1595], prominently emblazoned on the late Mannerist, oil on canvas painting of *The Meditations of St Augustine* in the Augustinian Priory, at Rabat. This painting is traditionally indicated as the altarpiece of the rural church of S. Maria ta' Gajdoru, overlooking Ramla Bay<sup>2</sup>, which was deconsecrated in 1657 (Bezzina 1983: 240). It is more probable, however, that it was an altarpiece in the priory church. In spite of the fact that it was seemingly the gift of the reigning Grand Master, the painting is a provincial work of mediocre artistic merit, characterized by an unpleasant rigidity and an arid imagination. There are stylistic analogies with

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1. These murals survived until after 1746. (See Agius de Soldanis and Farrugia 1953).

2. According to the pastoral visitation report of Bishop Baldassare Cagliares, the Ta' Gajdoru painting represented the Assumption of the Virgin.



Unknown Sicilian or South Italian, late sixteenth century artist, *The Meditation of St Augustine*, Augustinian Priory, Rabat. The canvas is emblazoned with the arms of Grand Master Hugues de Loubenx Verdalle. Photo: Anthony Cassar DeSain

the known works of Giovanni Maria Abela (act. late 16th century) but these are not enough to permit an attribution, and the painting can, indeed, be the work of a minor Sicilian or South Italian artist.

The first truly remarkable bequests were made by Bishop Baldassare Cagliares [1615-1635], who was reputedly of Gozitan extraction. In the early seventeenth century, the aristocratic prelate commissioned from Urbino, the famous Renaissance hilltop city, a painting which he donated to a remote little church of the Immaculate Conception, in the idyllic countryside outside the rural settlement of Qala, that had been rebuilt a few years previously. The painting still hangs behind the altar of the sanctuary church. It is probably the most important painting in Gozo and one of the finest in the Maltese Islands. The work comes from a source close to the great Counter Reformation artist, Federico Barocci [c.1535-1612] who counted among his friends and admirers St Philip Neri. The

soft painterly style of the canvas and its religious sentimentality point in his direction. It is not, however, an autograph work, but rather a product of his bottega. The Virgin, who seems to swoon in an ecstasy of pious fervour, is a rather insipid image, but the figure of God is splendidly realised. At the feet of the Virgin, the large, luscious leaves of the Tree of Good and Evil, introduce a poetic note and reveal a keen eye for naturalistic detail. The attribution to Barocci is first noted by Gian Pietro Agius de Soldanis in 1746 (Agius de Soldanis: II, 95), which seems to be borne out by stylistic and technical considerations. The painting survives in a good state of preservation, even though it has suffered from inept restoration interventions. In 1954 it was vandalised when a precious metal crown was placed on the Virgin's head (Buttigieg 1980: 50-52).

Cagliares's other important bequest was a painting of *The Flight to Egypt* which was intended for the chapel of St Joseph that he founded within the walls of the Castello, in 1620. The 1755 pastoral visitation report of Bishop Paolo Alpheran de Bussan, attributes the work to Filippo Paladini [c.1544-1616]<sup>3</sup> – a late Mannerist artist of some significance, active principally in Malta and Sicily (Buhagiar, 1988: 55-59). The work which shows a night scene is notable for its realism and quaint detail that partakes more of genre than of religious art. It seems to be the work of a nordic artist and the attribution to Palladini should be treated with caution.

The patronage of the Knights was, at first, far less exciting. In 1622, the Governor of Gozo, Fra Richard de Nini Claret, donated an altar-painting to the church of the Nativity of the Virgin, known as Ta' Savina, in Rabat. The picture is a late Mannerist exercise of mediocre merit. Its chief interest lies, in fact, in its documentary value because it faithfully records, in an inset, the appearance of the enceinte of the Castello in the early seventeenth century. Another governor of Gozo, Francesco Salinas, donated to the Castello church, in 1647, a painting of *The Virgin of Sorrows* that he had brought to Malta from his native Castille (Bezzina 1983: 241). The icon, which soon acquired notable cultic significance, was, in 1711, transferred to the sacramental chapel where it remained until around the middle of the eighteenth century. It was then replaced by a copy ascribed to Francesco Zahra [1710-1773] (Ferris, 1866: 545).

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3. Archiepiscopal Archives, Malta, *Visitatio Alpheran* 1755, f.476v. The late Daniel Glavina S.J. kindly drew attention to this reference.



Unknown early seventeenth century artist, the *Nativity of the Virgin with an Inset View of the Gran Castello*, Church of the Nativity of the Virgin (Ta' Savina), Rabat. The Canvas is emblazoned with the arms of the donor, Fra Richard de Nini Claret.

*Photo: Anthony Cassar DeSain*

Salinas's painting was subsequently placed in a street shrine under the archway of the Castello, close to the Casa Bondi, from where it vanished in the 1950s (Bezzina 1983: 241n). The picture that presently adorns the shrine is another copy, painted at an unknown period and carrying the forged date of 1550.

It was not until 1678 that the patronage of the Knights gave Gozo a truly remarkable work. This was the large canvas of *St George* for the high altar of the church of the saint at Rabat. It was commissioned from Mattia Preti by Fra Don Francesco de Corduba, another Governor of Gozo. This Knight was such a staunch devotee of St George that, according Agius de Soldanis, he was physically involved in the rebuilding of the church and used to carry on his back slabs of stone and sack's of mason's sand to the edification of all who saw him! (Agius de Soldanis, II: 47). The painting depicts the warrior-saint at the moment of victory over the foul dragon. The figure of St George is a replica with minor variations of a *St Michael the Archangel* that the young Preti had included in an altarpiece of *The*

*Virgin of the Angels* for the church of San Domenico in his native Taverna (Tassoni 1989: 26-27).<sup>4</sup>

In 1680, two years after the Don Francesco de Corduba bequest, another prestigious commission gave Gozo its second Preti painting. The work was, however, to remain on the island for only two years. The patron, this time, was Bishop Michele Molina [1678-1682]. The beneficiary was the church of St John the Baptist at Xewkija which the prelate had raised to parish status in 1678 (Borg, 1978: 2). The bequest should, therefore, be looked upon as the gift of a bishop to a new parish that he had founded. The painting which represented *St John the Baptist in the Wilderness* remained in the church until 1682. In that year the bishop was transferred to the See of Larida in Catalunya, and not wishing to part with the painting, decided to exchange it with a new altarpiece of the same subject by Preti's assistant, albeit very mediocre painter, Gioacchino Loretta [1637-c.1712]. The Preti canvas was donated instead to the cathedral church of his new diocese. Loretta's painting, which survives in Xewkija, is claimed to have been retouched by Preti (Cutajar 1988: 36-38). This I find difficult to believe. It is possible, however, that we have in it a weak copy of Preti's original altarpiece.

so apparently they  
did not paint this portrait  
- in reality

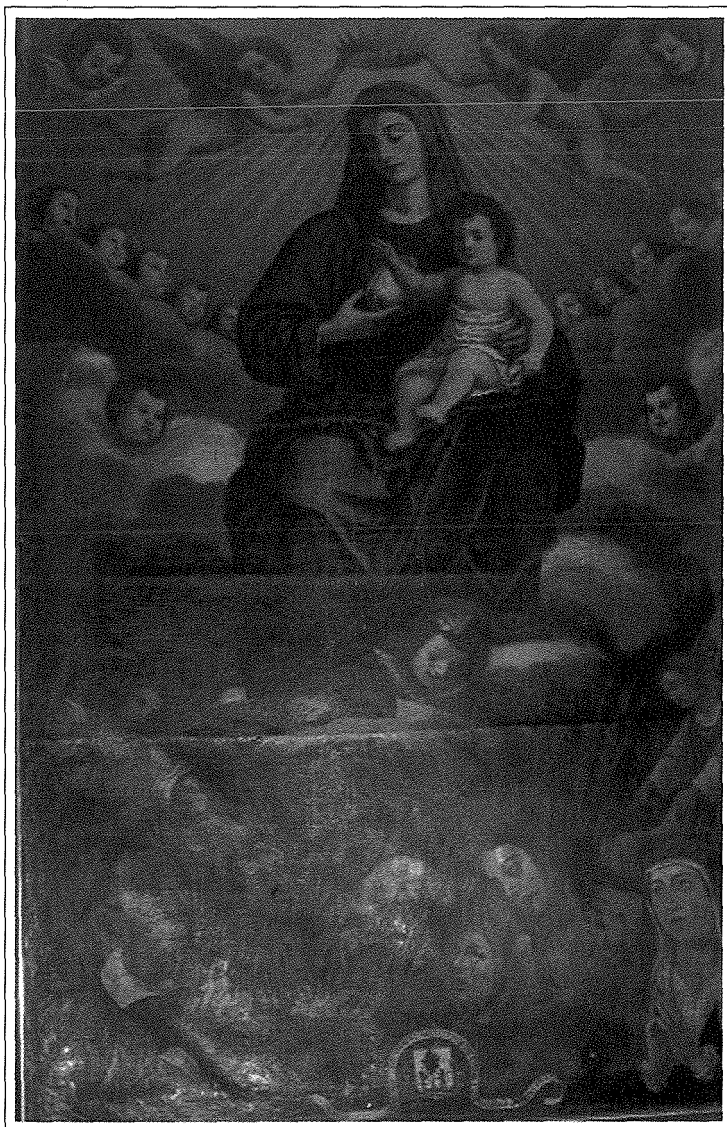
#### PATRONAGE BY THE GENTRY AND MIDDLE CLASSES

The local gentry was, in the seventeenth century, not very conspicuous in its artistic patronage. One exception was Giovanni Gourgion who, in 1688, donated an important work from the Preti Bottega to the church of St George. This is the altarpiece of *The Virgin of Mercy with Souls in Purgatory* which includes full length portraits of the donor and his wife Elena who appear in the lower tier of the painting to assist in the succouring of the suffering souls (Agius de Soldanis, II: 47). The painting is largely the work of Bottega painters working from preparatory sketches prepared by the master.

This was normal bottega practice. Preti supervised the work and, in certain, passages it is possible to detect his personal intervention. Giovanni Gourgion also extended his munificence to the priory church of St Augustine to which he donated yet another painting from the bottega

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4. Dr. Eugene Montanaro kindly drew attention to this publication.



Attr. to Filippino Dingli, the *Virgin of Mercy with Souls in Purgatory*, Basilica of St George, Rabat. The canvas is emblazoned with the arms of the donor Georgius Muscat. Photo: Mario Buhagiar.

of Preti (Agius de Soldanis, II: 81). This is the altarpiece of *St Augustine with St John the Baptist and St William of Aquitaine*, which is said to have been commissioned in 1690 (Borg and Mizzi: 1206). It is a work worthy of attention but the unsatisfactory state of preservation and successive layers of dark varnish make a critical evaluation difficult.

Before the time of Giovanni Gourgion, the only bequest by a member of the Gozitan gentry that deserves a passing mention was that made in 1623 by Joannis Castelletti to his family chapel in the Castello church. This was a canvas of *St Catherine of Alexandria* that includes a bust length portrait of the donor with whose name it is inscribed. The painting which is a provincial late Mannerist work is, however, of limited artistic interest.

Patronage of a humbler middle class sort could also occasionally produce interesting paintings. In 1642, a certain Georgius Muscat of Casal Luqa, donated a *Virgin of Mercy* to the church of St George, where the painting is still preserved in the vestry. Stylistic considerations point to Filippino Dingli (act. first half of the 17th century), an interesting but little known late Mannerist artist who seems to have been an important link between Paladini and Stefano Erardi.

*- painting 2 mentioned  
write one of the donor portraits in 1642*

An armorial crest and an inscription in the bottom centre of the canvas records the donation, and Georgius Muscat and his wife put in an appearance to intercede with the Virgin for the suffering souls.

Another noteworthy work was commissioned two years later, in 1644, by the Maltese priest Nicola Mangion, incumbent of the lucrative late medieval benefice of the church of the Annunciation, at Wied il-Lunzjata. This was a painting of the *Annunciation of the Virgin*, by the gifted, but similarly little studied artist Fra Lucas Garnier (act. mid -17th century), a member of the Order of St John, whose stylistic idiosyncrasies betray a Flemish background, though he was probably French.

## PATRONAGE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The eighteenth century witnessed a decline in the art patronage of the Knights. The only significant bequest was that made to the Augustinian



church in the early years of the century, by Fra Carlo de Queralt, Governor of the island. This was an altarpiece of *The Virgin of Carmel* by Stefano Erardi [1630-1716] (Schembri: 328). The patronage of the church and of the middle classes was, on the other hand, intensified and occasionally provided Gozo with some truly remarkable works. Among the most noteworthy one must mention the two companion canvases by Francesco Zahra [1710-1773] in the choir of the church of St George. These were the gift of the archpriest of Rabat, Giacomo Galea. The two paintings, which are among the best productions of the artist's mature period, were donated in 1763. They depict, respectively, *St George before Dioceltian*, and the *Beheading of St George*.

In the last decade of the century, the parish priest of the village of Sannat, Salvatore Grech [1779-1810], commissioned from Rocco Buhagiar [1725-1805], Malta's most prestigious artist, after the death of Zahra, two large canvases, of *The Beheading of St Margaret* and *St Margaret Experiencing the Visitation of the Holy Spirit*, which he donated to his parish church to hang in the newly reconstructed choir (Bezzina, 1989: 295-296). They were completed and fixed in position in 1801.<sup>5</sup> The two paintings have the significance of being Rocco's last known work. Rocco had deviated from Zahra's brand of Neapolitan Baroque in the direction of a more classicising Roman approach. His work is unequal in quality, but at his best he could be remarkably good. The Sannat canvases were painted at a time when old age had taken its toll of his competence, but no study of his *oeuvre* would be complete without them (Sciberras 1995). The artist seems to have entertained a friendly relationship with parish priest Grech that started in the early 1780s when he and his assistants painted the *Via Crucis* cycle for Sannat church.<sup>6</sup> The fourteen paintings could have been another gift by this munificent priest whose fine portrait, probably also painted by Rocco, hangs in the vestry of the church.

Among the several other instances of ecclesiastical patronage in the eighteenth century, one particular donation stands out. This was the high altarpiece of *The Assumption of the Virgin* for the Castello church which was commissioned from the painter Michele Busuttill [1762-1831] by Can. Don Benedetto Stellini [c.1728-1800], possibly at the suggestion

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5. The inscription *Ex dona Rev. i Par. hi Sal. is Grech - 1801* across the bottom of the canvas of the *Beheading* records the bequest.

6. On the introduction of the *Via Crucis* devotion in Sannat see Bezzina 1989: 277-278. The attribution of the *Via Crucis* paintings to Rocco is due to Keith Sciberras.

of the archpriest of the church, Francesco Saverio Cassar, Gozo's warrior priest who, in 1798, led the armed insurrection against the French garrison. The large canvas which is emblazoned with the armorial shield of the Stellini family, is Michele Busuttill's first important work. It is also his masterpiece. At the time of the commission, Busuttill was still fresh from his academic studies at the Academia di San Luca in Rome where he had shown considerable promise and won prestigious prizes. This had earned him great reputation. Can. Stellini's commission was, therefore, a notable one, and the work was received with such acclaim that the munificent patron immediately followed it up by a second commission for two other large canvases, of the *Immaculate Conception* and the *Nativity of the Virgin* for the choir of the church.<sup>7</sup> The present unhappy state of these two canvases precludes a critical appreciation, but they do not appear to be works of notable artistic merit. Michele Busuttill did not unfortunately live up to the expectations of Malta's restricted, but surprisingly discerning, circle of connoisseurs and savants. His precocious promise seems to have entirely dried up and most of his later works are marked by an arid imagination and limitations of draughtsmanship and technique.

The significance of middle class patronage has still to be critically assessed. Gozo distinguished chronicler, antiquarian, lexicographer and cultured cognoscente, Can Gian Pietro Agius de Soldanis, was a conspicuous patron of both the Castello church and the church of St George<sup>8</sup>, but the sphere of his patronage seems to have been restricted to marble works and altar reredoses and, therefore, falls outside the scope of this paper.

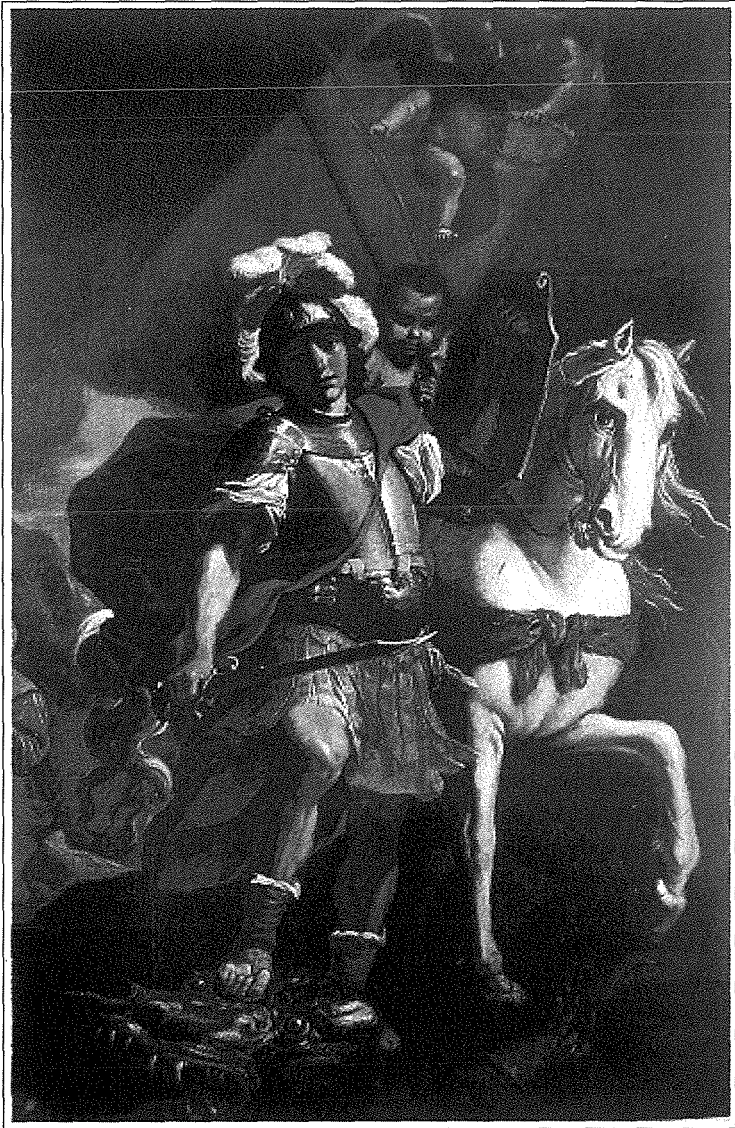
Two less prominent patrons who, none the less, bequeathed paintings of a respectable quality were Horatio Gilastri and the alderman or Giurato, Basilio Grima. The former donated, in 1735, an altarpiece by Gian Nicola Buhagiar [1698-1752], depicting the *Virgin of Mercy with St Bartholomew and Souls in Purgatory* to the small church of the Virgin of Mercy at Xewkija.<sup>9</sup> Basilio Grima's bequest was artistically inferior, but the painting, which he donated to the church of St George, at Rabat, towards

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7. On Michele Busuttill see Attard Tabone 1991: 5-31.

8. For the church of St George see Montanaro 1987: 27-39.

9. Archiepiscopal Archives, Floriana, Visitatio Rull 1758-60, ii, ff.677v-678. The painting carries the legend *Horatio Gilastri Sumptibus 1735*.



Mattia Preti, *St George and the Dragon*, Basilica of St George, Rabat. The canvas is emblazoned with the arms of the donor, Fra Don Francesco de Corduba. Photo: Anthony Cassar DeSain

the middle of the eighteenth century,<sup>10</sup> has its importance in the artistic chain of aesthetic and stylistic evolution that led to Rocco Buhagiar. The painting, which now hangs in the vestry of the church, depicts The Holy Trinity with St Basil and St Andrew. It is of unknown authorship, though certain elements and stylistic idiosyncrasies point in the direction of Enrico Regnaud [1692-1764] who might have been Rocco's first artistic master.<sup>11</sup>

## NINETEENTH CENTURY PATRONAGE

The nineteenth century witnessed a return to and gradual intensification of the old late medieval practice of collective patronage, but there were, of course, many exceptions and the patronage of the middle classes and of individual ecclesiastics remained, all along, strong. One important, though unfortunately short lived, development was the setting up of a foundation by the enlightened banker and financier Vincenzo Bugeja [1820-1890] with the dual intention of encouraging the arts and providing good quality paintings to churches and public buildings in the Maltese Islands. The foundation provided Gozo with at least one altarpiece. This is the religiously intense painting of *The Crucifixion*, by Giuseppe Cali [1846-1930] in the parish church of the Assumption of the Virgin, at Żebbuġ.<sup>12</sup>

I will conclude with one very significant painting donated by Judge Giuseppe Cremona, in 1906, to the church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at Fontana (Bezzina 1986: 45). This is the altarpiece of *The Death of St Joseph* by Giuseppe Galimberti, a largely unknown Italian artist active towards the turn of the twentieth century. The painting which has iconographic and chromatic affinities with the style of Domenico Bruschi [1840-1910], is one of Malta's great paintings of the early twentieth century. It is an essay in silver grey tonalities that looks forward to the paintings of Anton Ingloft [1915-1945] nearly half a century later.

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10. Personal communication by Can Dun Nikol Vella Apap who generously shared with me his research on the history and works of art of St George Basilica.

11. Thanks are due to Keith Sciberras with whom I shared ideas on the painting during a visit to St George Basilica on 24 February 1995.

12. The painting is inscribed with the legend *Conservatorio Vincenzo Bugeja*.

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