

New Light on some Artists Impressions of a Visit to St Paul's Grotto in the 17th Century

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Abstract: *The cult of St Paul in Malta derives from the Apostle's shipwreck (Acts of the Apostles, Chapters 27 and 28) which gained specific shape and interpretation through oral and written interpretations and accounts over the centuries. The centre of this cult was 'La Grotta di S. Paolo' in Rabat (Malta). The Counter Reformation programme with its efforts to renovate and re-establish concrete objects of veneration and Malta's increasing prosperity and her economic 'opening' towards Europe after 1530 were crucial factors in the history of this cult. The focus of this paper is directed on three distinguished artists' visit to the grotto in the 17th century, and its echoes in their works and writings. The comments on the shrine by Joachim von Sandrart, Willem Schellinkx, and Lambert Friedrich Corfey have, until now, escaped the attention of scholars.*

Keywords: *St Paul's Grotto, Cult of St Paul, Order of St John, Counter Reformation, artists, Joachim von Sandrart, Willem Schellinkx, Lambert Friedrich von Corfey.*

Introduction

The focus of this paper is directed on three distinguished artists' visits to Malta's foremost Christian shrine, the Grotto of St. Paul in Rabat, and its echoes in their works and writings. Until now, these echoes have escaped the attention of scholars. It is therefore intended (a) to present them here in some detail, as well as (b) to place them in their respective historical and cultural context. The latter intention requires some interdisciplinary approaches and aims to show the motives why an artist in the 17th century should take interest in this shrine.

The two drawings which Willem Schellinkx had carried out on the spot found the attention of several scholars.¹ His travel diary comments on the grotto and the

¹ Cf. the depictions in Bernard Aikema a.o. (ed.), *Willem Schellinks. Journey to the South, 1664–1665*, Rome 1982; John Azzopardi (ed.), *St Paul's Grotto, Church and Museum at Rabat, Malta*, Malta 1990; Thomas Freller, 'The Pauline Cult in Malta and the Movement of the Counter-Reformation: The Development of its International Reputation', *The American Catholic Historical Review*, Vol. LXXXV (1999), no. 1, pp. 15–34; and Id., '(...) Et cum evasissimus, tunc cognovimus quia Melita insula vocabatur', *Der Schiffbruch des Hl. Paulus auf „Melita“ und die Installation eines Kults*, *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, Vol. CXV (2004), Nos. 1–2, pp. 117–63.

reflections which found this visit in the writings of the renowned Dutch painter and art historian Arnold Houbraken however were neglected until now. The rather mysterious – because until now hardly documented – Malta-visit of the German ‘Vasari’, Joachim von Sandrart, had been discussed by the present author in a different context.² His comments on the Grotto have not featured yet. The visit to Malta by the distinguished architect, designer, and poet from Westfalia, Lambert Friedrich Corfey, until now has escaped the scholars completely. As their motives to pay a visit to Malta’s most important shrine form a unity, here they are presented and analysed together.

Iconography and ideology

The general revival of places of devotion and cult in Christian Europe after 1600 was far from random but part of a carefully planned programme of Catholic policy. The baroque period was also the culmination of the European fame of St Paul’s Grotto. This coincided with the peak of the reputation of the Order of St John. In fact these phenomena cannot be separated from each other. Although it had existed before the specific revival in the first decades of the seventeenth century, the movement of the Pauline cult in Malta had a direct connection with the Counter-Reformation programme of the Catholic Church, with its roots in the Council of Trent. Art, architecture, and literature had to state the importance and universal approach of the Catholic Church in order to attest the truth of Faith. The arts had to visualize this spiritual programme and help to develop a style which was now highly visual. A most significant part of this ecclesiastical programme was the revival of the holy traditions of the pilgrimages and their aims by rebuilding or extending old monuments in a baroque style, thereby practically creating new ones. However, in the case of the international ‘promotion’ of St Paul’s Grotto the concept of Counter-Reformation was not the only motive.

The period of Counter-Reformation coincides with the peak of the international fame of the Order of St John. Since 1530 ruler over the Maltese islands, the Order had gained tremendous fame in its heroic defence of Malta when it was attacked by a Turkish armada in 1565. In fact, the Knights soon realized the ideological and religious potential of the historical and devotional connection. In an attempt to foster and secure a widespread recognition of this up to then restrained local cult, the Order tried to use aspects of the cult and the devotion to St Paul for its own iconographical and ideological purposes. When the cult of St James in Spain and the pilgrimage to

² Thomas Freller, ‘On the trail of Caravaggio – Joachim von Sandrart in Malta’, in Toni Cortis, Lino Bugeja, Thomas Freller (eds.), *Melitensium Amor: Festschrift in honour of Dun Ġwann Azzopardi*, Malta 2002, pp. 289–300.



Galicia's Santiago di Compostela reached its peak in high medieval times, it was decisively shaped by the supposed or real threat to Christendom by the Moors and Arabs. St James had become a symbol in Spain's *Reconquista*. Also, the island of Malta was located on the borderline between Muslim and Christian faith. Although the Pauline Cult in Malta had never reached such an importance and such a European impact, its use and presentation by the Knights of St John – the sworn enemies of the infidels – had a similar philosophical and spiritual background. So, for Malta and the Order of St John, the Pauline cult had considerable political, devotional, and ecclesiastical implications; St Paul was seen to have promoted the Maltese ecclesiastical as well as the national and cultural identity and prestige. An important Pauline shrine in its dominion raised the prestige of the state of the Order of St John too. Therefore, it is no coincidence that in 1606 Grand Master Wignacourt, in a bull, gave permission to the energetic and pious Spaniard Juan de Venegas to visit Santiago and other important shrines of Christianity to learn more about how to install this cult.³ In the previous years Venegas had dedicated his life to promote the fame of the grotto. If Venegas, however, really went to Santiago is not documented.

So St. John and St. Paul became the spiritual guardians of the Island of Malta. It was only logical that the Grand Masters should try to exploit the Cult of St Paul to further their own power, history, and glory. Meanwhile, Venegas had built a first chapel dedicated to St Publius and had brought three wooden statues in the grotto representing St Paul, St Luke, and St Publius. The 1615 pastoral visitation of Bishop Baldassare Cagliares records five altars at the Grotto.⁴ After Venegas had achieved a tremendous boost to attract the locals and foreigners to visit Rabat and its shrine, the Order found the time ready to include the Grotto officially in their domain. Following permission received from the Pope, on 24 April 1617, the administration and guardianship of the Grotto passed on to the Grand Master of the Order of St John.⁵ Shortly afterwards Grand Master Aloph de Wignacourt erected an institution for chaplains looking after the Grotto. These resided in a Collegio just across the road from the Grotto. Juan de Venegas was nominated the first rector of the new institution. The translations of relics, which became increasingly widespread in the occident from the 7th century onward, had led to the creation of numerous shrines and centres of cult. To have a 'real' relic on the spot still must have been one of the major aims. Therefore it was a very important moment for promoting St Paul's Grotto when in 1620 the duke of Mantova, Ferdinando I, donated the armbone of St Paul to the Grotto. From the late 16th century onwards the devotion and worship of St Paul's

³ A[rchives] [of] [the] O[rder] [of] M[alta], Liber Bullarum, 455, f. 292v.

⁴ Cf. Archiepiscopal Archives, Floriana, Malta, 'Visitatio Cagliares (1615)', f. 90v. Cf. also Giovanni Francesco Abela, *Della descrizione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano*, Malta 1647, pp. 347 *et seq.*

⁵ Cf. the contemporary Abela, in *ibid.*, pp. 348–55.

Grotto were promoted by a legend based on unreliable traditions mostly fabricated by the Maltese clergy desirous to boost the cult with historical evidence. For that purpose, especially after 1580, insufficient historical and literary facts and material had to be complemented with new legends and inventions.⁶ So it was maintained that not only St. Paul, but also St. Luke and St. Trophimus spent their three months in Malta in the grotto.

The support and bequests of the various Grand Masters for St. Paul's Grotto make it evident that in the 17th and 18th centuries the Order kept fostering the Pauline Tradition also to further its own ideological and political ends. After 1660, during the magistracy of Grandmaster Nicolas Cotoner, the church of St Paul nearby the Grotto was rebuilt in the high baroque style by Francesco Buonamico.⁷ In 1718, the old statues in the Grotto were replaced by a new marble statue of St Paul by Melchiorre Gafà and Ercole Ferrari, and a wooden statue of St Luke. The statues, the paintings and relics in the Grotto and Church in the 17th and 18th centuries became far more than simple artistic representations intended to inspire the faithful or to educate the illiterate. Instead, like the Apostle himself, they enjoyed a special relationship with the divine power. As several of the pious travellers had stated, they participated directly in the existence and the being of persons they represented. According to the baroque concept of religious art, the image and atmosphere of the Grotto's interior and works of art brought the pious visitor into direct visual contact with the person represented. The Spaniard Bartholomè Pacorbo de Ayala y Guerra wrote:

La Cueva de San Pablo (. . .) mantiene, sobre sí una muy buena Iglesia, dedicada à este Glorioso Apostolo, y en ella se halla un dedo del mismo, guardado, y tenido con muy grande devocion; y estando en silencio, se oye como si fuesse una confusa voz, que causa en el corazon un dulce movimiento; se tiene una excessiva veneracion a ùn à las mismas paredes, de que se faca tierra, que sirve contra los animales venenosos. (. . .) Dèmos infinitas gracias à Dios, que es admirables en sus Santos.⁸

The Order's fame and the propaganda work of the Maltese and Sicilian scholars and clergy – namely the Jesuits⁹ – were fruitful. After the many sceptical comments

⁶ For a good example cf. Marc'Antonio Ascias, 'Relazione della rinovata e grandissima divozione introdotta nella Sacra Grotta di S. Paolo nell'Isola di Malta, con una breve raccolta delle cose notande, ed antichità di dett'isola', NLM. Libr. MS. 515. In the early 17th century there were various other copies and versions of this manuscript in circulation in Malta.

⁷ Cf. Conrad Thake, Denis de Luca, *The Genesis of Maltese Baroque Architecture: Francesco Buonamici*, Malta 1994, pp. 11 *et seq.*

⁸ Bartholomé Pancorbo de Ayala y Guerra, *La Flor del Mundo, o sea la Europa en su mayor esplendor. . .*, Madrid 1745, pp. 337 *et seq.*

⁹ Cf. Tommaso Masucci, *Paulus Apostolus seu vita S. Pauli Ap. historice et dogmatici explicata libri 15*, Lyon 1636, book 2, ch. 2, and Ottavio Cajetano, *Isogage ad Historiam Sacram Siculam*, Palermo 1707, pp. 152 *et seq.* Cajetano's work was originally written before 1620.

in the epoch of humanism in the second half of the 17th century there was hardly any more opposition to the belief that Malta was the island of the miracles of St Paul. As Philip Briet's *Annalis mundi sive Chronicon universale* (Vienna 1727) and many others confirm it was still a common belief in the first half of the 18th century that *Melita*, i.e. Malta, was the island where the apostle was shipwrecked.¹⁰ This, however, should change when in 1730 the monk Ignazio Giorgi took up again the old controversy in his book *Divus Paulus apostolus in mari . . .*¹¹ As Giorgi was abbot of the Benedictine abbey in Veliko Jezero on Mljet the patriotism in the reasoning behind his refutation of Malta being the place of the shipwreck in favour for his *Melita dalmatanensis* is not difficult to read. Giorgi fired a hot discussion which continued throughout the 18th century, and went on well into the 19th century. Maltese and Sicilian authors like Ciantar,¹² Agius de Soldanis,¹³ Padre Mifsud, Pagnini-Lanfredini, San Floriano, besides scholars from France and Germany like Kirchmeier,¹⁴ Wandalinus,¹⁵ De Rhoer,¹⁶ Regnaud,¹⁷ Floder,¹⁸ and many others, however, insisted on the 'Sicilian' Malta as the place of the biblical shipwreck. Other authors like Jacob Bryant,¹⁹ Abbé Ladvoat,²⁰ Stefano Sciuliaga²¹ and the anonymous author of the *Descrizione dell'Isola di Malta* in *Il Magazzino Italiano di istruzione, e di piacere* (1752),²²

¹⁰ Cf. Philip Briet, *Annalis mundi sive Chronicon universale*, Vienna 1727, p. 378.

¹¹ Ignazio Giorgi, *Divus Paulus apostolus in mari, quod nunc Venetus sinus dicitur, naufragus, et Melitae Dalmatanensis insulae post naufragium hospes, sive de genuino significato duorum locorum in Actibus apostolicis, cap. 27:27, cap 28:1 insecptiones anticriticae*, Venice 1730.

¹² Gian Antonio Ciantar, *De Beato Paolo Apostolo in Melitam, Siculo-Adriatici Maris Insulam Naufragi ejecto Dissertationes Apologeticae in Inspectiones Anticriticas Ignatii Georgii*, Venice 1738; *Critica de' Critici Moderni che dall'anno 1730 infino al 1760 scrissero sulla controversia del naufragio di San Paolo apostolo*, Venice 1763.

¹³ Gio Paolo Francesco Agius de Soldanis, *Lettere scritte da Venezia per Malta li 3 Novembre 1757 la quale è opposta alle due operette pubblicata in dett'anno dal Sig. Abate Stefano Sciugliaga intorno il naufragio del glorioso S. Paolo Apostolo seguito ne Mare Adriatico*, Venice 1757.

¹⁴ Johann Christoph Kirchmeier, *Dissertatio de Requite Pauli in Melitae Insula*, Marburg 1731.

¹⁵ Johann Friedrich Wandalinus, *Dissertatio de Melite Pauli*, Copenhagen 1737.

¹⁶ Johann de Rhoer, *De Sancti Pauli ad Insulam Melitam Naufragio*, Rhenum 1743.

¹⁷ G.M. Regnaud, *Le mire benefiche della grazia nella caduta in sulle vie di Damasco e le tracce amorevoli della Provvidenza nel naufragio in sulle rive di Malta dell'apostolo Paolo promotutolare dell'isola di Malta e Gozzo*, Rome 1749.

¹⁸ Johann Floder, *Acta Pauli in Insula Melita*, Upsala 1769.

¹⁹ Jacob Bryant, *Observations and inquiries relating to various parts of Ancient History, containing Dissertations on the wind Euroclydon and on the island of Malta . . .*, Cambridge 1767.

²⁰ Abbé de Ladvoat, *Dissertation historique et critique sur le naufrage de Saint Paul, dans laquelle on examine si c'est dans l'isle de Malte, ou dans l'isle de Meleda qu'il fut mordu d'une vipere, et qu'il guerit miraculeusement le père de Publius*, Luxembourg 1753.

²¹ Stefano Sciugliaga, *Il Naufragio di San Paolo ristabilito nella Melite Illirica*, Venice 1757.

²² Cf. 'Descrizione dell'Isola di Malta', *Il Magazzino Italiano di istruzione, e di piacere*, Vol. I (March 1752), No. 1, pp. 6 et seq.

however, supported Giorgi. Many of the visitors who came to Malta in the 18th century were undecided what to believe.²³

But this uncertainty was not the case for the numerous visitors of the grotto in the 17th century. There is enough evidence to conclude that guided tours of visitors in Malta included the Grotto and the Church of St Paul in Rabat. The clear majority of noblemen or other persons of consequence who took notes about their visit to the island in the late sixteenth and the entire seventeenth century recorded how knights or other members of the Order, following a general visit around the Grand Harbour, did not hesitate to guide them to St Paul's Grotto at Rabat. Many of these were also taken to St Paul's Bay (*Cala di S. Paolo*) as the site believed to be the place of the shipwreck. Therefore, in the 17th century, nearly all travellers from Christian countries passing through Malta were aware and more receptive of the cult associated with St Paul's Grotto.

A typical 17th century account of a visit to St Paul's Grotto was written by Johann Victor Besenval, a Swiss Patrician from Solothurn. Johann Victor, his younger brother Johann Joseph, and Johann Jakob Sury and Johann Victor Sury and their retinue arrived in Malta in December 1661. After some days in Valletta they rode with a guide to Mdina and Rabat. In his diary the elder Besenval repeats the well-known stories about the shipwreck, the damnation of the snakes and poisonous animals, and the healing power of the Maltese snake tongues. The Swiss travel group entered the grotto and said a prayer. Besenval comments on the several chapels in the Grotto, and reports how pieces from various petrified poisonous animals were worked into rings, and sold.²⁴

The grotto in art

The baroque age was a visual age. Art had to visualize the spiritual programme and importance of Catholic places of cult and devotion. Although with Willem Schellinx, Lambert Friedrich Corfey, Jean Houel, Jean Étienne Liotard, Dominique Vivant Denon, Joachim von Sandrart, Richard Dalton, Louis Ducros, Giovan Battista Lusieri, Berthel Torwaldsen, some quite talented painters and designers visited St Paul's Grotto and St Paul's Bay in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, we have relatively few depictions of the major shrine of the Pauline Cult in Malta. There is an engraving of the painting

²³ Cf. in more detail O. F. A. Meinardus, 'Melita Illyrica oder Africana?', *Ostkirchliche Studien*, Vol. XXXII (1974), pp. 21–34; *ibid.*, 'St. Paul shipwrecked in Dalmatia', *The Biblical archeologist*, Vol. XXIX (1976), No. 4, pp. 145–7; Thomas Freller, *St. Paul's Grotto and its visitors. Pilgrims, knights, scholars and sceptics*, Malta 1996, pp. 183 *et seq.*

²⁴ Thomas Fr. Schneider (ed.), 'Jähriger Rayß Beschreibung'. *Eine Europareise in den Jahren 1661 und 1662, ausgeführt von vier Solothurner Patriziern. Edition des Manuskripts S 67 der Zentralbibliothek Solothurn*, Basel 1997, p. 248.

of St Paul with Sword in St Paul's Grotto reproduced in Michael Heberer's *Aegyptiaca Servitus* (first edition 1610). The engraver was the Palatinate court painter Friedrich von Hummel. It is most likely that this design was given to Hummel by his compatriot Michael Heberer who was in Malta 1585 and again in 1588. However we do not know who the author of the design is.

Between September and November 1664 the Dutch painter and poet Willem Schellinkx spent some weeks in Malta. Among the several drawings he carried out on the island there are two portraying St Paul's Grotto and its precincts, and an illustration of the small church at St Paul's Bay.²⁵ A few years later, a prospect view of the entrance of the grotto and St Paul's church was carried out by an anonymous artist. The drawing was reproduced in two slightly different versions in Francesco Scalletari's account *Condotta Navale e vera relatione del viaggio da Carlistot a Malta* (Graz 1688) and in Vincenzo Coronelli's *Epitome Storico del Regno di Sicilia ed Isola di Malta* (Paris 1699). We also have a depiction of the Grotto with a hermit in the series of *calchi* (stamped medals) which the Knight of the Order of St John, Francesco Buonarroti, prepared in the 1620s.²⁶

In 1700 the architect Lambert Friedrich Corfey visited Malta, and the shrines of the Pauline Cult. It is documented that he made a drawing of the church at St Paul's bay; however, this has not as yet been unearthed. For the 18th century the situation is even scarcer. Neither of Dalton, Lusieri, Liotard, Denon, Houel, or Thorwaldsen – who have all visited the Grotto – seem to have been interested to document their visit visually. Neither was this interest shared by local artists.

Detailed analysis of some visits to the Grotto

Either in December 1631 or in January 1632 the famous German painter Joachim von Sandrart arrived in Malta, mainly to study the works of Caravaggio on the island.²⁷ It was he who provided the geographers and authors Mattheus Merian and Martin Zeiller with some drawings he had made of several famous locations on his voyage from Rome to Naples, Sicily and Malta and also with his written notes. The description of Malta appeared in 1640 (and again 1688) in the prestigious volume *Topographia Italiae* published by Merian and Zeiller. It includes a description of St Paul's Grotto and St Paul's Bay, and a birds eye view of Valletta. Although the Dutch 17th century art historian Arnold Houbraken maintains that Sandrart on this voyage carried out

²⁵ Depicted and commented in Aikema a.o. (ed.).

²⁶ Cf. John Azzopardi, 'Il-Kavaliere Buonarroti u l-Grotta ta' S. Pawl', *Il-Festa tagħna*, Malta 1991, pp. 7–13, and L. Sebregondi Fiorentini, 'Francesco Buonarroti, Cavaliere Gerosolimitano e Architetto dilettante', *Rivista d'Arte*, anno XXXVIII, pp. 49–86.

²⁷ Cf. Joachim von Sandrart, *Teutsche Academie der Bau-, Bild-, und Mahlerey-Künste*, Nuremberg 1675, p. 31, and Id., *Academia nobilissima artis pictoriae*, Nuremberg 1683, pp. 13 *et seq.*

several drawings and paintings²⁸ no depiction of Malta or of St Paul's Grotto have up to now come to light. Sandrart (respectively Zeiller who was responsible for compiling the text) has a lot to say about St Paul and Malta. His account starts like this:

(Malta) is the island on which St Paul was driven by a storm and where he preached. Vincentius Littera had this put in a verse: 'Insulae parva situ; sed rebus maxima gestis,
Africae & Europae ac Asiae contermina, Pauli
Hospes, & Alborum procerum gratissima Mater.'²⁹

Sandrart and Zeiller knew that some scholars and travellers like Fabri, Beroaldus, Mercator, Quintin d'Autun, and Knolles, in the previous decades had questioned whether Malta is the island where St Paul was shipwrecked. But the *Topographia Italiae* states:

That Malta is the island where the apostle was shipwrecked is not only proven by the geographical location as well as by the ancient monuments which one can still see. There is for example the bay where the apostle came on land. Once there stood a house where St Paul had lived. Now it is in ruins. On the same spot they have built a nice church, which houses several paintings depicting the episode of the shipwreck. Not far from there is also a well with fresh water. It is strongly believed that this well started to flow when St Paul was on the island. A slab at this well carries an inscription:

'Hac sub rupe cava quam cernis ad aequoris undas,
Est hic exiguus fons salientis aquae.
Religione sacra fontem hunc venerare viator,
Naufragus has dederit cum tibi Paulus aquas.'³⁰

Meanwhile, whereas Sandrart and Zeiller maintained a firm belief in the presence of St Paul in Malta, they also had many doubts about the stories concerning St Paul's Grotto:

There is also shown a grotto in which St Paul allegedly has lived and has prayed and converted the Maltese into good Christians. This however is questioned by Cluverius (lib. I, C. 16, f. 441). From this grotto the stones are excavated which are also called snake tongues or snake eyes (sic). They are highly esteemed for their power against snake poison. In fact on the whole island there are no poisonous animals and even when they are brought to Malta from foreign countries they lose the lethal power. This miracle is attributed to the miracles of St Paul.³¹

²⁸ Arnold Houbraken, *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilder en Schilderessen*, Gravenhage 1753, on Sandrart and Malta cf. Vol. I, p. 278.

²⁹ Here quoted in Mattheus Merian, Martin Zeiller, *Topographia Italiae, das ist warhafftige und Curiöse Beschreibung Italiens*, Frankfurt a. M 1688, p. 47.

³⁰ Merian, Zeiller, p. 47.

³¹ Merian, Zeiller, p. 47.

A few pages further, when Sandrart and Zeiller describe Mdina, St Paul's Grotto features again:

In the suburb (of Mdina) is an old church (sic) which is dedicated to St Paul. A rifles shot distant is the spot where St Paul is supposed to have preached. To commemorate this event a cross made of white stone is erected there. P. Masuccius S.J. maintains that not only all Maltese but also the inhabitants of the town of Gozo could hear the preaching of St Paul and were baptized.³²

Merian's and Zeiller's *Topographia Italiae* is one of the standard works of the 17th century. It had influenced the writing of many late 17th century and early 18th century descriptions and travel accounts on Malta. There is another interesting connection of Mattheus Merian the Younger with Malta and the Pauline Cult. In 1625, in Strasbourg he published a collection of pictures which illustrate the most important episodes of the bible: *Biblishe Abbildungen zur Darstellung der wichtigsten Geschichten der Heiligen Schrift, Icones Biblicae*. It was reprinted in Frankfurt at Main in 1627, and in Amsterdam in 1628. This collection also contains a well-executed depiction of St Paul and the viper. A coloured edition of this so called *Merian Bibel*³³ appeared in Strasburg, in 1630.

In the case of the visit of the Dutch painter Willem Schellinkx we are lucky that both of his travel diary and rich collection of drawings which he carried out on his *giro* through Italy, Sicily, and Malta in 1664, have survived. Schellinkx arrived in Malta in September 1664. On 23 September he visited Rabat and the grotto.³⁴ On this occasion he carried out two drawings which depict the sacred mound and the entrance of the grotto. His diary is quite detailed about this visit. The Bodleian version of this diary, however, must be dealt with care. It was compiled some years after the return home, and while being prepared for publication it was enriched with several other fragments of descriptions of Malta. The descriptions of the grotto and St Paul's Bay are definitely copied from Olfert Dapper's *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaansche gewesten . . .* (first edition 1668).³⁵ Dapper however seemed to have never visited Malta himself; he copied his Malta description from Johann Friedrich Breithaupt's *Christliche Helden Insel Malta*³⁶ and from Pierre D'Avity's *Description Generale de l'Afrique*.³⁷ Still, Schellinkx's drawings of the precincts of St Paul's

³² Merian, Zeiller, p. 49.

³³ Here quoted in *Die Bibel. Die farbigen Merian Bilder zur Bibel*, Dreieich 1988. It contains the coloured version of the depiction of 'St. Paul and the viper'.

³⁴ Willem Schellinkx, 'Reistagebuch', Bodleian Library Oxford, D'Orville, MS. 560, ff. 150 *et seq.*

³⁵ On the grotto cf. also Olfert Dapper, *Description de l'Afrique*, Amsterdam 1686, pp. 516 *et seq.*

³⁶ On the grotto cf. Johann Friedrich Breithaupt, *Christliche Helden Insel Malta. darinnen derselben Landschaft und Ritterlichen Johanniter-Ordens von Jerusalem zu Malta tugendsames Leben und Regiment*, Frankfurt a. M. 1632, p. 154.

³⁷ On the grotto cf. Pierre D'Avity, *Description de l'Afrique*, Paris 1637, p. 532.

Grotto and his original reports of his visits of Rabat and St Paul's bay found some echo in the Netherlands. The renowned Dutch painter and art historian Arnold Houbraken in the late 17th century states that he has seen the two drawings of the Grotto and of the sacred mound. In his *Schoubourgh* he writes about Schellinx:

In Malta he visited the ruins of the old Melite and carried out various drawings of its remains. Two of these excellent drawings I have seen with my own eyes. In one of them one can see a type of portal to a cave. It is said that in this cave the Apostle Paul after his shipwreck on Malta has slept. In the year 1624 the entrance to a subterranean chapel or burial place with bones and skulls was discovered. The other drawing depicts the hill from which the apostle preached the evangelium to the Maltese. On this spot a monument is erected. I also saw a drawing of the remains of the first church which the first Christians had built on the place where St Paul shook the viper in the fire. In the year 1616 Grand Master Alois (sic) de Wignacourt donated a church nearby. He is portrayed in an altarpiece in this church. This painting depicts also St Paul who warms himself after he survived the shipwreck. Next to him are several men and women in the clothes of the ancient Maltese. Under the painting one reads: 'Vipera ignis acta calore frustra Pauli manum invadit; is insulae benedicens anguibus et herbis adimit omne virus.'³⁸

One of the most substantial eyewitness-reports on the Pauline Cult in Malta and the situation of St Paul's Grotto around 1700 had been written by the erudite architect, poet, historian, and officer Lambert Friedrich Corfey from Westfalia. Corfey made an illustrious military career in the service of the Prince Bishop of Münster. But he also distinguished himself as a gifted architect of churches, as a poet, and as a learned collector. His report forms a mixture of a conventual report according to the patterns of Baroque travel-writing and first glimpses of subjectiveness and spontaneous comments. Between 1698 and 1700 Lambert Friedrich and his brother Christian Heinrich undertook a *giro* through Italy; Malta formed the most southern station of this tour. They arrived on this island on 27 May 1700. The next day Corfey and his brother undertook a tour to Mdina.

Corfey came right in time to witness the rebuilding of the Cathedral of Mdina which had suffered damaged by the earthquake of 1693. When Corfey – so to say as an expert – observed the works he noticed an impressive painting on the right side of the entrance which depicts St. Paul. Under it was written:

Divo Paulo apostolo patrono – ob servatam incolumem – Notabilem hanc eius urbem – imo Melitam totam – a formidabili et ingenti terrae motu – die XI. Januarii anni MDCXCIII – potiorem vicini Siciliae regni partem – funditus evertente – pii cives – grati animi monumentum – imaginem quam expressam in corde tenent – in civitatis fronte pp.³⁹

³⁸ Here quoted by Arnold Houbraken, *Schoubourgh der niederländischen Maler und Malerinnen*. Ed. by Alfred von Wurzbach, Vol. I, Vienna 1880, pp. 264 *et seq.*

³⁹ Lambert Friedrich Corfey, *Reisetagebuch 1698–1700* (Helmut Lahrkamp ed.), Münster 1977 (= Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte der Stadt Münster, New Series, Vol. IX), p. 240.

From Mdina the travel group around Corfey proceeded to Rabat and the precincts of the Grotto. The German architect made some comments on the statue of St Paul which stood on a pedestal on the so-called 'sacred mound'. It commemorates the alleged place where St Paul preached to the Maltese. Corfey wrote:

On the right-hand side of the church underground is the 'Grotta St. Pauli', where the Apostle and St Luke spent three month and a few days. This miraculous grotto is cut in a white rock, holds around thirteen foot in diameter and is seven and a half feet high. The Grotto has the property not to get larger although daily a huge quantity of stones are hacked out. These stones are even more highly reputed than Bezoar to be a safe cure against all type of gifts and bites from poisonous animals.⁴⁰

Up to here Corfey's diary parallels with the numerous other contemporary descriptions. But now we can notice the architect's observations:

That the stone of this grotto must regain itself is shown by the following calculations:

Diameter = 13

Circumference = 40.86

Superf. Sphaerae antri = 265.59

Soliditas = 575.267.940

If one excavates every day only 1 cubic-inch (although it is taken out much more, sometimes several cubicfoot are extracted) a space in the size of the actual grotto would be excavated in 15,16 years and 28 days. As the spot was always a grotto one has to admit, that its stone regains itself.⁴¹

Here we have a perfect example of the mechanical perception of nature by the 17th century intellectuals. After his mathematical treatise Corfey turned his observations on the cave of St Agatha. However his interest in the Pauline Cult did not stop there. On the same afternoon, after they had returned to Valletta, the architect took a boat to St Paul's Bay. He arrived at a 'rather huge gulf, surrounded by rocks'. Corfey reports:

When St Paul arrived at this bay after his shipwreck he managed to create a well with fresh water. This he did like Moses by hitting the rock with a stick. Just a stone's throw away from this well is a small church which stands on the ground where St Paul kindled a fire to dry his clothes. This was the place where he was bitten by the viper. Over the altarpiece of this church one reads an inscription: 'Vipera ignis acta calore frustra Pauli manum invadit, is insulae benedicens anguibus et herbis adimit omne virus.' Over the painting on the left-hand side there is written: 'Qua vehitur Paulus ingenti tempestate jactata navis alleviatur inque littus Melitense vi ventorum prorsus solvenda dimittitur.' On the right-hand side is written: 'Hic omnes quotquot in insula variis tenebantur languoribus ad Paulum adducti pristinae sanitati restituuntur.' The three paintings in the church depict the contents of these inscriptions.⁴²

⁴⁰ Corfey, p. 240

⁴¹ Corfey, p. 241

⁴² Corfey, p. 242.

These inscriptions were already recorded in older publications by Breithaupt,⁴³ Welsch,⁴⁴ Niderstedt⁴⁵ and Francesco Scalletari.

As in the case of previous generations, also in the beginning of the 18th century, the fascination of the iconography and myth created around St Paul's sojourn in Malta still worked very well. Corfey and his brother were so intrigued by St Paul's bay that the next day they visited the spot again. This happened on their return tour from Mellieħa where they had stayed overnight:

On 29 May, Pentecost, we returned to St Paul's bay to examine the place a bit more carefully. We also intended to carry out a prospect drawing of the church. We were very lucky to arrive at land as a storm came up. When at noon the weather got better we risked to sail back to Valletta, however, after a while, such a strong rain and storm started again that my brother went on land at the 'Porto Lazaretto'. I, however, stayed on the ship until we arrived in the port of Valletta. By facing this storm I dearly had the destiny of St Paul in my mind when he was shipwrecked on this island.⁴⁶

The present author could not succeed to find this prospect drawing which Corfey made from the chapel on St Paul's Bay in his hometown Münster (Westfalia, Germany). Corfey's travel diary is housed in the archive of the *Verein für Geschichte und Altertumskunde Westfalens* (Abteilung Münster, MS. 442). An attached note states that the diary was for a while in the possession of a certain Robert Steele Wandsworth. Corfey's sketchbook, which he kept on his travels, is not in Münster. So it is most likely that it came with the travel diary in the possession of Robert Steele Wandsworth but was not returned to Westfalia.

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⁴³ Breithaupt, pp. 154 *et seq.*

⁴⁴ Hieronymus Welsch, *Warhafftige Reiss-Beschreibung aus eigener Erfahrung von Teutschland, Croatien, Italien, denen Inseln Sicilia, Maltha, Sardinia, Corsica, Majorca, Minorca, Juica und Formentera, etc. etc.*, Stuttgart 1658, pp. 141 *et seq.*

⁴⁵ Burchardus Niderstedt, *Malta vetus et nova*, Helmstedt 1660, pp. 22 *et seq.*

⁴⁶ Corfey, p. 243.

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