



# San Ġorġ tal-Haġar

## The Parish of Gozo

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**T**he story of 'San Ġorġ tal-Haġar' ('St George [the parish] of the town') is the story of re-Christinization of Gozo following the domination of the island of Gozo by Muslim Arabs. Unfortunately, written records about it before the 15<sup>th</sup> century are scant and anything said or written about the period is either forged or invented by 18<sup>th</sup> century historians. It is, thus, advisable that works by Agius de Soldanis and other ecclesiastics with parrochial bias, such as, Prof Arturo Bonnici who wrote *A History of the Church*, should be read with caution.

Hear-say and traditions are also unreliable. Both A. Luttrell and Can. J. Azzopardi also warned against transcriptions of pre-16<sup>th</sup> century acts and other later manuscripts. Some may contain forgeries or may even be fabbrications. As are the Pauline traditions invented by the Jesuit Fr. Gerolamo Manduca and the legend that Count Roger re-establish the *matrice* of the *castello* in 1090 (Vella, A).

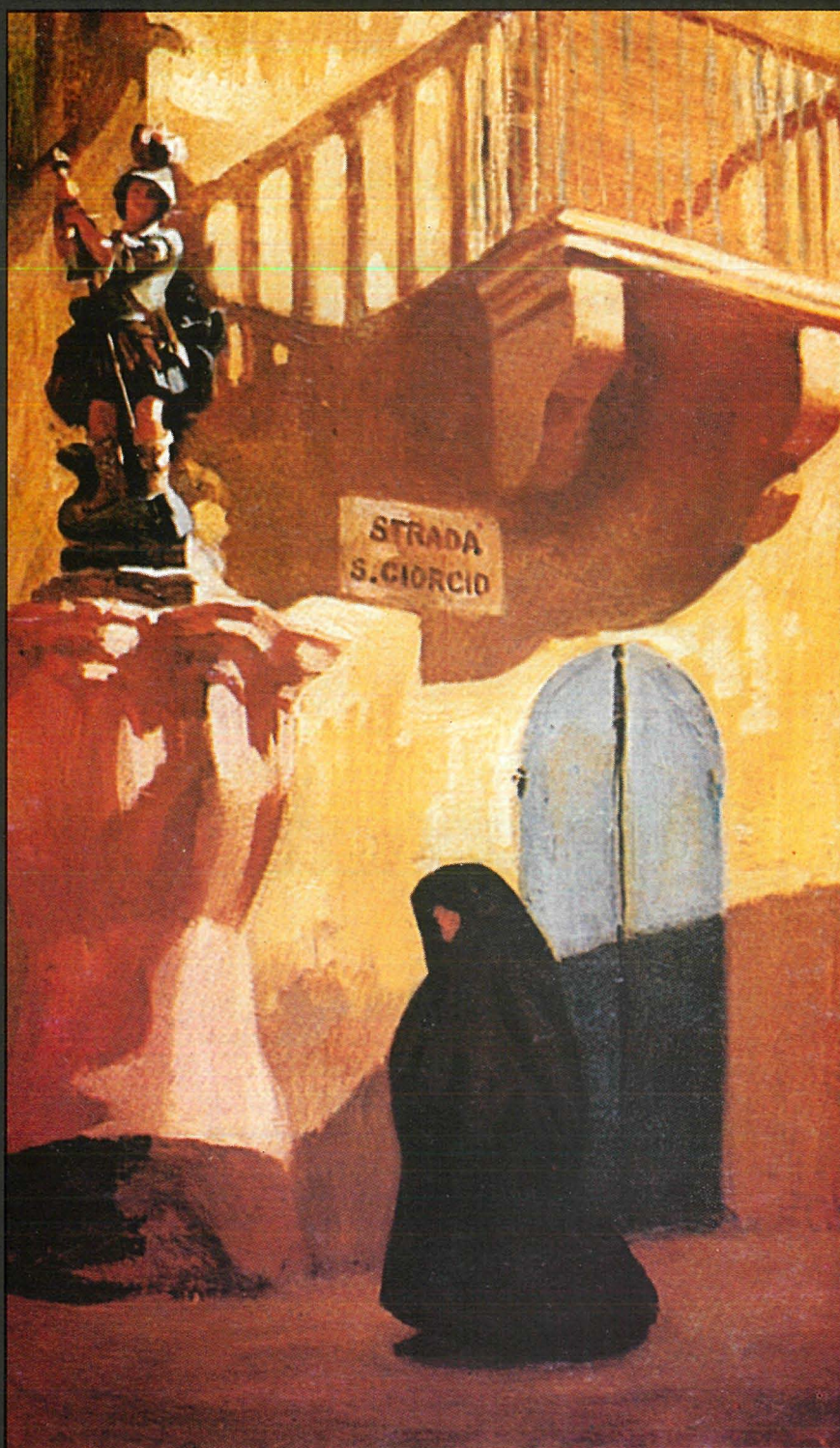


Besides such warnings, the historian will do well to bear in mind that long before Bishop Senatore de Mello found a *clerus gaulitevanus* in 1436, there was also in Gozo's ancient town, then known as *Il-Haġar*, a Christian community and a Christian church, situated in the same *Haġar*, which had since times immemorial been known as '*San Ġorġ tal-Haġar*'.

### A linguistic analysis

A linguistic analysis of the toponym is helpful in the historical study of the origin of this community. The toponym, in fact, is made up of the proper noun of the patron saint of the town and an adjectival phrase qualifying it, consisting of the possessive particle '*ta*' and the noun '*il-haġar*'. '*San Ġorġ*' could stand either for *San Ġorġ* 'the church' or *San Ġorġ* 'the statue'. '*Il-haġar*' too has a double meaning. It could stand for 'stone', '*tal-haġar*' meaning 'of the stone', and it could stand, as in Classic Arabic, for 'house' or 'town', thus meaning 'of the house' or 'of the town'.

The ambiguity in such terminology deserves deeper study. '*haġar*', in Siculo Arabic dialect, was the plural of '*hugira*' meaning 'a small house' (Agius). It also meant 'an urbanized center'. One such center, *Al Hijr*, as pronounced in English, was a key town on the caravan route between Saba' and the Mediterranean. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC it was said by Diodorus Siculus to have been inhabited by Nabataeans who spoke a north Arabic dialect. The term was later latinized as *Petra* and afterwards islamized *medina* changing *Al Hijr* to 'Mada'in Salih' (*Mada'in*, pl. of *Medina*), that is, 'the cities of Salih'. In an inscription found in *Naqab al*



Edward Caruana Dingli, *A corner in Gozo*, Aquarelle, National Museum of Arts

*Hajar* in southern Hijaz (Hitti, 51), Gesenius noted such early Arabic expressions as '*ghajr*' ('other than') which is still used in the Maltese language.

This term '*Il-haġar*' for 'the town' was also documented during late medieval times in various countries inhabited by Arabic speaking populations. Near Corleone, in Sicily, Berbers until the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century called their



village *Hagiar az-Zanati* (Maurici). It is also found in Tunis from where Berbers originated but the term '*al hajr*' is at times interchanged with its synonym '*gadir*'. This term '*gadir*', as given in the poem by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Berber poet Bin Ighil and translated by Kenneth Brown also stands for 'walled town' (Micheline Galley, ed.). In Malta notary G. de Guevara in 1541 (NAV, R224/1 f.258) recorded one such urbanized *contrata* as '*Sancti Georgi de gadir*', referring to '*San Ġorġ ta' l-Haġar*', *l-Ihġar* being plural of '*haġar*' (Wettinger). A toponym '*wara ta' gidrin*' (renamed St Ursola street) is located in Rabat just beyond the site where the walls of *Il-haġar* once stood.

### A historical survey

The site and size of this haġar have been defined by Prof. D. Trump following his archaeological excavations at It-Tokk in 1960. Since Bronze Age it stood on the same site where the old quarters of Rabat were until the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Its size did not stretch further than It-Tokk on the north and Vajringa street on the south. A map prepared by engineer Maurizio Valerga in 1680 bears good evidence to this. Besides the various burial places around it provide indications.

This ancient town appears to have been already well organized during late Cartaginian times. A third century stone tablet in punic characters reveals that it had three temples and that it was ruled by two '*rabs*' (Vella Horatio). A Latin inscription on stone, today encased in the wall of the gate of the medieval *castello*, was originally the pedestal of a statue dating first century AD (Bres). It records the gratitude of the *plebs gaulitana* towards C. Vallius for raising their town to the status of *municipium*. Two other Roman incised stone inscriptions and a hoard of some 4000 *sesterii* found near St George's church confirm the prosperity of the town during the first and second centuries AD (Annual Museum Report, 1936).

### Traditions about early Christianity in Gozo

The earliest evidence of Christianity on the island was an oil lamp dated c. fifth century AD (Trump) found in a Roman cellar at It-Tokk. We know of hardly anything else besides this. Some writers, however, anxious for an apostolic origin of our Christianity, deny this and have traced a passage in an apocryphic gospel saying that St Paul came to Gaudomelite on his way to Rome. Others narrate tales of Christian monks fleeing to Gozo to escape Vandal persecution in Africa. And yet others that during the domination of the Muslim Arabs Gozitan Christians were allowed to be administered from the *matrice* of the *castello*.

### The Muslims in Gozo

The account by Al Himyari reveals that the town was deserted until the early decades of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Brincat). It was, then, inhabited by Arab speaking muslims but after 1091 the 'Greeks', probably freed slaves, regained their right of worshipping their Christian cults in public. According to the Greek monk, Nilos Doxoprates both Malta and Gozo were listed among the 21 towns with an *episcopos* (Farrugia), a medieval ecclesiastical terms meaning 'parish priest' (Magri). It is, thus, palusible that as in neighbouring towns where the Greek Church was dominant Gozo's town, then called in Arabic dialect *Il-haġar*, was placed under the patronage of St George.

### The cult of St George

The cult of St George was, in fact, one of the oldest in this south-eastern region of Sicily of which Gozo made part. In

June 1063 St George is also said to have appeared at the head of Norman troops fighting the Muslims in the battle of Cerami. The Normans' victory opened the road to the Christian conquest of Sicily. In another similar apparition in the battle for Caltagirone led the Genoese against the Muslim moors from the Iberian penninsula (Peri). During the 12<sup>th</sup> century a number of chapels and churches had already been dedicated to him all over the countryside south of the Val Demone. The cathedral in Catania was built on one of these chapels while Ragusa and Modica have their cathedral dedicated to him until today. In Malta no such churches are documented. His name, 'Ġirġi', 'Grejġi', and 'Grejġa' are recorded in toponyms (e.g. these '*gebel Ibn bengeorge*') which are almost as old. They equal '*Ghisa*' for Jesus (e.g. '*gebel ben ghisa*').

### The early Christian community

Towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Gozo's town was still dominated by *saracenes* (Luttrell). However, its small community of Christians appears to have been big enough to be regarded by the Normans as an autonomous ethnic group. In 1174 it was part of a bishoprick under Joannes de Malte and by the end of the century Queen Constance awarded it the rights and privileges to have its own council. With the creation of Genoese sea lords as Counts of Malta the community grew stronger, as more Christian ships visited the island bringing crews and their priests who shared their beliefs with the Christian inhabitants of the town (Luttrell, 1979).

The community again increased in 1224 when Fredrick II drove out of the island some of the local fundamental Muslims, who wouldn't bow to his laws, bringing in their stead Christian 'outlaws' from Celano. Less than twenty years later governor Gilibertus Abate reported that the town's population had 366 families, of which 203 were christians while only 155 were muslims. There were also 8 families making part of a small Jewish community.

This milieu of people from different races may not have survived after 1263 when Charles and other members of the French House Anjo began a campaign of christianizing their possessions. Charles' brother, the saintly King Louis of France, even dared to organize a crusade to convert the muslim Bey of Tunis in 1270. He failed miserably and some 28 members of the aristocracy who made part of his crusade, died of dysentery on their way home and were brought to Gozo where they were given honourable burials in a cemetery 70 paces outside the town's wall (AV, Molina, 1680). Four years later a fierce attack by the Genoese depopulated the island (Luttrell). Thus the early community disappeared.

Gradually, within a few decades the town was rehabilitated with people from neighbouring towns, where the Siculo-Arabic dialect was still predominant. These were poor commoners, probably freed serfs or villains, descendants of converted muslims. There were also with them bourgeoisie members of ancient Christian communities, traders and small land owners, who agglomerated in the narrow lanes that winded around the church of *San Ġorġ at Il-Haġar*.

A number of nobles, attracted by social prospects offered to them by the King's curia in Sicily, also came to Gozo. These were mainly judges and notaries, who spoke Latin or vulgar Italian. Among these were the Puntremulo. They stayed in a small *castello* outside the town which the Secrezia Angionana on 19 July 1278 put under Raynoldus de Palearia as *custodiam castris nostri gaudisii* (ASM, 1936).



### The date of the castello of Gozo

Dating this Gozo *castello* is not easy. Archaeological excavations in it carried out by Dr. Trump yielded nothing earlier than the medieval. Similar castles in Sicily built outside a walled town by Frederick II date back to the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. A report about it, made by the Knight commissioners in 1524, describes it as 'small and round' (Bosio). In 1283 Ramon Montanier said that it surrendered to the Aragonese Andrea Lauria without even firing a shot (Wettinger, 1998).

It then served as the fortified home of feudal lords to whom the island was enfeoffed. In 1299 it was also a prison and place of exile for noble political prisoners. There may have been by then also a church dedicated to St Lawrence, patron saint of the Aragonese (Dusina). This, however, may have been so small that the noble Federico de Malte, who was dying while being held prisoner in it did not choose it for his funeral service. He, thus, requested it to be held at the cathedral of St Paul in Mdina (Bresc 1978).

The remains of derelict buildings in the *castello* show that extant development belong to the closing decades of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Some architectural features in them are, in fact, identical to those in the Palazzo Chiaramonte in Palermo which was finished in about 1380 (Ward-Perkins). Similar *bifora* windows are also evident at Birgu and Mdina in Malta and in Palazzo Montalto in Syracuse, all of which were built by the Chiaramonte at approximately the same date of Palermo.

The vulgarized term by which the *castello* was called at the time was '*rocca*', metaphorically meaning 'the stronghold'. It was the latinized term for '*balat*', from the Arabic '*blata*' meaning 'rock', which in Siculo-Arabic dialect was corrupted as '*belt*'. In the *Descriptio Insulae Melitae* (Lyon, 1536), Quintinus refers to it as '*oppidulum*', small town, in Siculo-Arabic dialect, rightly described by Bartolomeo del Pozzo in his *L'Histoire* (Rome, 1703) as '*cittadella*'. The *castello* was, however, more specifically called in *capitoli* and other official correspondence by the term '*terra*'.

### Terra et insula gaudisii

The '*terra*' an important geographical expression in medieval terminology, was 'a rural urbanized region which had 'a *castello* or walled *borgo*, its *subborgo* and one or two small *casali* in the neighbourhood' (Peri, 1978). According to Illuminato Peri there were 150 such regions in Sicily. Though until the latter half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Gozo was not included as such, it was undoubtedly called '*terra et insula gaudisii*', that is 'the town and the island of Gozo' during later centuries (Dalli).

In an interesting study, the Sicilian historian G. La Mantia, points out two distinctive areas in this term: the '*terra*', the main town or *castello* and the '*insula*' covering the rest of the territory: *subborgo*, *casalia*, and countryside. The '*terra*', he said, should be not be confused for '*civitas*'. They are two distinct districts: the former was 'a fortified place with an autonomous administration', the latter 'a city with an industrial and commercial centre' (ASM 1936). It was, thus, neither an '*acropolis*' as imagined by Agius de Soldanis, nor a Roman '*oppidum*', as artistically fancied by the Capucchin friar Luigi Bartolo and more recently by John Bezzina, and nor a *medina* as misleadingly suggested by the toponym *ruga di la medina* in the records of the Gozo Universitas.

The *castello* was in fact, indeed a stronghold for the feudal lords. Until the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century it had a garrison of only



The statue of San Ġorġ tal-Ħaġar as it appears today (photo, 2002)

10 *servientes* (Dalli). During the early decade of the 15<sup>th</sup> century it provided shelter to rebel nobles from Sicily and home for anti-Aragonese ecclesiastics thus creating in the *castello* a Latin party in opposition to the Catalans in Rabbato (Vella, A).

### The subborgo called Rabbato

The *insula gaudisii* was the *subborgo* called Rabbato, two *casalia* or *Ħaġarija* and vast stretches of agricultural land around them. The *subborgo* was the ancient town, originally the only urbanized center on the island. The Romans called it *Gaulos oppidum* and the Arabs later *Il-Ħaġar*. It was walled and had its own autonomous council called *universitas*.

The *casalia* were two small hamlets, each called *Ħaġarija*, that grew during the 15<sup>th</sup> century not far away from the *castello*. Both must have been originally a *tenimentum*, a feudal estate with a 'parish' church. One was called *Santa Maria de Savina*, the other *Sancte Jocobi de la nuxaha* (*nixxiegha*). There were, in fact, in them hardly ten small houses (*Ħaġar*) scattered about.

The countryside was fertile but uninhabited. In 1372 there were in it 10 fountains gabelled to individuals. *Is-saccaya*, today known as *wied il-Lunzjata*, was perhaps the most important. It had on it a chapel which was *jus patronata regii*. Other chapels scattered about also had similar patronage.



### San Ġorġ: Parish of the castello and the island of Gozo

The new urbanistic development in the centre of the island did not disrupt the parrochial organization which had existed since Norman times. In 1511 San Ġorġ tal-Haġar was still 'the parish of the castle and the whole island of Gozo' (*parrochia sub vocabolo sanctii georgii terrae et insulae gaudisii*) (CEM, *Acta Originaria* 1511). It also had other churches under its jurisdiction (*cum ecclesiis sibi connexit*).

Which churches had never been mentioned. Surely, however, they were among the 84 churches listed by Bishop Cubelles in 1545 (Ferres). Also among were the *matrice* of the *castello*, *Santa Maria ta' Savina*, and *San Ġakbu ta' nixxiegha* each one also called *ecclesiam parrochiale*.

Churches such as these were, according to Domenico Magri, 'parishes' because 'their parishioners were subjected to a priest' (*parrochia in cui sono le pecorelle soggette ad un sacerdote*). However, says the same author, while every parish church usually had a *cappillano* not every church with a *cappellano* was a parish (*ogni chiesa parrochiale e' curata ma non ogni chiesa curata e' parrochiale*) (Magri). Besides the term 'matrice' only meant the bigger church among a clutter of smaller churches in a district (Fiorini) and not necessarily a parish from other parishes were created as in the modern connotation (Luttrell, 1978).

In 1448 ta' Savina was described as '*ecclesiae Sanctae Mariae positae in Robbato Gaudisii vocatae de Savina*'. In 1550 it had neither parish priest nor parishioners. Likewise, the other parish of *San Ġakbu ta' noxiha* had no parishioners. Both were profaned by Mgr P. Dusina in 1575 and passed to the 'parish of Rabat' (Aquilina G., ed).

The *matrice* of the castle, though also called *ecclesiam parrochiale*, was not distant from *San Ġorġ tal-Haġar*, but as it was within a closed fortification, it was entitled to administer sacraments and thus described as '*parrochiale*'.

### A new parish organisation

This parrochial organization came to an end with the Council of Trent ((1543-63). By good or bad fortune Dragut's *razia* in 1551 helped in the process. Rabat was derelict, its parish pillaged and in ruins and most of its parishioners, including its parish priest, Don Laurentius De Apapis, carried away in slavery. The few people who managed to escape found refuge within the *castello* where Don Leonardo de Cace, a *cappellano* from the Cathedral in Mdina, tried to organize the parish of Gozo. As requested by the Tridentine Council he set up parish registres for baptisms, matrimony and deaths and would have succeeded in his mission had Don Laurentius De Apapis not returned from slavery in 1554.

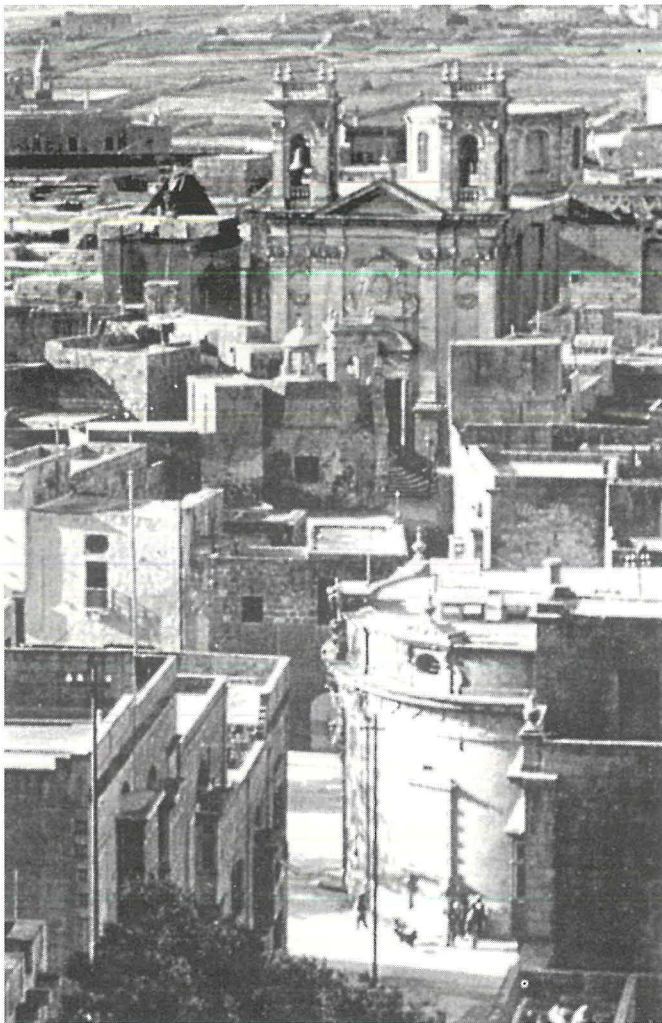
With the two parish priests at the helm the parrochial organization could not but bring confusion and rivalry. In 1560 Don Leonardo was recalled to Malta but left his nephew Don Antonius Attardus, a 17-year old cleric in his place. Don Laurentius in the meantime was allowed to carry on his previous duties. In 1575 his parish church was still derelict. It had no doors, its baptismal font broken, and the Holy Hosts had to be carried every evening for safety to the *matrice* of the *castello*. In 1575 Mgr Dusina prohibited him from performing the Gallican rite.

### Creation of a second parish

In 1591 Don Attardus complained with Bishop Gargallo that other fellow priests would not collaborate with him because his church was not yet collegiata. That same year he was allowed the right of a canonica and a prebend of a parish priest. In 1609 parish priest Don Anton Agius who succeeded Don Laurentius in San Ġorġ repaired the church of St George where an ancient icona of the saint was the center of great devotion by the parishioners. The church then still possessed two old pyxes, believed to be the oldest Christian relic on the island. One of these pyxes was recovered from the facade of the church in 1818 and is today preserved in the Museum of the Gozo Cathedral. In 1608 Vigar General Don Filippo Borg ordered that the *premie* and benefices from the countryside that were usually given to the parish of St George be passed to the parish priest of the *matrice*. Between 1614 and 1619 while the post of parish priest of St. George was left vacant the parish priest of Santa Maria forwarded pretensions for the right of the stole on burials done in the cemetery of St George. About the same time the church of Santa Maria ta' Savina was passed to the new parish of the *matrice* to act as its vice-parish with a burial space for its dead as requested by the Fourth Lateran Council. The new arrangement did not, however, solve the problem.

### Plans for a subtle coup d'etat at the parish of St George

Don Salvatore Pontremoli, who had then just returned from Rome and created Vigario Foraneo for Gozo by his cousin Bishop Cagliares, had even bolder plans. In 1619 traded from Don Chappara the post of parish priest of Santa Maria for the rent of 18 golden ducats, which he paid out of his own pocket, and in 1620 was first confirmed as parish priest and later as archpriest by his relative Bishop Cagliares. He, then proposed the union between the two parishes with himself as archpriest. Two years later with the appointment of Don Angelo Mudlun parish priest of St George quarrels over rights degenerated into rivalry between parish priest. In an effort to find some solution, Don Angelo asked the bishop to indicate his area of jurisdiction. In consequence Bishop Cagliares in 1623 delineated the limits between the two parishes. To San Ġorġ he assigned the urbanized quarters within the walled town of Rabbato while to Santa Maria the *castello* and the rest of the countryside. Don Salvatore Pontremoli did not appear to be happy. He insisted on the union and by means of the good services of another relative priest, Don Santoro del Piscopo he acquired from Don Angelo a false decalation that he was content with the union between the parishes. This was in consequence officially proposed in 1630 by the Vigario Generale, Don Pier Francesco Pontremoli, the archpriest brother, as a just solution for a peaceful settlement between the two parishes. The imposture was, however, timely uncovered in 1633 by three priests, Can. Teologo Don Giacomo Formosa, Don Lorenzo Theuma, and the Prior of the Augustinians Padre Giuseppe Greco, who immediately referred the matter to Rome. In the meantime parishpriest Don Angelo Modlun died. Don Giacomo Theuma, who had acted as vice-parishpriest all this time was transferred as parishpriest of Gudia in Malta and Don Santoro del Piscopo made parishpriest of St George. Bishop Cagliares died in 1633 and his successor Mgr Cannaves relieved Don Salvatore of his post of archpriest of the *matrice*



Old photo of St George's Basilica in the heart of the Gozitan Capital

by promoting him canon of the Chapter of the Cathedral in Mdina. His proposed plan was consequently shelved. In 1678 the new church of St George, built by parish priest Bonnici was completed with the initiative of the universitas of Gozo and Governor de Cordoba in thanksgiving for St George miraculous intervention in delivering the island from pestilence. Don Pontremoli did not live to see it. He died a year earlier. But other ecclesiastics from the matrice with the same school of thought again made San Ġorġ the target of their jealousy. They even tried to demote the cult of the Saint by replacing him as Patron with St Ursola. This had little success. Their jealousy further increased when two years later during the Diocean Synod, Bishop Molina acknowledging the antiquity of the parish of St George and recognizing it as the earliest parish of Gozo, placed it in order of precedence just after the eight earliest parishes of Malta even before those created by Bishop Gargallo after 1590. In the meantime another priest from Rome close to the Curia Romana, the 80-year old archpriest Don Carly Magri, as archpriest of the matrice. Another Pontremoli, in my opinion. With the pretext that the creation of parishes in the countryside were draining the coffers of the archpresbiter, following the financial loss it suffered by the creation of two parishes, first at Xewkija (1678) and then at Gharb only four months after, he objected to further erections of new parishes. Probably pitied because of his age and half-blindedness, Bishop Cocco Palmieri in 1688 allowed him to reactivate Don Pontremoli's plan as a condition for the

creation of parishes at Nadur, Xaghra, Żebbuġ, and Ta' Sannat. The Bishop wanting to find a way of accommodating him lured parish priest Don Paolo Lamagna to abandon his post at St George and accept chaplaincy at Cospicua. Bishop Cocco Palmieri left the post of Parish priest of St George vacant for several months until in 1689 the union of the two parishes of Rabat was finally accepted by Rome and the creation of the new four parishes put into practice. Don Carlo Magri took possession of St George's a few weeks later and was followed by his nephew Don Natale Cassia Magri who completed the rape of St George's as planned by Don Salvatore Pontremoli.

### The new San Ġorġ tal-Haġar

In the meantime the history of *San Ġorġ* [the parish] *tal-Haġar* sank down into the shadow of times leaving only scratches and hardly glimpses of its glorious past. Instead another *San Ġorġ*, this time a stone statue, was raised in a remote corner which marked the limits of the new parish. Perhaps as a reminder of the time when the '*parochia sub vocabulo sanctii georgii*' was the parish of the castle and the whole island of Gozo ('*terre et insulae gaudisii*'). No inscription on it commemorates the event. Its artistic posture killing the dragon betrays the story of the saint, who as the indisputable champion in the struggle between right and wrong was also the patron saint of our island. ■

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