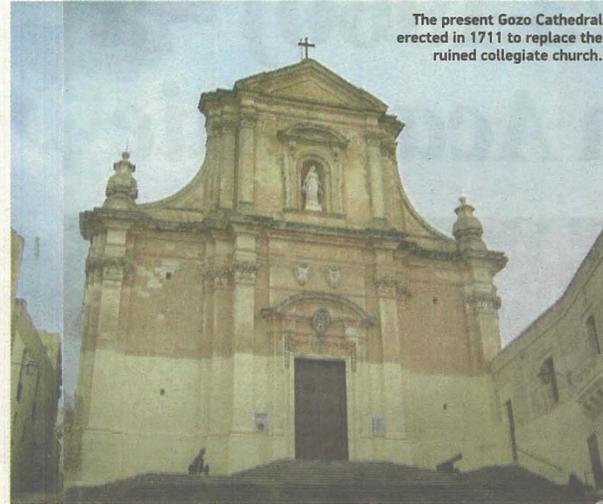




The church of St George in Victoria, Gozo, whose dome caved in when the 1693 earthquake hit the island.



The present Mдина Cathedral, erected between 1697 and 1703 in place of the medieval edifice ruined by the 1693 earthquake.



The present Gozo Cathedral erected in 1711 to replace the ruined collegiate church.



The former Mдина medieval cathedral, which suffered extensive damage in the earthquake and was replaced by the present building.

It happened in January

# The great earthquake that hit Malta in 1693



JOSEPH GRIMA

In the course of local history, Malta has experienced many earth tremors, some so slight as to pass by almost unnoticed. At other times, shocks have been greater and damage was caused. Perhaps the tremor that caused most damage in the Maltese islands and which is usually ranked as being the most terrible earthquake recorded in the history of Malta was the one that occurred in January 1693.

It seems that the earthquake followed in the wake of a great volcanic eruption by Mount Etna in neighbouring Sicily where the resulting tremors terrified the population. Slight shocks were experienced in Malta on January 9 but these were only the forerunners of the great tremor of January 11.

On that particular Sunday afternoon, at 2pm, a strange rumbling sound was heard, with one eyewitness describing it as "the noise of an ever-approaching cart" but which was more horrible the nearer it was heard. When recording Grazia Cassar's last will, Notary Marc'Antonio Brancati, for some unexplained reason, included a description of the earthquake as a very loud crack like a thunderbolt roaring in the distance but approaching all the time, together with a great upheaval of the earth while the house swayed and its walls shook.

Canon G.P. Agius de Soldanis wrote that, at Xlendi Bay in Gozo, the sea retired for a mile from the shore while a quantity of rocks broke away from the precipice at Gebel Sammat. However, although damage – quite extensive in some cases – was reported, no lives were lost. The epicentre of the earthquake had been in Sicily where casualties



Statue of St Paul at Rabat in the cave where it is traditionally held that he lived during his sojourn in Malta. Many Maltese prayed for his intercession with divine providence in the wake of the 1693 earthquake.

were estimated to have included at least between 50,000 and 60,000 deaths.

The 1693 earthquake filled the Maltese population with great fear and anxiety. As so often happens in the face of adversity and common danger, the local government and the people sought divine mercy and intercession by praying to the saints, particularly to St Paul.

Grand Master Adrien de Wignacourt ordered the temporary closure of the law courts, stopped all kinds of entertainment, and cancelled all carnival celebrations for 1693. The Knights were encouraged to participate in acts of repentance, and the Holy Sacrament was exposed at St John Conventual Church. The members of the Order were urged to fast on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday of the week ending on January 26 when an *aux flambeaux*

procession with the relic of the arm of St John the Baptist was to proceed from St John's.

Bishop Davide Cocco Palmieri also ordered the exposition of the Holy Sacrament in the whole diocese for several days. Special processions were held at Mдина and several other localities while, on January 25, the feast of the Conversion of St Paul, all the parishes participated in a general procession to St Paul's Bay where High Mass, followed by benediction, was sung for the occasion. The Cathedral Chapter also instituted an annual votive procession and Mass for January 11, while a dowry of 50 scudi was to be given to a poor female orphan to be married on January 11, 1694, the first anniversary of the earthquake.

In Gozo, prayers for intercession were mainly directed to St Ursula and an annual

votive procession was also instituted. It was to take place on the second Sunday of January and was to proceed from the collegiate church in the Castello (now the Gozo Cathedral) to the church of Our Lady of Grace, then known as Ta' Fomm ir-Rih.

All these religious manifestations were held to alleviate God's anger by direct prayer, penance and also by praying to saints for their intercession.

Although no lives were lost, yet an appreciable amount of damage was suffered. Certainly the best-known is the partial destruction of Mдина's medieval cathedral, of which only the apse, with its then recent painting by Mattia Preti, remained intact. Planning for a new cathedral was actually already in hand before the earthquake struck.

Together with the fortifications, many buildings in Mдина, which was already being depopulated and deserted at that time, suffered appreciable damages due to the fact that the Old City is built on a hill where tremor effects are more manifest, apart from the clayey nature of parts of the hill itself. The 1693 damages paved the way for the eventual building of the present cathedral to the plans of Lorenzo Gafa and the subsequent remodelling of appreciable parts of the city to the plans of François de Mondion during the magistracy of Antonio Manoel de Vilhena (1722-36).

On January 16, the Order commissioned three knights to report about damages in Valletta and Cottonera. Their first report concerned Valletta, wherein it was stated that there were many houses that suffered damages but needed only slight repairs. However, there were others that were partly or wholly in a dangerous state, including the Jesuit College, whose main dormitory was destroyed, and the church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which was closed to the public because of the great damage suffered in the vault.

At least 10 houses were to be demolished immediately to prevent damage to neighbouring buildings, while at least another nine were



The well-known Maltese architect Lorenzo Gafa who prepared the plans for the erection of the present cathedrals of Malta and Gozo.



Bishop Davide Cocco Palmieri (1684-1711), who oversaw the reconstruction of the Mдина Cathedral in Malta, and the Gozo collegiate church (now a cathedral).



A bust of Canon G.P. Agius de Soldanis whose writings include information about the earthquake that hit Malta in 1693.



Grand Master Adrien de Wignacourt (1690-97), ruler of the Maltese islands when they were struck by the quake.

to be repaired immediately for the same reason. Repairs were also to be effected to the Auberge d'Aragon and to houses (in modern Merchants Street) belonging to the Priory of Castille.

Much less damage was reported in the three cities of Cottonera. In Vittoriosa, the so-called Old Palace suffered great damage and it was recommended that at least part of it be pulled down. Two houses were also recommended for complete demolition.

**"Although damage – quite extensive in some cases – was reported, no lives were lost"**

In Cospicua, only one house near the so-called Ponte del Manderaggio was considerably damaged and earmarked for demolition. However, Senglea parish church incurred serious damages such that the commissioners recommended that the dome be demolished because it was feared it might collapse without warning. Two Senglea houses were also in ruins. Unfortunately, information about the countryside and the villages is scanty and conspicuous by its absence. Perhaps there was little damage but the way the whole population responded to religious manifestations is a sure indication that the tremor was really felt and installed terror in all. In fact, many Maltese actually spent a number of nights living under makeshift tents because they feared being

buried alive under debris should another tremor take place.

In Gozo, it seems that damage was restricted to Victoria and the Castello (Citadel). In fact, research has established that, to quote one example, no damages occurred in the Nadur area. The engineer Mederico Blondel was sent to Gozo to assess the damages that had occurred there.

Blondel found a castle in ruins with one-third of the houses levelled to the ground. But the engineer pointed out that considerable damage was due to the fact that most of the damaged buildings had long been deserted and the earthquake had simply hastened a process already under way. However, the collegiate church was badly damaged and the dome of the newly-constructed church of St George at Victoria had caved in.

Regarding the fortifications of the Castello, Blondel reported that the state of the walls had been in a deplorable state for a long time and the damages were not all due to the tremor. The same comments applied to the interior, that is, the government buildings within. He reported that he had long been advocating various repairs but nothing has been carried out.

The Order of St John also suffered losses in Sicily, particularly in Syracuse and Augusta, where the Knights' powder magazines, mills and ovens were a total loss. This complicated the Order's problems because these installations were an important part of its naval organisation. Indeed, the Order had to look elsewhere to obtain the necessary supplies and provisions, thus spiralling expenditure at a time when a combined Christian campaign against Turkey was being planned. The Order also suffered the loss of some men who had



A drawing of Mдина with the old medieval cathedral featured in its centre.

disembarked to load biscuits on the galleys. In fact, Grand Master Adrien de Wignacourt was seriously considering retiring from the forthcoming campaign. However, the Order received help from Pope Innocent XII who also persuaded the rulers of France and Savoy to exempt the Knights from property taxes. On their part, the Knights sent their galleys laden with medicines to Sicily to render all the help they could to the stricken population.

To express gratitude to divine providence, the Università of Mдина erected a niche with a picture of St Paul and a commemorative inscription in Latin facing the main gate of the old city. In Gozo, the painter Stefano Erardi was

commissioned to paint a canvas of Our Lady of Grace holding the Child Jesus with the Gozitan votive procession in the background. Furthermore, the rebuilt cathedrals of Malta and Gozo to plans of Lorenzo Gafa (the Gozitan church had not yet attained cathedral status) are a further living testimony to the havoc wreaked by the earthquake of 1693.

**Historian Dr Joseph F. Grima, a retired casual lecturer of History and Assistant Director of Education, includes among his publications *Zmien il-Kavallieri f' Malta 1530-1798 and The Fleet of the Knights of Malta: Its Organisation in the Eighteenth Century.***