

1. Burials in Maltese Churches: 1419–1530/40*

The report made in 1575 by Pietro Dusina, the Apostolic Visitor to the Maltese diocese charged with the task of rooting out a number of abuses and defects, might suggest that the private ownership of graves in the Maltese churches, so common a phenomenon until burial in churches was stopped in the course of the last century, had not started before the year 1575. In fact, Dusina reported several times that the dead were buried in earth instead of in proper graves.¹ Even for the cathedral at Mdina he had to leave instructions for this “impiety” to stop.² However ample evidence survives in other sources to show that some graves existed much before 1575 and were also owned privately and used as family graves despite the custom of burial in common earth.

As early as 30 November 1419 the nobleman Antonius de Vagnolo and his wife Ismiralda bought a family grave in the cathedral of Mdina:³

quoddam locum situm et positum in eadem ecclesia sive spatium intus videlicet Tribonam sinistram ex parte septentrionali sub hiis pactis et condicione subiciat quod dicti Jugales possint valeant et debeant absque aliqua condicione edificare Altarem ibi ad eorum opus et sepolturam eorum facere pro se et suis et ibi etiam sepeliri Juxta domini nostri Jesu Christi mandatum et dispositionem et hoc facto et hedificato gradam ibi inpune. . . . [sic] possint inde hedificato dicto altare cum dicta sepultura includere quemcumque voluerint ad eos expectantem intus dictam gradam

They retained the right to nominate a priest to take charge of the altar and they made an endowment of two *tenimenta terrarum* in the district of Żejtun called Rachal Bayada (Ḥal Bajda).

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1. Floriana, Archiepiscopal Archives, AA Visitationes Pastorales, ‘Visitatio Apostolica Duzina, 1575’, copy ‘C’ (cf. A. Luttrell, in *Ḥal Millieri: a Maltese Casale, its Churches and Paintings* [Malta, 1976], 138–139), f. 28v: “Non habent tumbas sed mortui humo revoluta sepeliuntur. Ideo Dominus mandavit quod fiant usque ad quattuor tumbae concameratae” (Naxxar); f. 41v: “Fiant tumbae pro sepulturas mortuorum nec amplius mortui sepeliantur humo revoluta” (Birkirkara); f. 72: “Habet lampadam unicam tantum, non habet tumbas. Ideo dominus mandavit fieri lampadarium et tumbas concameratas ut in aliis” (Qormi); f. 74: “A latere dextero est cimiterium muro clausum, in quo antiquitus mortui sepeliebantur, nunc in ecclesia sepelliuntur humo revoluta sine tumbis. In que etiam conservatur catalectum. Quod dominus mandavit amoveri, et fieri saltem duas tumbas concameratas, quibus mortui sepelliuntur” (Żurrieq); f. 132: “Item quod fiant tumbae concameratae ad sepeliendum mortuos qui amplius non sepeliantur humo revoluta” (Greek church of St. Nicholas at Birgu); f. 136v: “Sepeliunt mortuos humo revoluta et R. fr. magr. Damianus Taliana tanquam vicarius provincialis dictum locum pro ecclesia benedixit ut in ea celebrari et mortui sepeliri possint. Dominus mandavit in ecclesia nova cum fuerit constructa fieri tumbas concameratas quibus mortui sepeliantur” (Santa Maria de Portu Salvo, Valletta). Cf. G. Wettinger, “Some Maltese Medieval Place-names of Archaeological Interest”, *Atti del Colloquio Internazionale di Archeologia Medievale*, ii (Palermo, 1976).

2. *Ibid.*, f. 7 r-v: “In ecclesia Cathedrali predicta omnino fiant usque ad tres tumbae concameratae pro sepeliendis mortuis nec posthac amplius sepeliantur humo revoluta qui mos et impietatem praesefert et ecclesiam deformat.”

3. Mdina, Cathedral Museum, Curia Episcopalis Melitensis, Acta Originalia, Memoriale. . . . Sanctori Vella . . . et Nobilibus Philippi Vagnolo . . . , 1563, f. 65–66; extract is on f. 65r-v; copy is much older than 1565.

On 17 May 1431 Don Michele de Fabro, a canon of the cathedral, directed in his will that he was to be buried in the church of St. Mark at Rabat, Malta, which he himself had caused to be built, in the place where the corpse of Donnus Salvus de Calabranchio was laid, *ubi corpus Donni Salvi de Calabranchio est defunctum*; he left an important legacy to the church, which he intended to bequeath to the Dominicans, but he did not specify the manner of construction of the grave.⁴ Other pre-1530 testamentary provisions for burial are similarly vague but there is, however, no doubt that particular graves were frequently intended and understood. Thus in about 1431 the Sicilian official Andrea de Ravello had his first wife buried in the grave “of” an altar in the cathedral situated on the right side of the main altar, an altar of which he was the “benefactor”.⁵ After Ravello’s departure from Malta, the altar and its grave were held by Nicolaus de Sarlo who organised the church services there, especially the saying of mass on Thursdays and Saturdays and the celebration of the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady in September. Both of de Sarlo’s wives and their children were buried in this grave and eventually he himself was also laid to rest “in the grave of the said altar”. Court witnesses in 1491 could not tell how he had acquired his rights over the altar and its grave. His son Antonio then claimed that he had been asked by Johannes de Guyvara to surrender his rights to the altar and grave, rights which he had acquired by inheritance from his late father, on the grounds that, as a resident of Licata in Sicily, he did not need or could not exercise them. Possibly a similar transaction had taken place between Andrea de Ravello and Nicolaus de Sarlo some sixty years before.

Johannes de Nava, Castellan and one of the leading inhabitants of Malta, left instructions in his will of 1487 that he was to be dressed in the habit of St. Francis and buried in the burial place or *sepultura* belonging to the late Petrus de Busco where the latter had been buried; a marble *sepultura* was to be made for him within a year by his heir to be marked by a sword, gold-plated daggers and spurs together with a silk banner containing his coat-of-arms.⁶ It is clear that at least the upper classes had properly designed graves owned by themselves or their families.

However, evidence survives to show that by the opening years of the sixteenth century at latest members of the lower classes also aspired to and sometimes obtained family graves of their own. Thus on 9 November 1500 Johannes Vella, the parish priest of Żebbuġ, with the approval of the precentor of the cathedral and the vicar of the bishop, granted to Marcus Chantar for himself and his heirs in perpetuity:⁷

quamdam sepulturam sive monumentum perpetuum situm et positum intus dictam parochialem ecclesiam sancti philippi in quo sepulta est socera prefati Marci.

For this concession Marcus Chantar paid a sum of money for the repair of the walls and structure of the whole church:

Pro quaquidem sepultura sive monumento perpetuo dictus dompnus Johannes confessus est habuisse et recepisse a dicto Marco pro reparacione marammatum et fabrice dicte parrochialis ecclesie sancti Philippi uncias quatuor pecunie Malte.

4. Valletta, National Library of Malta, Libr. Ms. 635, f. 224v–227, especially f. 225.

5. Mdina, CEM, Acta Originalia, vol. 21A (1541), f. 20–25.

6. NLM, Libr. Ms. 635, f. 64.

7. Valletta, Notarial Archives Register of deeds of Not. C. Canchur, R. 140/1, f. 56r-v.

On 5 November 1519 Antonius Davula, another parish priest of Żebbuġ, granted a grave to the craftsman Georgius Vassaldus for himself and his heirs in return for his help in the making of a crucifix for the same church.⁸ Other graves were given to Paulus Manjun and Michael Axac in return for their gift of 12 *tareni* each towards the making of the same crucifix.⁹

Żebbuġ was not the only parish church which granted graves to its parishioners in return for money or other assistance. Reference was made on 18 October 1502 by Raidus Hellul *alias* Bruri to an altar he had set up in the church of Bir Miftuħ, placing himself and his heirs under the obligation of having a mass said at that altar on the feast of the Assumption, when the celebrant and a number of paupers were to be suitably entertained at his expense, as well as other duties:¹⁰

Quod in die beate virginis videlicet in Assumpcione teneatur et sit obligatus facere celebrare anno quolibet in dicto altari unam missam et invitare celebrantem et aliquos pauperes ad discrecionem dicti Petri (Raidus's son). Item teneant incendere lampadem que est ante dictum altarem in vigiliis et diebus sollempnibus: sabbatis et festis preceptis necnon in omnibus festivitibus et vigiliis virginis Marie prout est expressum in contractu super monumento et obligacione dicti altaris celebrato manu egregii notari Mathei Vassaldo notari puplici in quo monumento sive sepulturo voluit ipse Nardus (ie. Raidus) quod sepeliantur et ea utantur omnes filii sui heredesque eorum in perpetuum.

On 20 August 1502 Antonius de Nicolachi as vice-parish priest of the parish of St. Catherine of Żejtun agreed, with the concurrence of the procurators of the church of St. Mary of Casali Pascualino (Hal Bisqallin), to grant a right of burial to Antonius Randuni *alias* Rocca, in return for the donation of a field situated in the district of Tal Gwiedi to that church to help pay for its walls and structure:¹¹

et in cambium dicte clausure consignavit prefato Antonio (Randuni) presenti et a dicto dompno Antonio tamquam vice capellano ut supra recipienti pro se suisque heredibus et successoribus in perpetuum unam sepulturam perpetuam intus dictam ecclesiam sancte Marie casalis Pascualini . . .

The field was sold on the same day by Nicholachi and the two procurators of the church to Nicolaus Cassar of the same village, who already owned land adjoining the field on its eastern side and who paid two *uncie* for it, *pro fabrica et marammatibus fiendis in dicta ecclesia*.¹²

Zurrieq itself provides three early sixteenth-century examples of privately owned graves. On 30 April 1506 Guaglarda, the widow of Dionisius Manjuni, with the approval of her two sons Michael and Georgius, gave to Petrus Hellul, the parish priest of *Sancta Catherina de lu Zurrico*, a field situated in the district of Tal-Bitti retaining for herself a small portion, just enough to sow two *mundella* of wheat. In

8. NAV, deeds of Not. P. de Alaymo, Ms. 779/1, f. 42v of first quire.

9. *Ibid.*, f. 43r-v of first quire.

10. NAV, Not. C. Canchur, R 140/1, f. 187.

11. *Ibid.*, f. 177v et seq.

12. *Ibid.*, f. 178.

return Hellul gave her:¹³

pro se et successoribus in perpetuum jure suo proprio etc. more et consuetudine solitis et consuets . . . prefate Guaglarde prefatis magistro Michaeli et Georgio dicte Guaglarde filiis eorum heredibus et successoribus suis in perpetuum etc. presentibus ipsis Guaglarde Michaeli et Georgio ac ab eodem eorum capellano pro se et suis etc. recipientibus . . . quandam sepulturam perpetuam intus dictam ecclesiam parrochiale ubi est sepultus quondam Laurencius Manjuni filius dicte Guaglarde. . . .

About seven years later the same craftsman Michael Manjuni seems to have obtained another grave for himself and his descendants from the same parish priest in return for adding an extra bay to the same church:¹⁴

Die predicto (1 September 1513) testamur quod presens coram nobis etc. magister Michael Manjuni de capella sancte Catherine casalis Zurric non vi etc. sed sponte etc. promisit et se obtulit fabricare et facere unam arcata in dicta capella et ecclesie sancte Catherine expensibus et sumptibus ipsius Michaelis videlicet in addicione dicte ecclesie quo respectu et causa venerabilis donnus Petrus Hellul tanquam capellanus et curatus in dicta ecclesia Sancte Catherine consenciens prius in nos etc. non vi etc. sed sponte etc. per se et successores in dicta capella et ecclesia dedit et concessit ac per tactum penne mei notari etc. consignavit etc. dicto magistro Michaeli heredibus et successoribus ipsius in perpetuum unam sepulturam perpetuam intus dictam ecclesiam et capellam sancte Catherine inducens dictum Michaellem in possessionem dicte sepulture ex nunc pro tunc etc. etiam concessit dicto Michaeli facere unum altarem intus dictam ecclesiam cum pacto et condicione quod dictus Michael et heredes sui ac successores in dicta sepultura teneantur servire dicto altari videlicet incidere lampadem ipsius altaris tam in omnibus sollempnitatibus quam in festivis diebus et sabbatis tocius anni et si dictus Michael vel sui defecerint in premissis vel quolibet premissorum quod capellanus dicte capelle possit et valeat de dicta sepultura facere et disponere ad ipsius capellani libitum non obstante dicta arcata facta per dictum Michaellem nec presente contractu promittentes cum juramento premissa attendere etc. Unde etc. Testes: Marcianus Camilleri tamquam procurator dicte ecclesie et consenciens, Dancius Hili, Nardus Zammit, Johannes Bugeia, Grigorius Gristi et aliis tamquam habitatoribus dicte capelle et etiam consencientibus etc.

On 12 September 1519 Don Petrus Hellul gave Matheus de Armanino of Żurrieq for himself and his successors in perpetuity a grave in the church of St. Catherine of Żurrieq where Matheus's father was known to have been buried in return for his providing building stone or *balati* to cover another bay at the new wall lately erected and added to the church:¹⁵

Die XII eiusdem (Septembris VIII Indicionis 1519) Venerabilis donnus Petrus Hellul tamquam capellanus et rector ecclesie sancte Catherine di lo Zurrico consenciens prius in nos etc. non vi etc. sed sponte etc. per se et successores suos in dicta capella et rectoria dedit donavit ac per tactum penne mei notari etc. consignavit et

13. *Ibid.*, R 140/3, f. 13v et seq.

14. *Ibid.*, R 140/6, f. 2r-v.

15. *Ibid.*, R 40/8, f. 76v.

confirmavit Matheo de Armanino de eodem capella presenti etc. dicto venerabili capellano pro se et heredibus suis in perpetuum stipulante recipiente etc. unam sepulturam perpetuam intus dictam capellam sancte Catherine in qua sepultura dixerunt fuisse et esse sepultum patrem ipsius Mathei qui Matheus pro jure dicti sepulturi perpetui ut asseruerunt videlicet dictus capellanus et Benedictus Camilleri procurator dicte capelle et ecclesie apportavit suis propriis sumptibus et expensis certi balati per copiri una andana in la dicta ecclesia et capella videlicet ala maramma nova et noviter hedificata et iuncta in dicta ecclesia et capella presente dicto Benedicto procuratore ut supra et premissa ratificante promittens dictus dompnus Petrus tamquam capellanus et rector ut supra premissa et quodlibet premissorum in dicta capella et rectoria habere et tenere rata grata inviolabilia perpetuoque duratoria etc. et juravit more sacerdotali etc. Testes: Don Nicolaus Xara et Bernardus Farruge.

At Birkirkara in 1538 a dispute broke out between Johannes Pisano, the parish priest, and one of his parishioners over the ownership of family graves.¹⁶ Pisano held that:¹⁷

de usu et antiquissima observancia dicte ecclesie parochialis di Bircarcara et ab antiquissimo tempore a quo non est memoria in contrarium fuit et est observatum che quando alcuna persuna voli haviri alcuna sepultura in dicta ecclesia oy vero in lo cymiteri non altromenti si chi po conchediri et darisi dicta sepultura excepto che in reconpensa di la dicta sepultura non si dugna alcuna parti di terreno oy vero dinari oy alcuna altra cosa et di quisto modo si solino dari et conchediri sepulturi et non aliter. Ita et prout fuit visum et cognitum uti et observari ac concedi et dari sepulturi per ipsum venerandum conventum tamquam capellanum et per alios predecessores capellanos predictae parochie et Ita est veritas et dicant testes.

On the other hand, witnesses stated that Xenno Burg had inherited from his father a grave in the main church always held by the Burg family and another constructed forty-five years previously in the adjoining church of St. Agatha:¹⁸

Dimitrius Mifsud de casale Birchircara testis juratus et interrogatus super primo capitulo dixit quod quondam Raimundus Burg pater dicti Xenni (i.e. Simonis) informantis tempore sue vivencie et usuq̄ ad eius mortem sempre et de continuo usava tenia et possedia la dicta sepultura in capitulo contenta posita intus ecclesiam parochialem parochie di Birchircara la quali sepultura ananti che fo crixuta la ecclesia predicta venia vichina de li lampa di lo Corpo de Cristo et ora per esseri crixuta la dicta ecclesia veni quasi a menzo la dicta ecclesia in la quale sepultura dicto Ramundo fachia sepelliri li soy et specialiter Catherinam uxorem tunc quondam Simonis Xeberas filiam dicti Ramundi la quali ha circa anni quaranta chinco et successive fo sepulto lo quondam Franquino figlo di dicto quondam Ramundo et succèssive la figla di lo dicto Xenno informanti senza pagari raxuni alcuna de la sepultura alo capellano, la quali sepultura intisi ipso testu che era originalimenti de li antecessuri et antiqui di lo dicto Xenno; de causa sciencie interrogatus dixit scire premissa per modum ut supra quia bene scit et novit vidit

16. Mdina, CEM, Acta Originalia, vol. 17 A (1538), f. 63–75v. My attention was kindly drawn to these proceedings by Mr. John Schembri of Birkirkara.

17. *Ibid.*, f. 70.

18. *Ibid.*, f. 74.

et audivit ea etc. de loco Melite et in dicto casale Birchircara de tempore ab annis quinquaginta circa citra qui testes est etatis anorum ultra sexaginta quinque.

Super ii dixit tantum prout deposuit addendo quod mortuo dicto quondam Ramundo la dicta sepultura la possessio lo dicto Xenno informanti supra la quali allumava et alluma ogni commemoracioni deli morti candili et blandunetti accusi comu si costuma como cosa sua . . .

Leo Michallef de casale Birchircara testis . . .¹⁹

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Super iii dixit quo jam sunt circa anni xxxv et ultra tempore quo erat quondam Reverendus dominus Michael de Falsono capellanus dicte parrochie quodam die trovandosi ipso teste in dicta ecclesia parrochiali una cum dicto quondam Raimundo Burg, Bendo Michallef et Georgio Burg, qui Ramundus, Bendus et Georgius tunc temporis erant procuratores dicte ecclesie cum li quali ancora era lo dicto quondam don Micheli capellano et volendo fari murari la dicta ecclesia Sancte Agathe et farila crixiri perche era pichula dissi lo dicto quondam don Micheli ali dicti procuraturi coram ipso teste che ipsi procuraturi volissiru procurari et actendiri che si facha la dicta maramma de la dicta ecclesia et facta che sarra ogni uno di ipsi procuraturi habia una sepultura in dicta ecclesia et che sia loro in perpetuum et de poy lo dicto quondam Ramundo piglao la dicta sepultura in capitulo contenta et appropriilila (?) per si et fichi sepelliri li soy et deinde fo sepulto ipso Ramundo et mortuo dicto Ramundo restao lo dicto informanti in la quali ancora fichi sepelliri il soy senza pagari cosa alcuna como cosa sua . . .

Another witness stated:²⁰

Multi et assay sepulturi sunno intro la ecclesia parrochiali li quali su di diversi persuni che non hanno dato terreno et hoc perche li sarranno dati per li capellani tunc esistenti senza alcuno terreno.

It would be easy but pointless to give similar references to family graves in other churches.²¹ The evidence given is enough to suggest that Dusina needs careful reinterpretation in the light of the new information. It is clear that family graves already existed in Malta a century and a half before his time and that by the beginning of the sixteenth century even mere craftsmen and other villagers aspired to and obtained family graves. Proprietors of chapels or churches would no doubt have pride of place but other benefactors and mere procurators, apparently, also managed to get hold of a grave. Incidentally, one cannot help noticing the surprising amount of church or chapel building, rebuilding or extending that was taking place throughout this time.²²

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19. *Ibid.*, f. 75.

20. *Ibid.*, f. 63, evidence of *Petrus Burg filius Orlandi de casali Birchircara*.

21. Thus on 29 May 1534 the Dominican Friars granted a grave to Bartholomeo Vella of Luqa in the Chapel of the Rosary of their conventual church at Rabat, Malta, in return for his donation of a yearly sum of fifteen *tari* for a mass and other church services on every feast-day of Our Lady celebrated in that chapel: M. Fsadni, *Id-Dumnikani fir-Rabat u fil-Birgu sa l-1620* (Malta, 1974), 59.

22. See also M. Fsadni, *Il-Migja u l-Hidma ta' l-Ewwel Dumnikani f'Malta (1450–1512)* (Malta, 1965); G. Wettinger, *Il-Grajjja Bikrija tal-Knisja Matrici t'Ghawdex 1435–1551* (Malta, 1975); and *idem*, "Artistic Patronage in Malta: 1418–1538", in *Hal Millieri*, 108–115, 116–119.