

St Lawrence of Birgu before 1530

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the medieval cult of St Lawrence in the Maltese Islands and investigates the documented origins of the parish dedicated to the saint in Birgu. In particular, it considers the relationship that may have existed between this parish and the chaplaincy of the *Castrum Maris*. It is concluded that the two entities were quite separate and, indeed at times, at variance with each other.

Keywords: *Castrum Maris*, Birgu, St Lawrence, Byzantine Rite, Latin Rite.

The spread of the cult of St Lawrence in the Maltese islands in late medieval times is best gauged by the nomenclature index of occurrences of personal names, place-names, and, in particular, churches and cult centres going back as far as records can take us. The earliest comprehensive lists of personal names that afford such an analysis are the militia rolls of the first decades of the fifteenth century. All these lists are defective in the sense that, as they were drawn up by the *Mdina Universitas* for the purpose of assigning watch-duties and similar tasks to those under its jurisdiction, that part of the population centred on the *Castrum Maris* and under its jurisdiction is excluded; this area includes Birgu and the surrounding villages of Żabbar, Żejtun, Ghaxaq, and the smaller hamlets. In spite of this, they remain the best tool for our purpose. Thus, the Militia List of 1419–20¹ lists a total of 1609 Christian men (excluding Jews) with 80 different personal names. Of these, 18 are called Laurenczu and 16 others are called Lenzu, a syncopated form thereof (but no Wenzu occurs), so that this count of 34 is way above the average of 20 even though it does not compare very favourably with Antoni, topping the list with a score of 104. Given that

1 Published by G. Wettinger in *Melita Historica*, Vol. 5 No. 2 (1969), 80–106 [=Militia List].

the name is fairly evenly distributed throughout Malta, one already gets the inkling that the devotion to the saint was widespread at that time. A perusal of this same list also reveals the surname De Laurenczu occurring four times at Qormi. One can try to compensate for the deficiency of lists for Birgu by looking at other sources even if less comprehensive. A mid-fifteenth-century list of members of a confraternity erected in Birgu by Bishop Senatore de Mello in 1445 comprises 23 names but none of whom is called Laurenczu or Laurencza whereas a similar list of 38 names of Birgu men who in 1528 requested the Blackfriars to establish a friary in Birgu contains exactly one named Laurenczu.²

Coming next to the occurrence of St Lawrence in the stock of place-names – a source with a much longer historical memory than that of personal names –, one notes that, in general, toponyms bearing a saint's name are usually associated with a church or chapel dedicated to that particular saint. A useful starting point that affords a good snap-shot view of the hagiographical spectrum in the Maltese islands is certainly Mgr Pietro Dusina's Apostolic Visitation report of 1575.³ Starting with the furthest region, Gozo, one notes that Dusina visited there a rural church dedicated to St Lawrence in the district of Ġharb and Dwejra (f. 188).⁴ There is no doubt that this church coincides with the present-day village of San Lawrenz, now itself an independent parish. Inside the Gozo *Castrum*, then, the Apostolic Visitor was shown another small church of St Lawrence about which he was informed that it was the very first church to be built there: *dicitur fuisse prima ecclesia primo constructa in dicto castro* (f. 109^v). Its importance also lay in the fact that it gave its name to one of the streets of the *Castrum*, situated precisely *in contrata Il Cortiglio dove era la porta anticha* (f. 436^v).

Proceeding to the larger island, Dusina visited a rural chapel dedicated to the saint in the district of Raħal Kbir and Raħal Tabuni of the Siġġiewi parish (ff. 170^{rv}). This church still stands today on *Tal-Għolja*

2 S. Fiorini, 'Demographical Aspects of Birgu up to 1800', in L. Bugeja, M. Buhagiar and S. Fiorini (eds.), *Birgu. A Maltese Maritime City*, 2 vols. (Malta, 1993) [=Birgu] 219–54, esp. 222, 224 (Tables I, II).

3 G. Aquilina and S. Fiorini, *Documentary Sources of Maltese History* [=DSMH]. Part IV: Documents at the Vatican. No. 1: Visita ... Dusina, 1575 [=Dusina]. Hereafter references to Dusina are to the folio numbers in this publication.

4 This is the only rural church of Gozo dedicated to St Lawrence visited by Dusina. A second church listed by A. Ferris, *Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo* (Malta, 1866) 648, as visited by Dusina is to be discounted as a misreading for *San Leonardo*.

albeit now as part of a private residence.⁵ It gave its name to the expanse of garigue above Il-Fawwara, referred to in a notarial deed of 1593 as Ix-Xaghra l-Fuqanija ta' San Lawrenz;⁶ it is also referred to in other documentation of the time as San Lawrenz tal-Kemmuna.⁷ While doing the rounds of the churches in the vicinity of the Old Capital, Dusina visited two other churches which he described as located *in platea per quam itur ad Casale Mustae* (f. 31). The term *platea* is misleading, suggesting as it does some plaza in or near the city. The Cathedral records of 1648, however, set the record straight when they associate the saint's name with the flat-land – *platea* – below Mdina known till today as Ta' Vnezja. The Cathedral treasurer's prebend included the Ta' Vnezja estate which was subdivided into *la parte della Madalena [e] la parte di San Lorenzo*.⁸ Dusina does not mention a chapel dedicated to the saint – one of a score or so huddled around St Paul's Grotto in Rabat – which is mentioned in the full list of Royas' visitation report.⁹ Further to Birgu, he likewise does not mention what may have been an unlocated village, *Casale Laurentio*, associated with someone whose personal name or surname was Laurentio.¹⁰ It is encountered only once, again in the Cathedral records, in 1546. Coming, finally, to Birgu itself, the church of St Lawrence figures very prominently in Dusina's report, not least because of the large number of smaller churches by which it and its cemetery were surrounded. Suffice it to mention that there were no fewer than seven of them, three of which were dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin, one to St Andrew, one to St Anthony, one to St Sebastian, and another of St Catherine which, in 1530, became the church of the Damascene Madonna, one of the three Greek-rite parish churches (ff. 126–8^v). Both church and its cemetery were manifest land-marks in the fifteenth century. In the Venetian portulan published by Pertusi,¹¹ *La gliexia de San Lorenzo* was where the vessels were

5 It was described by Gian Francesco Abela, *Descrittione di Malta, isola nel mare siciliano* (Malta, 1647) 97, as *nuouamente riedificata*.

6 G. Wettinger, *Place-Names of the Maltese Islands: ca. 1300–1800* (Malta, 2000) [=Place-names] 603.

7 Mdina Cathedral Museum [=MCM], Archivum Cathedralis Melitae [=ACM], Prebende 7 [Decime Decanali, 1601], f. 122^v.

8 Ibid., Prebende 12 [Decime Tesoreriali, 1648], ff. 4^v, 5^v.

9 Archbishop's Archives, Floriana, Visitatio Pastoralis Royas, 1575, ff. 51–3^v.

10 Wettinger, *Place-Names*, 118, s.v. *Dukkiena*.

11 A. Pertusi, 'Le isole maltesi dall'epoca bizantina al periodo normanno-svevo (secc. VI–XIII) e descrizioni di esse dal sec. XII al sec. XVI', *Byzantinische Forschungen*, 5 (1977)

recommended to berth, and the cemetery, in 1487, appears from a notarial deed as forming the boundary of some land being sold;¹² the church itself figures in yet another contract of 1508,¹³ juxtaposed as it was to the *Mal Cantoni* of the suburb.¹⁴ All this data establishes that the cult of St Lawrence was very diffused throughout these islands even to its remotest corners. This receives confirmation also from early iconographic material such as the appearance of the saint in an archaic, stylized posture ‘as a deacon in dalmatic, holding a book in his left hand’, with no appearances of a grid-iron, in the important fresco cycle at Hal Millieri dating from the 1450s.¹⁵

But how far back can we take the Birgu dedication? The earliest mention of St Lawrence of Birgu in Maltese documentation goes back to 1432 when Ventura, wife of Nicolaus Cassia in her will of 28 October of that year in the acts of Notary Luca Sillato, bequeathed a field at Tal-Barrani to the *Ecclesia Sancti Laurentii suburbii maris*.¹⁶ A few years later in 1445, it reappears when Bishop Senatore de Mello issued a document erecting the Confraternity of the Blessed Virgin in the church of *Sancta Maria dilu Burgu*. This document imposed the condition on the members of the confraternity that *in li jorni di la Dominica per diri Missa poy la Missa dila Cappella di Santo Laurentio per non dari impachu ali Missi ordinarii*. The date of this document is 20 May 1445.¹⁷

Some twenty years later St Lawrence receives a third mention, this time as a parish, when on 5 November 1467, Canon Bartholomeus Busuttill installed Canon Fridericus de Arpania in the benefice with *cura animarum*, that is as *capellanus*, of *Santu Laurenzu dilu Burgu*, to which De Arpania had been collated on 31 October of that year by the Bishop of Malta who, in that year was Antonius de Alagona.¹⁸ The

253–306, esp. 298.

12 Fiorini, DSMH I/2, Doc. 182.

13 Notarial Archives, Valletta [=NAV], Notary C. Canchur R140/4, ff. 124^v.

14 NAV, Not. N. De Agatiis R202/4, (23.viii.1540), f. 288^v: *in hoc suburbio in loco dicto Lo Mal Cantoni confinatum ex parte orientis secus cimiterium ecclesie Beati Laurentii*.

15 G. Bautier-Bresc, ‘The Paintings at Hal Millieri’, in A.T. Luttrell (ed.), *Hal Millieri: A Maltese Casale, its Churches and Paintings* (Malta, 1976), 97–104. Bautier-Bresc is of the opinion that the artist at Hal Millieri modelled his saints on ‘an earlier cycle, perhaps from some twelfth- or thirteenth-century chapel’.

16 MCM ACM, Misc. 368, f. 243.

17 *Ibid.*, Misc. 32/A vol. 2, f. 31 (*olim* 18, f. 57), XVIIth-century copy, unsatisfactorily published in S. Guastella, *Senatore de Mello di Noto, Vescovo di Malta* (Roma: n.d.), 1–11.

18 DSMH I/3, Doc. 129.

predecessor of De Arpania thirty years earlier is known to have been Donnus Nicolaus de Falsono, Canon of the Mdina Cathedral Chapter. This information can be deduced from the well-known *Rollo de Mello* of 1436, wherein De Falsono is described as parish priest of *La Cappella dilo Burgo*, without any allusion to its dedication to St Lawrence.¹⁹

How can one be sure that this church is the same church of St Lawrence noted in 1432, 1445, and in 1467? After all, there was in existence more than one church at the time in Birgu; certainly there was that of the Virgin which can be shown to have survived to this day as the present Church of the Dominican Friary. That the *Cappella dilu Burgo* of 1436 coincides with *San Laurenzu dilu Burgo* of 1432 and later transpires from the important report of the Apostolic Visitation of Mgr Pietro Dusina of 1575, already cited. It is asserted there: [*constat*] *Ecclesiam parrochiam huius civitatis semper extitisse templum Sancti Laurentii in quo parochus toti civitati Sacramenta ministraret* (f. 120). This means that the church of St Lawrence had always been the parish church of Birgu.

In no way does the document of 1436 purport to have erected any parishes in Malta, as has been often erroneously misinterpreted. It was a financial document intended to remedy certain taxation anomalies between the clergies of Malta and of Gozo, as its terms of reference in the title – *Quinterniolus pro concordia taxarum* – explain. The false interpretation about the erection of parishes is easily refuted by citing the existence of some of these *cappelle* that ante-date 1436. One such is Birkirkara, the subject of a document of 1402,²⁰ and another is *Sancta Dominica* of Tartarni and Dingli in 1419–20.²¹ In this regard, the *Rollo* of 1436 can only be cited to assert that, in that year, twelve parishes further to the Cathedral were already in existence in Malta.

A local tradition upheld in Birgu, however, states that Birgu had precedence over all other parishes, except the Cathedral, by virtue of its prior erection, attributed no less to the good Count Roger himself. To prove convincingly such an assertion is indeed a tall order, certainly not established by erecting marble monuments! I would like to take a closer

19 J. Busuttill and S. Fiorini, 'The Rollo de Mello (1436) and the Will of Don Bernardus Yaner (1442)', in T. Cortis, T. Freller, and L. Bugeja (eds.), *Melitensium Amor. Festschrift in Honour of Dun Ġwann Azzopardi* (Malta, 2002), 57–72, esp. 64.

20 *DSMH* IV/2, Doc. 137.

21 Militia List, f. 1: *Cappella Sancta Dominica Tartarni et Dinkili*.

look at this claim which seems to be favoured also by Mgr Vincent Borg in his recent monumental *Melita Sacra* (vol. i, 227–9). If we cannot get direct black-on-white proof of this assertion, one then asks what are the probabilities, or maybe just possibilities, in its favour, and against it? The very reasonable tack adopted by Mgr Borg sounds promising: Is it possible to link the Birgu parish with St Angelo, the *Borgo* with its *Castrum*, which certainly has a history going back at least to Swabian times? Fifteenth-century Birgu was a very minor place of settlement judging by its demographic consistency but, to make up for its minuscule measure its strategic position, *in bocca di portu*, compensated heavily. Although the tools one usually has resort to gauge fifteenth-century demography – the *militia* and *angara* rolls – are very disappointing where Birgu is concerned, because Birgu is sadly missing from all of them, one can extrapolate population counts for Birgu by comparing the solid information contained in these rolls with other sources, not least the *Rollo de Mello* of 1436, which also afford quantifiable material in the form of incomes. This *Rollo* shows that Birgu in that year was bottom of the list, together with Mellieħa, providing its *cappellanus* with a mere 2 *uncie* compared with his colleague at *Sanctu Paulu di Fora* of Rabat, at the other end of the spectrum, who was deriving no less than 25 *uncie*. As the population of Rabat and that of most of the other *cappelle* is well understood, a little bit of statistical juggling leads one to conclude that the Birgu population count hovered around the 120 mark huddling around some 25 hearths at the beginning of the fifteenth century.²² This figure, however, does not take into account the nearby *Castrum Maris* which, towards the end of the century, is known to have housed some 40 *casette* further to the 60 of its suburb, as documented by the Order’s commission of 1524.²³ Ignoring the *Castrum* is a serious omission because the *Castrum* was the very *raison d’être* of its *borgo* in the Middle Ages. The name Birgu may be, and has been, interpreted as *borgo* of the *Castrum Maris*, but it is at least equally likely to be derived from Greek *Pyrgos*, ‘a tower or castle’.²⁴ The *Castrum* was the King of Sicily’s special preserve in these islands with its castellan or *gaytus* appointed directly by His Majesty. The very earliest secure

22 S. Fiorini, ‘Rabat and its People in the Late Middle Ages’, in J. Azzopardi (ed.), *St Paul’s Grotto, Church and Museum at Rabat, Malta* (Malta, 1990) 3–34, esp. 25–7.

23 Fiorini, ‘Demographical Aspects’, 224.

24 Wettinger, *Place-names*, 33.

mention of the *castrum* in 1223 emphasizes precisely this point when the Lord of Malta, Arrigo Piscator, fell out with Emperor Frederick II, he was pardoned but lost his control of the *castrum* which remained in royal hands. It continued to be run directly by the king and at royal expense till 1530 and, although its fortunes varied over the years, it was always well defended by a strong contingent which at times counted 200 soldiers.²⁵

This sizeable community of the protective *castrum*, much larger than that of the suburb nestling at its feet, had all its needs catered for directly by the king, including the spiritual needs of its inmates. Suffice it to mention that by 1274 the *castrum* was already being served by at least two churches, the church of Santa Maria *in castro interiori* and that of Sant'Angelo (which, doubtlessly, later gave the fort its name) *in castro exteriori*, and both were very well equipped with all necessities in that year. Of particular interest is the very probable presence at the *Castrum* in the 1270s of liturgical texts which later found their way to the Mdina Cathedral, still being built in 1299, which suggests that the *Castrum* was the hub of Latin Christianity before Mdina.²⁶ It is this point that needs stressing, that the very first *cappellanus* – *kappillan* (Maltese equivalent for parish priest) – mentioned in these islands appears in connexion with his chaplaincy or *cappellania* of the *castrum*. Already on 2 August 1361, one notes how *Presbyter* Marcus de Augusta, *habitor Insole Meliveti*, was being appointed to take over the *cappellania* from his predecessor, the late *Presbyter* Jacobus Pisani *vita sibi comite*, that is, who had held it for his life's duration. Later on, one encounters the *cappellani* Johannes Barbara in 1375, Antoni de Budara in 1398, Bernardus Ginestra in 1399, and Rogerius Sahona in 1410.²⁷ At this juncture we start having information about the parish of St Lawrence in Birgu as becomes evident from the *Rollo de Mello* of 1436. One asks: Is it possible that the precedence claimed by the Birgu parish of St Lawrence is due to an association with the *cappellania* of the *Castrum* which, somehow, extended its jurisdiction over its satellite

25 G. Wettinger, 'The *Castrum Maris* and its Suburb of Birgu during the Middle Ages', in Birgu, i, 31–71, esp. 33–40.

26 S. Fiorini, 'The triple strand of the liturgical tradition of the Church in Malta: Byzantine, Roman, Gallican Rites', *Melita Theologica*, Vol. 63, No. 2 (2013), 5–18, esp. 8.

27 S. Fiorini, 'The Clergy of Malta to 1460', *Melita Historica*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2001) 165–208, esp. 173–6.

territory or, perhaps, that there was a shift of locality of the centre of gravity of the population to the suburb? On this assumption, Mgr Borg readily admits that ‘it is rather difficult to determine when a separation between the chaplaincy of the castle and rectorship of a distinct parish church catering for the community residing at the *Borgo* actually took place’. After listing various considerations anent the civil jurisdiction of the *castrum*, he continues to say that ‘they may also have influenced the ecclesiastical sphere giving birth to a new parish church outside the castle’. These comments are inserted at the end of his catalogue (p. 227) of *Castrum Cappellani*, which list terminates in 1410 with Rogerius de Sagona, and the earliest mention of St Lawrence in 1432, strongly suggesting to the reader that that is where he places the transition, in the first two decades of the fifteenth century. But even this hypothetical situation has to be rejected, as the *Cappellani* of the *Castrum* continued to be appointed by the Sicilian Crown till 1530 as one continues to find them still mentioned, as for instance, an unnamed *cappellanus* in 1466,²⁸ and Angelus Garaffa who occupied that post for more than twenty years between 1486 and 1507,²⁹ well after the establishment of the parish of St Lawrence.

Not only were the two *cappelle* coexisting distinctly, but indeed, it is documented that on more than one occasion they were experiencing conflicts of interest between them! A Viceregal letter of 1507 issued an order that his protégé, the *cappellanus* of the *castrum*, should not be further molested and should be allowed to exercise his duties, including the celebration of liturgical functions, independently of those of the Birgu parish.³⁰ It is very clear that boundaries in Birgu had to be respected. Already in 1445, when the confraternity of the Virgin was set up in the Annunciation Church, that later became the Dominican friary church, it was made clear to the members that they had to tread neither on the toes of the *castrum cappellanus*, by abstaining from celebrating the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin which was already being celebrated there, nor were they to tread on the toes of the *cappellanus* of St Lawrence by ensuring that the Sunday Mass celebrated for the confraternity in the Annunciation Church should not precede nor be held at the same time as that at St Lawrence’s, doubtlessly, not to lessen

28 *DSMH* II/3, Docs. 67, 69 [1466].

29 Wettinger, ‘Castrum Maris’, 57, fn. 193.

30 MCM ACM Misc. 28 (7.viii.1507) ff. 221–3.

the size of that congregation. By 1517 it had become necessary for the bishop to send a strongly-worded letter to Don Filippo Guivara, parish priest of Birgu, to defend the rights of the *cappellanus* at the *castrum*. On this occasion the bone of contention was the feast of *Corpus Domini* which used to be celebrated at the *castrum* and it was customary, in more peaceful times, to be attended by the clergy of Birgu. This practice had apparently been stopped by the parish priest and the bishop warned him severely to send three priests from the parish as was customary on pain of losing the bishop's favour.³¹ Nor did the matter rest there. Again in 1522, the Vicar General of the diocese needed to be reminded that the diocesan clergy were not saying Masses at the *castrum* as previously, to the detriment of the interests of that *capellanus*.³²

It is, therefore, clear that (i) these two *cappelle* were quite distinct from each other at all times, and (ii) judging by the surviving records, that the *cappella* of the *castrum* is documented a good eighty odd years before St Lawrence. Furthermore, in view of emerging new material that is helping us to understand much better the situation of the Church in Muslim and Norman times, it is becoming increasingly clear that during the Muslim, Norman, and Swabian periods of our history, the hub of Christianity down to the mid-thirteenth century was Gozo where an essentially Greek Church survived.³³ The report of Giliberto Abbate of ca. 1241 can now be seen to show that the Christian population in these islands in that year, consisted of two disjoint groups: (i) a small administrative unit supported by the defence contingents in the three *castra* amounting to some 300, and (ii) the villanage population spread in the islands outside the *castra*, heavily skewed in favour of Gozo where there was a 55 per cent majority of the population by contrasts with a 41 per cent minority in Malta. It follows that, as far as the *Castrum Maris* and its suburb are concerned, in that year Birgu was practically devoid of Christians and the garrison and administrative unit at the *castrum* constituted a Latin Church enclave. One would be treading on surer ground if one were to speak of a Jewish presence in Birgu at this

31 National Library of Malta, Univ. 12, (13.vi.1517) f. 162^v. The mention of priests at Birgu, other than the parish priest, is of interest at this time. The presence of Previti Julianus Trumbetta in the 1445 document is worthy of note.

32 Wettinger, 'Castrum Maris', 57.

33 J. Busuttil, S. Fiorini, and H.R.C. Vella, *Trista ex Melitogaudo. Lament in Greek Verse of a XIIIth-century Exile on Gozo* (Malta, 2010).

time. This community, known by its synagogue,³⁴ was certainly strong enough to warrant calling the creek *La gala Iudea* in a portulan that goes back to 1296 if not earlier.³⁵ Although this document makes no mention of a *cappellanus* at the *castrum* it is very likely that one existed within the administrative unit in view of the churches mentioned there, as already noted. Thus, the priority must go to the *castrum*. As to when this chaplaincy was established, an educated guess would be the second half of the twelfth century but not before.

34 G. Wettinger, *The Jews of Malta in the Late Middle Ages* (Malta, 1985), 58–9.

35 B. Motzo, *Il Compasso da Navigare* (Cagliari, 1947) 112. It continued to be so called in a later 15th-century portulan: Pertusi, 298–9.