

The Rock-cut Church of Bormla: Origins and Developments

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Abstract

This paper seeks to establish the origins and start writing the history of a rock-cut church in Bormla, (Malta) which was, for over three centuries, sealed away from public eyes. The study reveals that the church, originally dedicated to the Nativity of Jesus through the Virgin Mother, started as a Christian cave-place of worship during the late Byzantine era (8th-9th century). It was extended during the 13th century and kept functioning till the second half of the 17th century. After 325 years of invisibility, and the focus of many assumptions and reports, this church emerges as a unique and historic site linked to Christianity in Malta and the origins of the Marian cult in the ancient maritime town of Bormla.

Introduction

This study analyses a number of historical artefacts in order to establish the origins of the rock-cut church in Bormla. Evidence was particularly sought from neighbouring Sicily, Southern Italy, previous publications, oral lore, and close observation of the site itself. The research started with the authentication of the inscriptions found in this church. Attempts were also made to date its origins and reconstruct its unrecorded history. Finally, the research outlines the churches and Marian devotions of Bormla from mediaeval times till the present.

The Inscription: A point of departure

Some authors attribute the first Bormla church to an early devotion to Holy Mary under the title of ‘*tas-Sokkors*’ (*Del Soccorso*), while others attribute it to St Helen. These views are partially correct. Medieval sources about Malta are sparse, especially during the Byzantine period.¹ The earliest publication on Maltese religious heritage was by Abela,² most of which was reproduced by Ciantar.³ Publications from late 19th century and 20th century authors were subjected to Church censorship. This study examines sources previously excluded due to Church censorship or other reasons.

Quandary 1: The Inscription on the Rock

Post-19th century authors disagreed on the writing of the main apse inscription. Cassar reported that the inscription read ‘*Maria Virgo Genuit Salvatorem Saeculi*’.⁴ In spite of this inscription, he maintains that the church was dedicated to the Nativity of Jesus.⁵ As the Museums Department kept no official records before 1951, he relied on records supplied by

¹ Charles Dalli, ‘Satellite, Sentinel, Stepping Stone - Medieval Malta in Sicily’s Orbit’, in A. Bonanno and P. Militello (eds), *Malta in the Hybleans, the Hybleans in Malta. Malta negli Iblei, gli Iblei a Malta* (Progetto Kasa, Officina di Studi Medievali, Palermo, 2008), 247.

² Gian Francesco Abela, *Malta illustrata con le sue Antichità ed altre Notizie*, Malta, 1647.

³ Giovannantonio Ciantar, ‘*Malta Illustrata ovvero Descrizione di Malta Isola del Mare Siciliano e Adriatico, con le sue antichità, ed altre notizie, divisa in quattro libri, del Commendatore F. Giovanfrancesco Abela ...*’ (Stamperia del Palazzo di S.A.S., Malta, 1772).

⁴ Translation: ‘The Virgin Mary conceived the Saviour of the world.’

⁵ [Rev.] Giuseppe Cassar (Archpriest and the Rev. Chapter of the Bormla Collegiate Parish Church), *Zvilupp tal-Qima lejn Marija Vergni Immakulata f’Bormla* [Development of the devotion towards Mary Immaculate Conception in Bormla], (Giov. Muscat, Valetta, Malta, 1949), 49.

Don Diego Ciantar's 1679 inventory⁶ and the testimonies of parishioners who had witnessed the 1946 rediscovery of the church. Grech⁷ quoted the inscription as '*PATR. M. MARIA VIRGO GENUI*', adding that the church was 'probably dedicated to the Holy Trinity, while people claimed that it was dedicated to the Saviour'. He assumed that the Marian cult started after the liberation of Malta from Muslim Arab rule. Grech based his arguments on a triangular Greek inscription in the rock-cut church, and the *Auxilium Christianorum* painting, known as *Madonna tal-Bahrin*, found therein.⁸

Guillaumier referred to the Latin inscription as indicating the Nativity, but attributed the main dedication to the Madonna tas-Sokkors (Del Soccorso) described by him as the Madonna tal-Bahrin,⁹ referred here as *Auxilium Christianorum*. By stating '*Madonna tas-Sokkors, jġġifieri, l-Verġni Marija għajnuna ta' l-Insara*',¹⁰ Bonnici repeated Guillaumier's mistake. Both erroneously amalgamated two distinct Marian devotions: *Del Soccorso* and the *Auxilium Christianorum* [Help of Christians], as suggested by the painting of *Auxilium Christianorum*. Buhagiar attributed the church to the Vergine del Soccorso, described as partly rock-cut, with the inscription *P... MATER VIRGO GENVI*.¹¹ Though Buhagiar was closest to reality he referred to Dusina's 1575 description of the church.

The actual inscription

The Latin inscription reads '*PATRVN MATER VIRGO GENVI*', indicating the Nativity of Jesus.¹² A verbatim translation reads '*of the Fathers. Mother Virgin I have begotten*'.¹³ Two possible interpretations emerge: the first being '[The Word] of the Fathers [said]. Mother Virgin I have begotten'. This is a phrase attributed to the Fathers of the early Church, encapsulating how God became human through the Virgin Mother, His birth-giver. A second translation, interpreted through a form of Vulgate Latin, or influenced by Sicilian, would be that '*PATRVN.*' is an abbreviation of *patrimonium*, meaning the Father's Inheritance,¹⁴ which then translates as 'The Father's Inheritance from a Virgin Mother I have begotten'. The Latin inscription endorsed the first Theotokos dogma of the Eastern Christian Church at Ephesus (431 AD) and to which the Western Church initially adhered to. Since little is known about 6th century Malta, a number of scholars try to deduce what was taking place here by referring to Sicily. In the 6th century the Christian Church in Sicily relied strongly on Rome but still experienced a strong Byzantine presence. In fact it had six

⁶ Charles Galea Scannura, *Tagħrif Storiku dwar il-Knisja Parrokkjali ta' Bormla* [Historic information about the Parish Church of Bormla], (Kummissjoni Fuljett tal-Kunsill Parrokkjali, Bormla, Malta, 1983), Kap. II, 14.

⁷ Romeo P. Grech, O.Carm., 'Il-qedem ta' Bormla u l-ewwel knisja tagħha' [The antiquity of Bormla and its first church], '*Cospicua*', Malta, 1954, *Special Issue* No. 4: 2.

⁸ Grech, 1954, 2.

⁹ Alfie Guillaumier, 'Bliet u Rhula Maltin' (Malta, 2nd ed. 1972), 58-59. Translation: *Madonna tas-Sokkors* or *Del Soccorso* is literally Our Lady of Rescue, while *Madonna tal-Bahrin* is Our Lady of Seamen.

¹⁰ Alexander Bnnici, 'Knisja Mitluqa Bla Ma Hadd Jiehu Hsiebha' [An abandoned church about which no one cares], *Bormla - Fuljett Parrokkjali* (Malta, 1977), vol. 3, no. 33, 6-7. Translation: 'Our Lady of Rescue, meaning, the Virgin Mary Help of Christians'.

¹¹ Mario Buhagiar, 'Medieval Churches in Malta,' *Medieval Malta: Studies on Malta before the Knights*, ed. Anthony T. Luttrell (The British School at Rome, London, 1975), 179; Mario Buhagiar, 'The Rock-cut Churches of Malta,' *Heritage - An encyclopaedia of Maltese Culture and Civilization* (Publ. Midsea Books Ltd., Valletta, 1979), no. 29, 583-585.

¹² The present author made several visits to the rock-cut church between 1996 and 2013.

¹³ In Latin grammar: '*of the Fathers*. [Gen.] - *Mother* [Nom. Voc.] - *Virgin* [Nom.] - *I have begotten* [Active Indic. Perfect. v. *gignere*]' which translates in Maltese as: 'tal-Missirijiet. Omm Xebba [jiena] nissilt.'

¹⁴ John Vella, 'L-eqdem knisja fil-port il-kbir' [The most ancient church of the grand harbour], *Lehen il-Banda San Ġorġ, Bormla* - (Festa 1999, Malta), 101.

Benedictine monasteries faithful to the Roman Papacy.¹⁵ Still, no proof of Christian rites and practices was found either in Sicily or Malta.

The Nativity church has two distinct sections: a stylized rock-cut section with traces of a rock-carved altar, and, a later addition (dismantled in post-war years) which, in Dusina's words, made it 'well-sized' to cater for a large community. Dusina's description brings to mind 13th century rock-cut Sicilian and southern Italian (Puglia and Basilicata) churches. So, was Grech correct or not in assuming that the Marian devotion at the Nativity church was introduced in post-Arab years?¹⁶

Both Ciantar and Castagna referred to this church as being dedicated to St Helen's¹⁷ due to the altar founded by Comm. Perdicomato in 1633. St Helen became the titular saint in 1667.¹⁸ An accompanying side altar, never mentioned as a main devotion, was that devoted to St Andrew.¹⁹ The church in question was, however, profaned in 1668 and destined to remain so till its rediscovery.²⁰



Perspective view of the main apse of the rock-cut church at Bormla. The courses above were added after its rediscovery in 1946. © Photo: Author.

¹⁵ Ministero per i Beni Itinerari e le Attivita' Culturali, Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione: *Culturali del medioevo siciliano - Le Chiese Basiliene*, 2003, 5.

¹⁶ Grech, 2.

¹⁷ Ciantar, Lib.I, Not.VIII:319. P.P. Castagna, *Lis Storia ta Malta bil Gzejer tahha*, 1888, (Midsea Books Ltd., Malta, 1985, 2nd. Edition), 101,104,113 (Map).

¹⁸ Galea Scannura,1983, 5.

¹⁹ Cassar, 14.

²⁰ Galea Scannura, 5.

Proof of the Nativity Cult

Proof of the Nativity dedication derives from a painting on the main altar described by Ciantar as ‘*un antichissimo quadro di pittura, alla maniera greca, sopra legno, rappresentate la B[eata]. Vergine col Bambino Gesù, con altre figure di Santi, secondo l’uso di que’ tempi, e della predetta Nazione.*’²¹ The painting was also recorded in Ciantar’s 1679 *inventarium*, but Cassar reported that ‘in spite of the considerable search made for the painting we could not and we were not successful in locating it.’²²

Ciantar’s description²³ of the painting reflected the hierarchy of intercession established in 6th century Christianity, where the divine or deity could only be accessed through a hierarchy which ‘constituted the Trinity at its pinnacle (with Christ as its most accessible member because of his human experience), followed by the Virgin, referred to as the “God-bearer” or Theotokos in Greek writing, the saints, and finally, the believer.’²⁴ Reaffirmation of the Trinity or God as the pinnacle of belief came from a Greek inscription found on site.²⁵ Though some authors did not refer to these citations,²⁶ this study has traced the authors who saw the Greek inscription and supplied a reference. Ciantar’s treatise on Malta’s Greek Christian heritage recalled:

‘a Greek inscription, engraved in a triangular design at the top of the façade of the ancient Church of St. Helen: which in spite of being already ruined by the ravages of time, nevertheless we estimate it is good to produce here, so that its memory will not be forgotten, and it is as follows: The base of the triangle is longer than its two sides: in the middle of it there is a small circle. Along the right side these words can be read: ... Then follows from the top of the left side descending alongside these voices [words]: ...’²⁷

Ciantar continued: ‘The mentioned Church, already desecrated, is found today annexed to a garden, situated in the boundaries of one of our cities, commonly known as Bormola. The triangular figure, with which ends its façade, symbolizes the Holy Trinity, and the circle, placed at the middle, [symbolizes] Eternity.’ Both Caruana and Grech saw the Greek triangular inscription on the upper part of the church façade and agreed on its symbolism.²⁸ While Caruana wrote about seeing an intact church situated in a garden in St Helen’s area near St Helen’s Gate, Grech confirmed the existence of its constructed façade. A year later he reported that these inscriptions which had been on display near St Helen’s Gate went missing.²⁹

²¹ Ciantar, 216. Translation: ‘in the said Church on the altar one can see a very old painted picture, in the Greek manner, over wood, representing the Blessed Virgin with the Child Jesus, with other figures of Saints, according to the custom of those times, and the aforementioned Country.’

²² Cassar, 14.

²³ Ciantar, 216.

²⁴ Erns Kitzinger, *Byzantine art in the making: main lines of stylistic development in Mediterranean art, 3rd-7th century* (Faber & Faber, Cambridge UP, 1977), 101,85-87, 95-115.

²⁵ Galea Scannura, 2; Grech, 2.

²⁶ Grech (1954); Galea Scannura (1955); Charles Galea Scannura, Charles, ‘*Bormla – Fuljett Parrokkjali*,’ (August Issue), 1986, 6-7.

²⁷ Ciantar, Lib. II, N.XXXIII, 531-533, and Lib. I, Not. VIII, 319. Author’s translation.

²⁸ A. A. Caruana, *Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiquities in the group of the Islands of Malta*, (Government Printing Office, Malta, 1882),166; under *Chapter XXXV; Greek. Melitensis, Epoch – Byzantine period. Place of preservation, unknown. Note 190*) reported that Ciantar’s Liber II, (not. IV, XXXIII), 156. Grech, 2. Caruana’s report was also published as Caruana, Antonio Annetto, *Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiquities in the Group of Islands of Malta*(Oxford University, United Kingdom), 1882.

²⁹ Carmelo Galea Scannura, ‘Ghall gieh l-istorja,’ *Cospicua*, 1955, no 6:2. Galea Scannura (1986) based on studies of his uncle Galea Scannura (1955), and on contributions by Grech (1954) to the ‘*Cospicua*’ newspaper.

Ciantar remarked that:

‘From the words here contained, missing a number of letters, and are of good ortography, but we cannot comprehend other, if not that this is an invocation, or a prayer to God, as Supreme Being; True Good, Sovereign Power, on created things, to perpetuate to them abundance, or fertility, piety, help in the current calamities,³⁰ and then enjoy the glory of resurrection to immortal life,³¹ with some other particularities, which the voices cannot permit us to penetrate, and the missing syllables.’

Two centuries later Grech also alludes to the illegibility of some of the words which had eroded over time.³² Authors who came later in time reproduced Ciantar’s version of the prayer or invocation with minor modifications but none changed the core words, sequence, or meaning.³³ Ciantar described yet another Greek inscription found in this chapel:

‘Conserved in our [national] museum is a fragment of fine marble with Greek characters, out of which can be picked up, except the name of a certain Crispia. Wherein we believe, that this was placed as a tombstone for the mentioned woman, which shows that she was of high status, as shown by the marble which is finer than ours.’³⁴

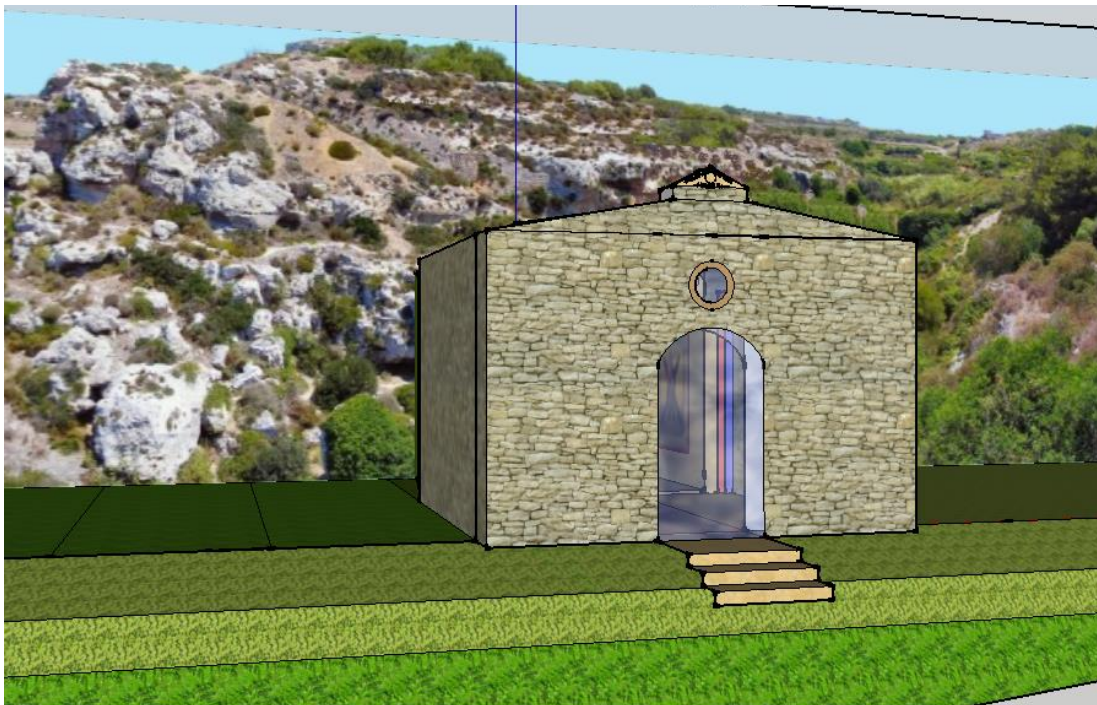
³⁰ Author’s note: The ‘current calamities’ may refer to hard times such as wars, the Mediterranean Justinian plagues of the 6th- 8th century AD, extreme weather events, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis, or the 8th century threat of Islamic expansion.

³¹ Ciantar, 1772, 531-533, Lib. II, Not. XXXIII. The Greek wording as provided by Ciantar is: ΙΩΝ ΕΥΨΟΡΕΘΕΩ ΕΥΣΕΒΙΑΣ ΗΘΙΝΕ ΗΜΑΣ ΕΞΕΝΟΣΑ ΙΚΑΙΑ // ... ΟΥΣΙΕ ΥΤΕΡΘΕ ΕΚΑΙΥΤΙΡΑΓΑΘΕ. ΤΩΝΧΕΤ. ΣΤΑ- // ΟΤ. ΣΩΓΙΤΗ. ΕΚΓΛΑΨ ΘΑΣΟΤ. ΑΝΑΣΤΑΣΕΟΣ ΔΥΘΗΜΕ ΘΑΝ ... ΟΝ. This is proof that he gained access and saw the church still intact.

³² Grech, 2.

³³ Caruana, 156. Grech, 2. Galea Scannura, 1986, 6-7.

³⁴ Ciantar, Lib. I, Not. VIII, 319.



Artistic impression of the rock-cut church with its built up front section in the 13th century.
© Author.

Two centuries later, the Crispia tombstone was again mentioned.³⁵ The tombstone indicated that the environs of the rock-cut church included a cemetery or burial place where some of the high-ranking faithful were buried.³⁶

Ciantar added: ‘We have also seen here onsite small idols of terracotta with Greek ciphers. All in all many were the relics, which were found here from that nation.’ These statuettes could be historic artefacts rescued from the iconoclastic eras.³⁷ They are not the only Greek remains that have been found in Bormla.³⁸

Another detail added was that:

‘Next to the mentioned Church an entrance can be seen, through which a bent man can pass, for a deep cave damp with water, which ooze themselves from the fissures in the rock, and from its chalky [clay] parts: the mentioned [cave] extends for a long tract, that it is believed to end at the seashore of Marsaxlokk. And in reality in the

³⁵ Caruana, 156. Grech, 2.

³⁶ Ciantar, 531-533.

³⁷ Shephard, 31, 290.

³⁸ Greek inscriptions carved in limestone are quite common in Bormla. These were noted on a number of occasions between 1996 and 2005 when the present author was invited to see private residences in the lower part of St Lazarus Street and the southern part of Alexander Street (Triq Xandru) – known as St Theresa’s area – to view material recovered from excavation works. On a broken limestone slab of around 26 cm (horizontal) x 10 cm (vertical) x 8 cm (thickness) there were four lines of Medieval Greek characters, some of which even resembled Punic characters. The resident did not allow photographs to be taken or copying of the inscription. Later on the resident reported that the inscription and various pottery artefacts found on site had been stolen by the architect commissioned to supervise the house improvements while the resident was abroad. The size of the Greek letters was around 1.2 cm in height and the carving was about 1.2 mm deep maximum. Among the clearly legible characters were... Ε ΝΙΜΟΙ ... The place where it was recovered showed the features and remains of an old mule-drawn mill (Google Map coordinates 35.883232, 14.521721).

vicinity of Marnisi there is a grotto, called Dalmaw [Cave of Darkness] never penetrated till its end; but which we judge to be starting the already mentioned cave.³⁹

Local lore maintained that in the past someone had led a piglet through the Bormla cave and it exited from the Marnisi side a couple of days later. Guillaumier (1972), like Ciantar, mentions this cave. The present author had the opportunity to explore this natural cave in 1998.⁴⁰

Quandary 2: Historic Events and Influences from the Mediterranean - Dating

This study then attempted to date the origins of the Nativity church. Though it certainly predates the engraving of the Latin inscription, it was also expected to predate briefly, coincide or be contemporaneous with the Greek inscriptions found on site. Due to the dearth of historical material covering the mediaeval period in Malta,⁴¹ it was very difficult to find records about small localities and communities.

Cassar stated that the Bormla community petitioned for the building of a church as early as 760 AD and that around 800 AD a wooden church was built a short distance away from the shore on the way to Żejtun, which coincided with the location of the rock-cut church, correctly located by Cassar at 'ta' Santa Lienu' (St Helen's).⁴² By the first half of the 8th century, the Mediterranean witnessed the encroaching domination of the Middle East, the Maghreb and the Iberian Peninsula by Muslim Arabs, assaulting the Byzantine Roman Empire by laying sieges on Constantinople between 668-680 and 716-717AD.⁴³

Though the documents perused could not ascertain whether a church had already been in place at that time, observations and analyses⁴⁴ conducted by the present author confirm that the church had originated from a cave. Various Mediterranean sources recorded that caves drew the attention of monks or hermits. From 730 AD and particularly after the annexation of Sicily and Malta to the Patriarchate of Constantinople, Byzantine monks and hermits moved to southern Italy, Sicily and nearby islands on voyages and spiritual missions. The major influx of Byzantine monks and hermits conceivably occurred during the two iconoclastic eras (726-787 AD and 802-843 AD).⁴⁵ Basilian monks, increasingly persecuted by iconoclastic Church and Imperial headships, travelled to remote islands of the Empire. By the 9th century, due to the increased presence of Byzantine devotees, a Byzantine bishopric was installed in Malta. This was confirmed when in 869-870 AD the Aghlabid Arabs captured the Byzantine bishop of Malta and took him as a slave to Palermo.⁴⁶

From the 6th century onwards, the Byzantine influence on the Christian religion vied with pro-Roman influences. Byzantine Christianity became culturally and spiritually prevalent by the 7th and 8th century due to the Persian and Arab invasions of Asia Minor which forced scores of pro-Roman Benedictine monks to seek refuge by moving westwards.

³⁹ Ciantar, 531-533. *Dalmaw* may be an older reference to Ghar Dalam.

⁴⁰ The cave entrance, assumed to be the narrower part of the original cave, was obstructed by the foundations of the apartments built upon the church in the post-war years. Exploration of the site with modern and future scientific technology may help discover what is behind the post-war interventions and whether there is any truth in local lore.

⁴¹ Dalli, 246.

⁴² Cassar, 11.

⁴³ Jonathan Shephard ed. *The Cambridge History of The Byzantine Empire c.500-1492* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008), 232-233, 255, 260, 265, 366 (Map), 372, 381, 385, 399, 440 and 461.

⁴⁴ The analysis of samples taken in 1998 from the opening in the rock showed that it was the narrower part of the original natural cave.

⁴⁵ Shephard, 2008, 254.

⁴⁶ Michael Galea, 'Byzantine art and influence in Malta', interview with Mons. George Mifsud of the Greek Church of Our Lady of Damascena, Valletta, *The Sunday Times*, (Feb. 1, 2004), 41.

Between 678-701 AD Sicily managed to produce four Popes, and two Patriarchs – one in Antioch and one in Constantinople. In Sicily most monuments of the Byzantine era were erected between 725 AD and the Arab conquest.⁴⁷ After this date the Byzantine presence in Sicily was less felt.



Detail from the main apse showing one of the oval cavities found on each side of the Latin inscription. © Photo: Author

The Aghlabid attacks and presence in Sicily from 827 AD onwards forced more Byzantine Christians to seek refuge in Malta. Most probably the Bormla Byzantine church was founded some time between 780-820 AD, when the Byzantine Empire was attacked and defeated in the East, in Constantinople and Bulgaria. Iconoclasm forced non-conformists to escape to the Empire's peripheries when the turmoil among the Caliphates saw the formation of the new Aghlabid Emirate. These events made Sicily an important centre of power for both political and religious reasons. Further proof of the dating hails from a comparison between the Greek Crispia tombstone found at Bormla and another engraved tombstone found during the excavations for the foundations of St Joseph's Oratory in Rabat, which showed the date 810 AD.⁴⁸ The dating of the church is further corroborated by Grech's (1954) dating of the triangular inscription to the 8th or 9th century AD.⁴⁹ Greek was reinstated as an official language and liturgical medium in Calabria, Sicily and Malta by Emperor Justinian in 553 AD. It was used till the end of Norman rule (1194), when Latinisation from north Italy gradually filtered into administrative spheres and replaced the use of Siculo-Arabic language.⁵⁰ Though Greek remained popular among administrative ranks, Latinisation crept into Sicily and Malta after 1130 AD thanks to the Roman Popes' insistence and the Longobards' movement south.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ministero per i Beni Itinerari e le Attivita' Culturali, 2003, 5.

⁴⁸ Ciantar, Lib. II, Not. IV, 530-533. Caruana, 1882, 165-166. Grech, 1954, 2.

⁴⁹ Grech, 2 (referring to Ciantar [1780] and Ferres [Ferres, Achille, *Descrizione delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo* (With a dedication to Bishop Gaetano Pace Forno, Malta, 1866.]). Galea Scannura, 1955, 2. Guillaumier, 1972, 58-59; Galea Scannura, 1986, 6-7.

⁵⁰ Joseph M. Brincat, 'Maltese – an unusual formula,' *MED Magazine* 2005 (02).

⁵¹ Also referred to as Lombards, q.v. Shephard, 2008, 39.

An analysis of the content of the triangular inscription revealed that it was very similar to that of a 250 AD papyrus containing an early prayer to the Theotokos still used by both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches.⁵² Since there is no exact record of the Greek inscription except Ciantar's (1772) text, this research surmises it was the same old prayer written on the papyrus.

Apart from its Greek inscriptions and other factors, details in the architecture of the oldest section resemble features of other early 9th century rock-cut churches in southernmost Italy, such as those in the province of Puglia.⁵³ Research on the Byzantine rock-cut church of Caltabellotta (Madonna della Pietà) in Sicily indicated that old Basilian rock-cut churches of the Byzantine era had a unique rectangular hall design with simulated arches supported by monolithic stone columns dug entirely from the rock and, among others, an altar dug from the same rock.⁵⁴

The church built on the dawn of the 9th century was, according to Cassar, destroyed around 1000 AD by a fire or an earthquake.⁵⁵ Major earthquakes and tidal waves were recorded hitting Sicily and Malta in 1125, 1137, 1169 and 1202 AD. Both seismic activity and man-made interventions on the cave could have caused the outer part to collapse⁵⁶. This consequently required repair and offered an opportunity for remodelling and enlargement around 1240-1280 AD when Basilian monks returned on missionary work to Malta.

The Mediterranean during the Arab era

The Sicilian Aghlabid Emirate governorship in 869 AD was passed on to Mohammed, son of Khafaja ibn Sufyan.⁵⁷ During his two-year rule he sent Ahmad ibn Umar ibn Ubaydallah ibn al-Aghlab al-Habashi with the Emirate's fleet to attack Malta, the last Byzantine island close to Sicily. The Byzantines meanwhile received reinforcements and resisted till 870 AD. When Malta fell, the town (Rabat-Mdina) was plundered, fortifications razed to the ground, the marble of the then cathedral stolen,⁵⁸ and the Byzantine Bishop of Malta taken into slavery and sent to Palermo.⁵⁹ Events forced monks, clergy and the wealthy among the faithful to leave Malta. The Bormla harbour, due to its maritime and commercial

⁵² Mathewes-Green, Frederica, *The Lost Gospel of Mary: The Mother of Jesus in Three Ancient Texts* (Publ. Paraclete Pr. 27, 2007 (April), 86, 107. Reference was made to 'Catalogue of the Greek and Latin Papyri' in the John Rylands Library, III, *Theological and literary Texts* (Manchester, 1938), 46-47.

⁵³ Examples are San Nicola Church a Casalrotto at Mottola, Taranto, and Madonna della Candelora at Gravina di Massafra, Italy; Sivo, Stefania, 'Casalrotto di Mottola: Chiesa rupestre di San Nicola', (Province of Taranto, Italy, 2007). Available at: <http://www.mondimedievali.net/Edifici/Puglia/Chieserupestri/Taranto/Casalrotto.htm> (Accessed 8 May 2013)

⁵⁴ Giuseppe Rizzuti, 'La Chiesa della Pietà' [The Church of Our Lady of Mercy], 2013. Available at <http://www.caltabellotta.net/chiesemonumenti/piet%C3%A0/pieta1.htm> Agrigento, Sicily (Accessed: 8 May 2013).

⁵⁵ Cassar, 11.

⁵⁶ One must keep in mind the natural surroundings, the lower sea-level and shoreline evident in Bormla in the 9th century.

⁵⁷ A.A.Vasiliev, *Byzance et les Arabes, Tome II, 1ère partie: Les relations politiques de Byzance et des Arabes à l'époque de la dynastie macédonienne (867-959)* (French ed.: Henri Grégoire, Marius Canard, Brussels: Éditions de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales, 1968), 24-26.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 24-25; Alex Metcalfe, *The Muslims of medieval Italy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 2009.

⁵⁹ Galea, 2004, 41.

activity, became important⁶⁰ and together with Malta's south it was incorporated into the Arab district.⁶¹

In spite of the fact that the building of Christian churches during the Aghlabid occupation was almost unthinkable, though no records stated explicitly the prohibition of any creed, it is quite clear that the Byzantine influence survived even into the Norman years.⁶² This implies that the Nativity church must have survived the Arab invasion thanks to local and visiting Christians who frequented Bormla's cosmopolitan harbour. It is believed that the Byzantine bishop's return occurred after 909 AD under the tolerant Fatimids.⁶³ In 1060 AD the Normans, supported by the Papal States, took Sicily in an attempt to keep the Muslim threat away from Rome. The Normans' arrival in Malta in 1091 AD did not force Muslim Arabs out, but restored freedom to Byzantine Christians and other creeds. Under such circumstances, it is understood that the Nativity church functioned overtly, as the Normans encouraged co-existence and cooperation among the monotheistic religions in their territories.

By 1156 AD, even the Roman Catholic Church had started showing a strong interest in Sicily and Malta, and around 1168 AD a certain Giovanni was nominated 'Bishop' for Malta but resided in Palermo.⁶⁴ He supervised the security of Malta together with a proto-notary, the Bishops of Syracuse and Salerno, and the Qaid.⁶⁵ Although authors refer to a *canonicus* (canon) of the Roman Catholic Church, a *canonicus* does not act as a bishop but as a regular priest, which means that no bishop was actually appointed in Malta.⁶⁶ Between 1172-1189, the Roman Catholic Church started receiving lands and privileges in Sicily and later in Malta. In 1194, the Hohenstaufens' administration in Sicily started using vulgar Latin or Siculo-Latin, superseding Greek and Siculo-Arabic.⁶⁷ Concurrently, through the instigation of their Church, Roman Catholics started migrating into southern Italy and Sicily.

Both the architecture and the Latin inscription indicate that by the 13th century the Nativity church had been enlarged with a built extension to the front cave-opening to form a 'well-sized' church. The project revealed that the Christian community in Bormla was increasing and more clergy were available to serve the faithful. Grech's (1954) claim that the Marian devotion was introduced after the Arab rule is therefore plausible since during those years Basilian missionaries, supported by both Churches and the Hohenstaufen crown, promoted the Christianisation of their subjects. Overall circumstances served to repair, remodel and enlarge the rock-cut church damaged by the earthquake, an issue mentioned by Cassar.⁶⁸

Certain authors report a stronger influx of Christians into Malta in the 1240s, when the Patriarchate of Constantinople remained vacant for four years and when Basilian monks

⁶⁰ John Vella, 'Thalassic imaginaries: silent witnesses to (an) unwritten history', Paper presented at the 3rd Conference 'Thalassic Imaginaries: the Mediterranean Sea in Language, Art and Other forms of representation', Mediterranean Institute, University of Malta, Malta, 23-24 January 2015 and at the Maritime Museum, Malta, 22 January 2016. (Publication forthcoming).

⁶¹ W.R. Zahra, *Storja taż-Żejtun u l-inħawi tiegħu* (Malta, 1978), vol. I, 77 and fig. 22.

⁶² Ministero per i Beni Itinerari e le Attività Culturali, 2003, 5.

⁶³ Justin Wintle, *History of Islam* (Rough Guides Ltd., London, May 2003), 136-137.

⁶⁴ In 1168, the Roman Catholic bishops were Stefan de la Perche (1167-1168) for Palermo, Richard Palmer (1157-1183) for Syracuse, and Romualdo Guarna (1153-1181) for Salerno, which leaves serious doubts on whether Giovanni was a Roman Catholic bishop for Malta in Palermo when Malta had earlier fallen under the Byzantine metropolitan seat of Syracuse.

⁶⁵ Andrew Vella, Concise History of Malta (6) 'The Normans and the Hohenstaufens', *Heritage - An Encyclopaedia of Maltese Culture and Civilization* (Publ. Midsea Books Ltd., Valletta, Malta) no. 41, (April) 1981, 803-804. Quids was a reference to palatine officials and members of the *curia*, usually to those who were Muslims or converts from Islam.

⁶⁶ P. Collura., *Le più antiche carte dell'archivio capitolare di Agrigento: 1092 - 1282* (Palermo, 1961), 129-130.

⁶⁷ Brincat, 2005.

⁶⁸ Cassar, 11.

connected to the Western Church moved south from Sicily to Malta. This constant movement of Basilian monks occurred earlier within the Eastern Church when during the iconoclastic years monks escaped from the persecution of both Patriarchate and Emperor. Cassar stated that from 1250 the church started being called ‘*tal-Kuncizzjoni*’ [the Conception’s] and by 1575 it was known as ‘*tal-Madonna tas-Sokkors*’.⁶⁹ The *Del Soccorso* devotion started in Palermo in 1306. Local lore maintains that it reached Bormla through a Sicilian devotee. Alternatively, the story goes that the cult of the Conception (as Mother of God) started in the East between the 5th and 7th century. It was later promoted by the Byzantines in southern Italy and the Sicilian province, of which Malta formed part, and was later revamped by the Normans in the 12th century.⁷⁰

Between 1262 and 1283, under Angevin rule, no Roman Catholic Church bishop was nominated for Malta.⁷¹ This did not exclude the possibility that the Eastern Church or its missionaries continued to support local Christians. However, while in Sicily the Roman Catholic Church started gaining lands between 1172 and 1189, in Malta this occurred a century later. Confirmation of the first taxes raised from land acquisition in Malta came from records of accounts mentioning ‘incomes of the bishoprics on the island of Sicily, according to the papal tax lists of 1274/80’, describing Malta as a ‘suffragan’⁷² paying ‘20/25 uncie’ to the Bishop of the Palermitan Province, and which by 1308-1310 had increased almost six-fold to ‘135 uncie’.⁷³



Artistic impression of the main apse of rock-cut church after the 13th century. © Author.

A reference to the Nativity church is found in Angevin documents dated 29th July 1274, and which for the first time mention the *Castrum Maris* as the exterior tower. The documentarist wrote about an interior tower behind the church dedicated to Our Lady – “*In castro interiore, retro ecclesia Sancte Marie*”.⁷⁴ This note is clearly a reference to a tower

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 15-19. Translation: Our Lady of Rescue (Succour).

⁷⁰ Francis X. Weiser, *The Holyday Book* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, New York, 1956).

⁷¹ G. A. Loud, ‘*The Latin Church in Norman Italy*’ (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 236.

⁷² Initially and prior to Vatican II, the bishop of a suffragan had no diocesan territory beyond the city limits and was tied to a metropolitan seat led by an archbishop, on which it depended.

⁷³ Loud, 236, 526, 530.

⁷⁴ V. Laurenza, ‘*Malta nei documenti angioini del R. Archivio di Napoli*’ (Rome, 1936-1937), docs 3-7 and 40.

behind the rock-cut church at Bormla.⁷⁵ The Angevin documentarist associated the ‘*ecclesia Sancte Marie*’ in front of the ‘*castro interiore*’ with ‘Sancte Marie’ but did not specify any particular Marian devotion as this was a heated issue between the West Roman Church and the Eastern Church. The reason why the Nativity is not mentioned results from the fact that at that time the rock-cut church had its Nativity painting described as ‘*B. Vergine col Bambino Gesù*’,⁷⁶ the *Auxilium Christianorum (Madonna tal-Bahrin)*⁷⁷ painting, and the newly engraved inscription ‘*PATRVM. MATER VIRGO GENVI*’, all of which indicated Marian connections. All these made the Angevin royal reporter associate the church with Our Lady without entering into theological debates. Yet the detail added to the location of the *castro interiore* was purposefully intended to help the reader differentiate between two towers – the *Castrum Maris (castro exteriore)*, later known as St Angelo, and the old interior tower in Bormla. The words *exteriore* and *interiore* were specific in explaining the outer and inner points of the Bormla harbour. After all, the royal reporter had no interest or obligation to enter into any controversy since his priority was the island’s security.



The structure behind the rock-cut church which shows features similar to that of a mediaeval tower, later converted into a residential building. © Photo: Author.

⁷⁵ A building behind the rock-cut church shows characteristics of a mediaeval tower now used as a private residence. The street name ‘Vicolo Torre’ (Tower Lane) can be used as evidence to indicate the existence of a tower in the area.

⁷⁶ Ciantar, 216.

⁷⁷ Translation: Our Lady of Seamen.

According to the private archives of certain noble Maltese families, donations to the Nativity church were common. Gifts came from Margaret of Burgundy, the Queen Consort of Sicily (1268-1282), documented as ‘Donna Margherita’, who even visited and prayed at the church.⁷⁸ Oral history suggests that some of the precious artefacts were still in the church when it was rediscovered in 1946.⁷⁹

The Roman Catholic Church strengthened its grip over Malta after it forced the Kingdom of Sicily in 1223-1227 to expel or transfer *en masse* Muslims from Malta.⁸⁰ By the mid-13th century the remaining Muslims in Sicily (1245-1280) and Malta (c.1270s) had been coerced to choose between Christianity and slavery.

In 1282 the Aragonese, supported by pro-Papal and Roman Catholic regents, took over Malta. Research points to Angevin or very early Aragonese years as the time when the Auxilium Christianorum painting may have appeared in the rock-cut church in Bormla. Research does not indicate that there was another Marian church in Bormla. Since the Del Soccorso church was built after 1306, it was maintained that the Auxilium Christianorum painting was in the rock-cut church, as were the paintings of St Andrew and that of the Nativity.

Quandary 3: Which church is which?

This study also attempts to distinguish clearly the different churches and names attributed to the various Marian devotions in Bormla. It concludes that there were two churches which played a role in the history of the present devotion to the Immaculate Conception, originally ‘the Conception’. The first was the Byzantine rock-cut church of the Nativity, recorded later as Santa Maria de Nativitate.⁸¹ The second, of later date, was that of Del Soccorso built on the site of the present parish church.

Del Soccorso

Research in the field has proved that the Marian devotion recorded as ‘*Santa Maria del Soccorso*’⁸² started in the 14th century, and not before. The cult of the Madonna del Soccorso, originated in Palermo in 1306, spread around by devotees and the Augustinian Order.⁸³ This order, having arrived in 1383, was among the first to settle in Malta. The del Soccorso devotion, known locally as ‘*il-Madonna tal-Marżabba*’ [Our Lady of the Bough], had reached Bormla earlier through Capitan Rocco, a Sicilian who frequently sailed between the two islands. While moored in Bormla, Rocco and his companion ran to rescue a child

⁷⁸ *Archivi Nobilitas Melita – Anon.* This is a reference term created by the author to protect the identity of the members of Maltese noble families who granted access to their private archives for this research, but wished to remain anonymous for reasons of security.

⁷⁹ Vella, 1999. Oral history, interviews recorded by the author from various elderly residents of Bormla, clergy and in particular Tony Silvio. Tony, as a child during the post-war reconstruction phase, lost a shoe. It fell through a hole in the church ceiling and this led to the rediscovery of the rock-cut church in 1946. He recounted how after the discovery, a small truck supposedly sent by the then Museums Department loaded two large amphorae packed with precious stones and gemstones that had adorned the corners of the main altar area and drove away through St Helen’s Gate never to be seen again.

⁸⁰ Vella, 805-806.

⁸¹ Galea Scannura, 1983, 5.

⁸² The cult of the *Madonna del Soccorso*, referred to by the Church as *Succurre Miseris*, is still prominently displayed on the architecture of the main altar area at the Bormla parish church.

⁸³ Caietano, Ottavio, *Raguagli delli ritratti della Santissima Vergine Nostra Signora più celebri, che si riveriscono in varie Chiese nell’isola di Sicilia. Aggiuntavi una breve relazione dell’Origine e miracoli di quelli. Opera posthuma del R. P. Ottavio Caietano della Compagnia di Giesu. Trasportata nella lingua Volgare da un Devoto Servo della medesima Santissima Vergine. E cresciuta con alcune pie meditazioni sopra ciascun passo della vita della medesima* (Palermo 1664, rist. anast. Palermo 1991).

they had heard crying under a carob tree at l-Għolja Tal-Ġonna (Gardens' Hill). Surprisingly, Petruzza, the child liberated from the devil by Our Lady, turned out to be Rocco's own daughter. The story is similar to another associated with Santa Maria del Soccorso in Palermo.⁸⁴ Events therefore date the first Santa Maria del Soccorso church to sometime between 1307 and 1320. Rocco returned the year after this event to build the first Latin-rite church on the site where his child had been liberated from the devil, as so it was believed.

The artefacts found in the original del Soccorso (tal-Marżabba) church, including the triptych were taken by the Canons of the Mdina Cathedral by an order of the Bishop at the onset of the 1565 Great Siege.⁸⁵ Among these was a polyptych (*trittiku*) of 'tal-Marżabba', attributed to Salvo (known also as Giovanni Salvo) de Antonio of Messina, who had been commissioned to work at the Mdina Benedictine convent between 1494 and 1505.⁸⁶ Luttrell and Abbate state that the polyptych was incorrectly attributed to Salvo de Antonio as in fact the 1505 Mdina contract did not mention this artwork.⁸⁷ Sricchia Santoro explained that the Bormla polyptych of the:

'Madonna del Soccorso' [Tal-Marżabba] "e' evidente un'utilizzazione sbrigativa in bottega, per committenti secondari, di modelli già pronti lasciati in mano agli aiuti (Si confronti il ripetersi dei S. Pietro nella predella, nel citato pannello e nel pannello destro della Madonna del soccorso nello stesso museo, quest'ultima probabilmente frutto della collaborazione con lo scadente Giovannello da Itala)."88

This Giovannello da Itala was the collaborator and apprentice of Salvo de Antonio.⁸⁹ The painting shows traits that reveal an influence of Antonello da Messina whose real name was Antonello di Giovanni di Antonio, a famous Renaissance Sicilian painter.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Caietano, 1664, rist. anast. 1991: 52.

⁸⁵ Cassar, 20. Archiepiscopal Archives Malta, Visitatio Apostolica, 1575, 139v; Vincent Borg, (Monsg), 1975 edition, The 'Succursus' and the Immaculate Conception, in *'Marian Devotions'* (The Historical Society (Malta) under the auspices of the Local Organising Committee of the 9th. International Mariological Congress, Malta, 1983), 86-103.

⁸⁶ Santoro Sricchia, Fiorella, *Antonello et l'Europe*, Milan: Jaca Book, q.v. De Antonio, Salvo (Giovanni Salvo), in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 1986. Available at ([http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/salvo-de-antonio_\(Dizionario_Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/salvo-de-antonio_(Dizionario_Biografico)/)) (Accessed 13 December 2012). Abbate, Francesco, *'Storia dell'Arte nell'Italia Meridionale – Il Cinquecento'* (Progetto Donzelli, Donzelli editore, Roma, 2001), 27-28.

⁸⁷ Anthony Luttrell, 'The Madonna del Soccorso at Mdina,' *Heritage – An encyclopaedia of Maltese Culture and Civilization* (Publ. Midsea Books Ltd., Valletta, 1983), no. 47, 932, q.v. reference notes.

⁸⁸ Translation: 'the hasty utilisation is evident in his studio, for secondary customers, of models already ready left in the hands of assistants (compare the recurrence of St Peter in the predella, in the above panel and in the right panel of the Madonna del Soccorso in the same museum, the latter probably the result of collaboration with the substandard Giovannello da Itala).'

⁸⁹ Abbate, 29.

⁹⁰ Fondazione Federico Zeri of the University of Bologna attributes authorship of the *Madonna del Soccorso* polyptych to Antonello di Antonio known as Antonello da Messina. The record is Code Numbered 21391, Archive series - Pittura Italiana, Container no. 0253, folder No. 7. It is attributed to Anonimi Antonellesci I, Giovanni d'Itala, Salvo d'Antonio and Mario di Laurito. Available at http://catalogo.fondazionezeri.unibo.it/scheda.jsp?decorator=layout_resp&apply=true&tipo_scheda=OA&id=23579&titolo=Antonello%20di%20Antonio%20.%20Madonna%20del%20Soccorso%20:%20San%20Pietro%20:%20OSan%20Giacomo%20Maggiore%20:%20Annunciazione%20:%20Crocifissione%20di%20Cristo .



Polyptych of the Madonna del Soccorso between the saints Peter and James the Greater, with the scene of the Crucifixion above on the middle panel, and the Annunciation on the side panels, now exhibited at the Mdina Cathedral Museum captioned as Our Lady of the Bounty, Malta. © Photo: Author.

Artists and origins of the polyptych

In 1479 the *bottega* [workshop] of Antonello da Messina was inherited by his son Iacobello, who engaged his three cousins Antonello and Pietro de Saliba, and ‘the most talented and original’ Salvo de Antonio.⁹¹ The Antonellian style and models were retained as the *bottega* re-used wooden *intagli* [carvings] made by Antonello’s brother-in-law and father of Antonello and Pietro, Giovanni de Saliba [of probable Maltese origin] who was key to the carpentry of the polyptychs.⁹²

The Madonna del Soccorso polyptych⁹³ is attributed to Salvo de Antonio’s workshop. Erudite art scholars state that the polyptych does not reflect the standard, style and quality of Salvo’s own works.⁹⁴ Neither the style nor the quality can attribute the work of the Madonna del Soccorso to Salvo.⁹⁵

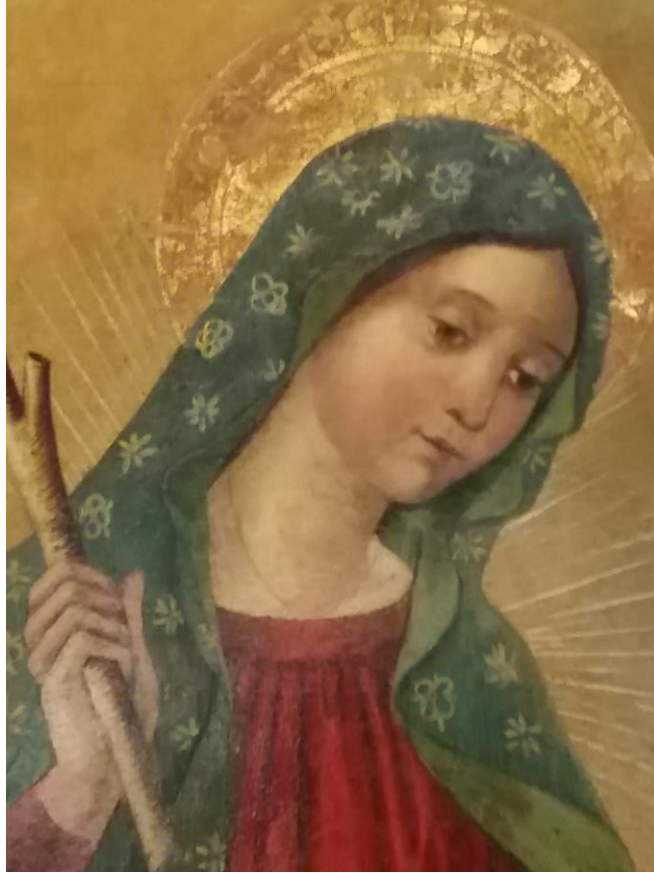
⁹¹ Abbate, 21.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Exhibited at the Mdina Cathedral Museum as Our Lady of the Bounty, is referred to by Abbate (2001, 27) as *Madonna del Soccorso tra i santi Pietro e Giacomo, la Crocefissione e l’Annunciazione* [Our Lady of Help between the saints Peter and James, the Crucifixion and the Annunciation].

⁹⁴ Abbate, 2001, 27-28.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*



Detail from the Madonna del Soccorso polyptych. © Photo: Author

Not earlier than 1493 was Salvo referred to as '*discretus magister*'.⁹⁶ The Mdina museum recently rejected the centuries-old oral lore that the polyptych was taken from the Bormla church in 1565. The museum identified the del Soccorso polyptych as the work commissioned in 1493 by a certain Pietro Vaccaro. Vaccaro originally wished to put the polyptych on the altar of his family chapel within the cathedral in question,⁹⁷ but somehow this did not happen. Actually the first ever mention of a '*Succursus*' altar at the Mdina cathedral does not occur until almost a century later with the Pastoral Visit of Bishop Gargallo (1588-1602).⁹⁸ This record supports the lore that the exhibited polyptych was indeed that taken from the Bormla church in 1565.

There are therefore two possible occurrences which can be conceived. The first is that the polyptych ordered by Vaccaro in 1493 was for one reason or another never placed or allowed on the altar of his family's chapel at Mdina, and consequently ended up donated to the Bormla church by Vaccaro himself. The second is that the polyptych now at Mdina was a facsimile of the Vaccaro polyptych produced for the Bormla church by the same Antonellian bottega between 1493 and 1508. The input of apprentice Giovannello da Itala points to a date between 1504 and 1508.⁹⁹

In 1505 the Benedictine nuns of St. Peter (Mdina) requested the production of a *retablo* [altar step/platform] inspired on the one ordered by Vaccaro to Salvo de Antonio.

⁹⁶ Santoro, 1986; Treccani, Encyclopedia 1987 *Dizionario Biografico*, vide De Antonio, Salvo, Vol. 33. Translation: 'distinct master'.

⁹⁷ Abbate, 27-28.

⁹⁸ Archiepiscopal Archives Malta, *Visitatio Pastoralis*, 1588-1602, 4v.

⁹⁹ Abbate, 29; Santoro, 1987.

This might have misled many who attributed other works to Salvo de Antonio himself. The indication from the notarial document itself demonstrates otherwise. It does not state the artist to whom the nunnery had entrusted the execution of the work ordered. The standard is lower than that shown in Salvo's own work at Messina.¹⁰⁰

The existence of the del Soccorso devotion and church at Bormla prior to 1565 is however confirmed by both Dusina's 1575 Apostolic Visit¹⁰¹ and other members of the clergy¹⁰². The collection and carting-off of religious paraphernalia and valuables to a more secure place in turbulent times was commonplace. This therefore does not exclude that in 1565 all items considered sacred or valuable within places of worship and houses of Bormla ended taken either to Mdina or to the neighbouring Borgo Nuovo.¹⁰³

Auxilium Christianorum

The painting of *Auxilium Christianorum* (Help of Christians) known locally as *il-Madonna tal-Baħrin* is a *sanese*¹⁰⁴ or Byzantine work of art attributed to the 13th or very early 14th century¹⁰⁵ which posed a departure from the two-dimensional paintings of Byzantine icons. Zerafa stated that:

*'Numerosissime erano le chiese erette o restaurate nel decorso di questi tre secoli, tutte erano ornate di quadri in tavola o di trittici: molte di queste pitture pervenute fino a noi sono cospicue per il loro ben'inteso disegno. Esistono ancora due quadri della scuola sanese secondo alcuni, bizantina secondo altri, rappresentanti l'uno s. Paolo seduto in cattedra con manto fiorito, venerato nella Chiesa cattedrale [at Mdina], e l'altro trovasi a Bormola rappresentante la B. Vergine, che si venerava nella demolita Chiesa di s. Elena.'*¹⁰⁶

Referring to the *Auxilium Christianorum* (Madonna tal-Baħrin) painting, Zerafa assumed that the church had been demolished since it was invisible and inaccessible in his time. Incidentally, it took some time to trace Zerafa's work. A number of authors cited the information provided here but unfortunately did not acknowledge his work.

Paintings with characteristics resembling those of the *Auxilium Christianorum* at Bormla were found mostly on the Italian peninsula, as in Siena, dating back to 1308. These paintings were attributed to Simone Martini (1284-1344) and represented the Madonna della Misericordia.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁰ Abbate, 27-28.

¹⁰¹ Archiepiscopal Archives Malta, Visitatio Apostolica, 1575, 139v.

¹⁰² Borg, (1975 edit.), 1983, 86-87. Cassar, 1949.

¹⁰³ While the Mdina Bishop and Canons collected what they considered as valuable from Roman Catholic churches on the Island, at the beginning of the 1565 Great Siege the Grand Master ordered the people of Bormla to take all their valuables and furniture into the newly built Birgu. The *Borgo Nuovo* terminology used for the building of Birgu is indicative of it being a new settlement built outside the old fortified place (the *castrum maris*) and destined to be fortified. The 'borgo' definition is available at [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/borgo_\(Enciclopedia-Italiana\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/borgo_(Enciclopedia-Italiana)/)

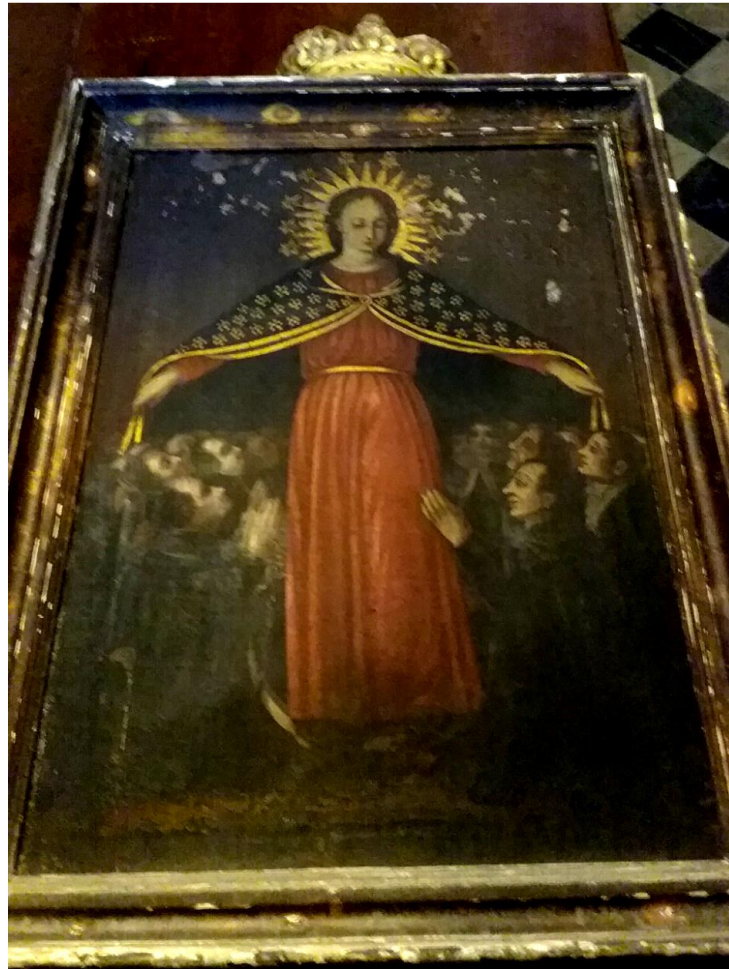
¹⁰⁴ *Sanese* (or *Senese*) refers to Siena in Italy, and therefore a work of art with a Siennese style.

¹⁰⁵ Stefano Zerafa, *Discorso sulla storia artistica di Malta* (Valletta, Malta, 1850), 19.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 'Numerous churches were built or renovated in the course of these three centuries; all were decorated with paintings on panels or triptychs: many of these paintings which come down to us are conspicuous for their well understood design. There are two more paintings of the Siennese school, according to some, Byzantine according to others, representing St Paul sitting in a chair in a flowery robe, venerated in the Cathedral Church [at Mdina], and the other is found in Bormola representing the Blessed Virgin, who was worshipped in the demolished St Helen's Church.'

¹⁰⁷ Translation: Our Lady of Mercy.

Martini, an apprentice and helper of Giotto di Bondone, and an artist himself who worked in the old Vatican church, was the first Renaissance artist to depart from the old two-dimensional Byzantine style. Another artist who adopted the same techniques was Lippo Memmi (1291-1356). The son of Memmo di Filippuccio, Memmi studied with Guido da Siena, acted as an assistant with Giotto at Assisi, and was also a follower of Martini, who was his brother-in-law. These findings may indicate who might have drawn the *Auxilium Christianorum* painting.



Painting of Our Lady ‘Auxilium Christianorum’ known popularly as the ‘Madonna tal-Bahrin’ (Our Lady of Seaman), currently at the Bormla Parish Church, Malta. © Photo: Author.

Since this *sanese* or Byzantine-style painting dated back to the 13th or 14th century, the *Auxilium Christianorum* pre-dated the Del Soccorso church built by Capitan Rocco by half a century. One may consequently hold the view that the *Auxilium Christianorum* (*Madonna tal-Bahrin*) painting was actually and originally venerated at the Nativity church at the time when it had been enlarged. The devotion to Our Lady of Help or of Assistance (of Christians) had been popular among Byzantine Christians since the 4th century. Βοηθεια (the Help) and this devotion increased in the 11th century and during the Crusades. The title ‘*Madonna tal-Bahrin*’ could have been adopted by the Sevillians who frequented the rock-cut church during the 13th and early 14th century. Indeed, it can be compared to a later work that

is found in Seville, namely, the Madonna dei Naviganti (1531-1536) by Alejo Fernandez.¹⁰⁸ Though parish church records and publications do not provide details about the painting's origins, it is well-documented that the Auxilium Christianorum painting came from the rock-cut church, where it remained till 1636.

The Origins of Roman Catholic Parishes and other developments

In the Middle Ages the Maltese bishopric and clergy were subjected to decisions taken by the Sicilian crown. During this turbulent time, there was constant fighting within and between kingdoms, and between various Church authorities and their followers.¹⁰⁹ From the early 13th century the Sicilian monarchy took under its jurisdiction the ecclesiastical property of the Roman Curia, and as a result the monarchy suffered threats, attacks and repetitive excommunications from Church authorities.¹¹⁰ Sometimes there were two bishops nominated for Malta and at times none.

The end of the 13th century led to politico-religious rivalry between various Roman Popes and anti-Popes. The disruption caused by the Great Western Schism (1378-1418) led to the Aragonese takeover of the Sicilian throne, which caused the Roman Pontifex Maximus to become the feudal lord of many lands in Aragon, Sicily, and Malta between 1378 and 1414. This was an opportunity to supplant the clergy who supported the Eastern Church and the anti-Popes. Following all the turmoil created among Mediterranean Christian monarchies, at the Council of Costanza (1414-1417) the Roman Catholic Church faithful to Pope Martin V in Rome emerged triumphant. As the sole head of Christianity in the West, it took the opportunity to establish the first-ever Roman Catholic parishes in Malta.¹¹¹

The establishment of these parishes in the 15th century led to the formation of more homogenous communities. Clusters of hamlets or small villages were grouped together to become part of a Roman Catholic parish.¹¹² This practice facilitated the task for the clergy, but contributed to the extinction of those smaller communities absorbed by the new parishes. Bormla had been sub-divided into *contrade* and smaller communities each with its own Byzantine Church. These were brought under one umbrella church – that of Del Soccorso as a Latin-rite church.¹¹³ It is worth noting that during pastoral visits to Malta of the 16th and 17th century around 400 churches which had a connection to the Byzantine Church were declared profane or forced to close down.

¹⁰⁸ The *Madonna tal-Bahrin* (Madonna dei Naviganti) title was popular among Catalan Spanish navigators in the 13th and early 14th century. This following reached Sardegna in 1370 when a number of these Catalan sailors survived a terrible storm at sea. Fernandez's painting is found in the Church of Santa Cruz, Alcazar, Seville which at that time formed part of the Castillian dominion. See also, Rahn Phillips, Carla, 'Visualizing Imperium: The Virgin of the Seafarers and Spain's Self-Image in the Early Sixteenth Century', *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 3, 2005 (Fall), 815-856.

¹⁰⁹ P. Bonaventura Fiorini, O.F.M. Conv., 'Il Comm. Abela e la Cronologia Episcopale di Malta', *Melita Historica*, 1955, 82-99.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² A few examples are Hal Muxi + Hal Mula + Hal Dwin + Haż Żebbuġ became the Haż Żebbuġ parish; Hax Xluq + Hal Kbir + Hal Qdieri + Hal Tabuni + Hal Masur + Hal Niklusi + Siġġiewi became the Siġġiewi parish; Hal Bisqallin + Hal Gwann + Hal Bisbut + Hal Gwann + Hal Ghaxaq + Haż Żabbar + Hal Tmien + Has Sajd + Bidni + Has Saptan + Hal Hellul + Hal Fuqani + Hal Bajda + Hal Harrat became the Santa Katerina (Żejtun) parish.

¹¹³ The communities around the Bormla harbour were grouped under six '*contrade*' or Byzantine churches: i) St. Margerita of Antioch; ii) St. George of Lydda; iii) St. Nicholas of Myra; iv) the Nativity of Jesus; v) the old St. John Eleemosinaire on the outskirts (now part of Fgura); and, vi) St Julian of Antioch (now Senglea).

Following the earlier suppression of Muslims (1223-1227), in the 14th and 15th century¹¹⁴ the Roman Catholic Church started persecuting the Jews and later non-Roman Catholic Christians. These moves helped reshape the Mediterranean. Bormla, a cosmopolitan harbour where different religions, cultures and political creeds came into contact, mingled and coexisted, was affected by these religio-political events.

Apparently with the Order's arrival, any remaining Byzantine Christians and individuals of Greek descent moved from Bormla into the newly built 'Citta Nuova'¹¹⁵ to join the Rhodians who had settled there. They took with them household items, religious works of art, and whole structures such as the small churches of St George of Lydda and St Nicholas of Myra. The churches of the Nativity of Jesus and St Margerita of Antioch were left to serve the communities of their respective *contrade* around Bormla.¹¹⁶ The movement of Greek churches and their belongings from the small villages or *borgos* of Bormla to the newly built suburb meant that any Byzantine Greek parish serving the Bormla communities was disbanded and the clergy joined those coming with the Order from Rhodes to form two new Greek parishes within the fortifications of the new suburb.¹¹⁷ This 'migration' meant that the Byzantine churches of Bormla were no longer in use. This led the Order to take over or barter the property in the 'old suburb' (Bormla) with property in the 'new suburb' (Birgu). In fact in 1556 the Nativity church was taken over by the Grand Master and was managed by the Infirmary which ensured that Sunday Mass become regular practice. This can mean that before the 1565 Great Siege the Bormla population was much larger than after this event.

By 1563 the Nativity church and its adjacent properties had come under the administration of the Grand Prior of France, De Chantereine, known as Santarena.¹¹⁸ It seems that between 1565 and 1575, the Del Soccorso church fell into disrepair. Dusina reported that the 'Vergine del Soccorso' was partially rock-cut. At the time Bormla had a population of 1,200. Religious services were conducted in the Nativity church until the Del Soccorso church had been repaired. The church had a number of missing religious items including the titular painting of the Madonna tal-Marzabba which had been taken to the Mdina Cathedral. Apart from Dusina's, no report was ever made that the Del Soccorso church had a rock-hewn section. The necessity of using the rock-cut church did not undermine the Del Soccorso devotion but gave rise to its merging with the Auxilium Christianorum devotion, and unified them under the title of the Virgin Conception of Mary (Sancta Maria de Nativitate).

On June 1st 1584, four representatives from the Bormla community petitioned Mgr Pietro Francesco Costa for the institution of a distinct parish to serve the communities left outside the fortified new suburb. In their petition the four '*Procuratori della comunità di Bormola*' (Procurators of the Bormla community) requested the holding of the Blessed

¹¹⁴ Vella, 796-806, 855-858.

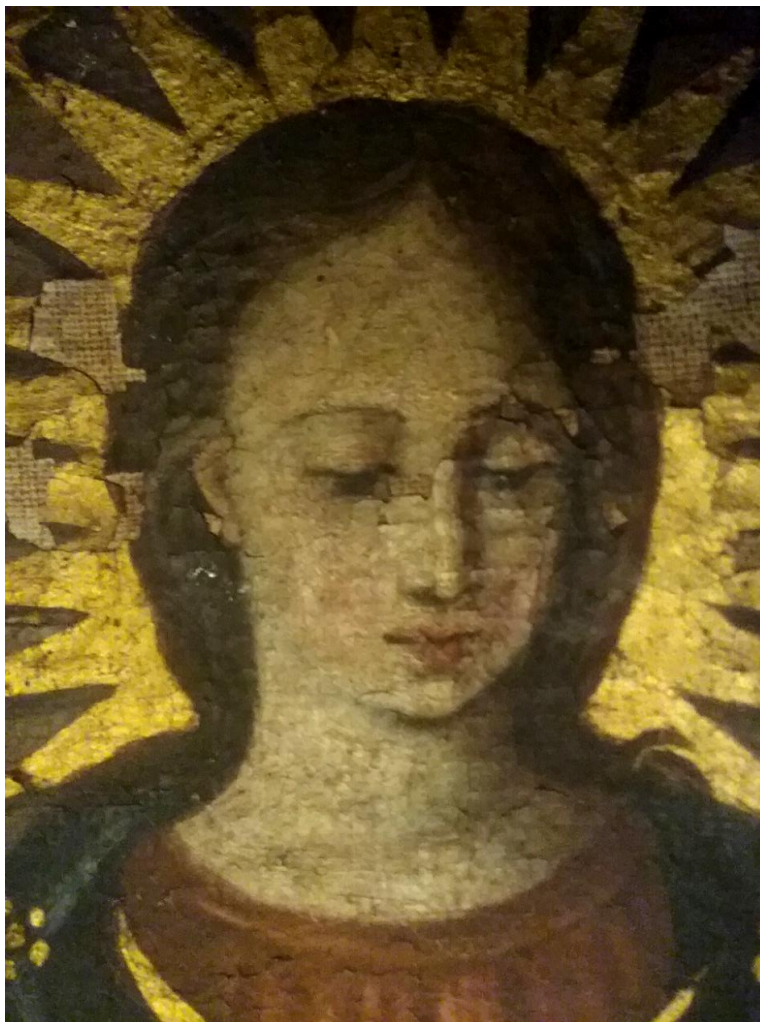
¹¹⁵ Castagna, 85. Birgu, as a 'new town' for the Order and those accompanying it, was planned on the open space and least built land, which previously served as a buffer zone between the Bormla communities and the *Castrum maris*. The building of the new town started some time after 1530. A neck ditch separating it from Bormla was dug in 1535. The quarried stone was used to build the fortification walls. Before the Order's arrival the 'new borgo' area contained a couple of cemeteries, an abandoned synagogue building converted into a hospital and the initial stages of a Dominican church and priory. Some of the adjacent houses in Bormla were demolished to provide space for fortifications. Prior to the Great Siege more houses in Bormla were destroyed as precautionary measures against imminent attacks from the Turkish army.

¹¹⁶ Excluding the St Julian of Antioch church, later part of Senglea, and the old St John Almoner church which later fell under the jurisdiction of the Bir Miftuh parish. With the building of new Latin-rite churches the Byzantine dedication was at times replaced by a Latin Church saint.

¹¹⁷ Achille Ferris, *Descrizione delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, With a dedication to Bishop Gaetano Pace Forno, Malta, 1866. These were added to the two Greek parishes of St. Anthony and Our Lady of Damascus brought over by the Rhodians after fleeing from Rhodes.

¹¹⁸ The Grand Master's building which de Chantereine owned survived the Second World War and is visible behind the site of the rock-cut church. It is now a private residence with the sea-shell detail still prominent on its facade.

Sacrament ‘*nella Chiesa della Madonna del Soccorso*’.¹¹⁹ Ciantar continued to describe the church as ‘*nella suddetta Chiesa sull’altare maggiore si vede un antichissimo quadro di pittura, alla maniera greca, sopra legno, rappresentate la B. Vergine col Bambino Gesù, con altre figure di Santi, secondo l’uso di què tempi, e della predetta Nazione.*’¹²⁰ Ciantar mentions the ‘*Chiesa Parrocchiale sotto titolo della Madonna del Soccorso, ovvero dell’Immacolata di lei Concezione.*’¹²¹ This statement implies that the title given to the parish still incorporated the Del Soccorso and Conception (De Nativitate) cults even a century after the Nativity church had been closed. This was despite the fact that the Roman Catholic Church clearly imposed restrictions and censorships on reminders of past devotions and identities, especially where a non-Latin rite church was the case.¹²²



Detail from the Auxilium Christianorum painting. The painting is in urgent need of restoration and conservation. © Photo: Author.

¹¹⁹ Ciantar, 215.

¹²⁰ Ciantar, 216. Translation: “above the main altar in the Church we see an ancient painting, in the Greek style, over wood, represented the Blessed Virgin with the Child Jesus, with other figures of saints, according to the custom of those 'time, and the aforementioned Country”.

¹²¹ Ciantar, Lib.,III, Not. XIV, 333.

¹²² The title of Parish was granted to Bormla in around December 1586, after two refusals coerced by the then Birgu parish priest. A significant intervention in the process of the granting of the Parish may have come through Bishop Gargallo who resided in St. Margerita Street, Bormla (Ferres, 1866, 38) .

The Declaration of the Parish and later

The Del Soccorso (tal-Marżabba) church, damaged or destroyed by the Ottomans in 1565, apparently remained in disrepair till the 1584 petition. There are no records of its condition between 1565 and 1636. The Latin inscription accompanying the Auxilium Christianorum painting in the old sacrestry states that it came from the rock-cut Nativity church in 1636.¹²³

Primarily this demonstrates that the parish in around December 1586 was given the title of ‘Santa Maria del Soccorso’ in the absence of a utilizable Roman Catholic church; secondly, the clergy utilised the Nativity church, rented or lent by the Order’s Infirmary, between 1565 and 1586, and again from 1587 until the building of the new parish church in around 1633-1636. The necessity of using the rock-cut church did not undermine the Del Soccorso (Madonna tal-Marżabba) devotion but gave rise to its merging with the Auxilium Christianorum (Madonna tal-Bāhrin) devotion, and unified them under the title of the Virgin Conception of Mary (Concezione) that is, ‘la B. Vergine col Bambino Gesù’¹²⁴ or ‘Santa Maria de Nativitate’,¹²⁵ to form the parish of Santa Maria Concezione del Soccorso by 1602.¹²⁶

Since the Mdina Cathedral had deprived the Bormla community of the original polyptych forever, the Del Soccorso devotion started by the Tal-Marżabba polyptych was popularly replaced and included the devotion to Holy Mary under the Auxilium Christianorum (Tal-Bāhrin) title, whose painting was eventually placed in the new parish church. It was after the construction of a new parish church on the Del Soccorso site that the decline in popularity and significance of the rock-cut Nativity church started, leading to its two profanations in 1659 and 1668, the latter bringing about its closure.

St Helen and St Andrew

The rock-cut church is described by Ciantar as the “*vetufta Chiefa di S. Elena*”.¹²⁷ Once the Auxilium Christianorum painting and other paraphernalia had been taken to the new parish church built on the site of Del Soccorso (tal-Marżabba), the rock-cut church was left with the altar and painting of St Helen commissioned by Comm. Perdicomato in 1633 together with other items. In 1667 the church reopened under the title of St Helen.

Castagna in 1888 maintained that in ancient times the Bormla people ‘*bneu Cappella u iddedicawa lil Santa Liena – Wara zmien, kabbruha, irrangiawa ahjar, u intitulawa “IL CONCEZIONI”*’.¹²⁸ He referred to the ‘Concezioni’ church saying ‘*Dan it-Tempju, [...] imbena f’loc il knisja zghira li semmeina, ta Santa Liena*’.¹²⁹ Castagna referred to this church as ta’ Santa Liena because its name had been changed. Galea Scannura, on the other hand, assumed that the Helenian devotion had started as a result of the widespread mispronunciation of ‘Santarena’, De Chantereine’s surname. The latter administered the

¹²³ Cassar, 15, placed the dating to c.1700.

¹²⁴ Ciantar, 216.

¹²⁵ Galea Scannura, 1983, 5.

¹²⁶ Archives of the Archbishop of Malta, Visitatio Gargallo - 5 May 1602, and, Visitatio Cagliares 1618.

¹²⁷ Ciantar, Lib. I, Not.VIII, 319. Translation: ‘ancient Church of St. Helen’.

¹²⁸ Castagna, 101. Translation: ‘they built a Chapel and dedicated it to St. Helen - After time, they enlarged it, they designed it in a better way, and gave it the name of ‘The Conception’.

¹²⁹ Castagna, 104, and 113 (map). Author’s translation: ‘This temple [...] replaced the small church we mentioned, at St. Helen.’

property including the rock-cut church and the field adjacent to it in 1563.¹³⁰ Various references were made to this property and it is distinctly shown on images and maps of the Great Siege, and in other depictions that were drawn after this date.¹³¹

A most plausible start of the Helenian cult in Bormla occurred when Perdicomato built an altar in 1633. In 1667 the rock-cut church reopened with the title of St Helen. Other factors which perpetrated and contributed to the cult were the 1638-1645 construction of the St Margerita Lines. A gate and the bastion close to the church were named after St Helen.¹³² A large painting of St Helen, a wooden altar with six wooden silver-gilded candle-sticks and cross were placed in the interior balconade of this Gate until some time ago.¹³³ Some maintain that the Helenian painting was the original taken from the rock-cut church after its profanation in 1668.¹³⁴ No trace or record of the painting was left by whoever had removed it in the 1990s.

Several authors maintain that the rock-cut church had a painting and an altar dedicated to St Andrew.¹³⁵ If Cassar was right in saying that St Andrew had a religious following among worshippers at the rock-cut church,¹³⁶ this would be further evidence that the parishioners of the time followed Byzantine Church rites. St Andrew is regarded as the founder and first bishop of the Church of Byzantium and is consequently the patron saint of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople.

¹³⁰ Galea Scannura, 1983, 5.

¹³¹ Francesco de Coreggio Balbi, *The Siege of Malta* - Translated from Spanish by Henry A. Balbi, Copenhagen, 1568, 30r. “*Sant Arren ... assi llamado vn jardin del Prior de la yglesia*”. Bosio, Iacomo, *Dell’Istoria della Sacra Religione et Ill.ma Militia di San Giovanni Gierosolmitano*. Parte 3a, Roma, 1602, 588 D. Ganado, Albert and Maurice Agius Vadala, *A Study in depth of 143 Maps representing the Great Siege of Malta of 1565* (Publishers Enterprises Group, Malta, 1994), vol. I, no. 14, note 11; 133, note 2; 223 note 56, also vol. II, map No. 2 by Nicolo` Nelli (8 July 1565) and Map No. 34 by Domenico Zenoi (August 1565). Others are listed in place names: qv. *G.no* [Giardino] *de Cianterena* ; *giardino dilli S. G. Maestro*; *Giardin del Gran Maestro*; *giardino* [at Bormla]; *Giardino dall’Illmo. & Rmo. Sor. Gran Maestro*; *Giardino de la fontaina* Vol I, 223, Note 56;; *Giardino di Sant’ Elena* Vol. I, 13, Note 10; Vol. II, 38-39, Maps No. 10 and 11; 42, Note 23; 321, 327.

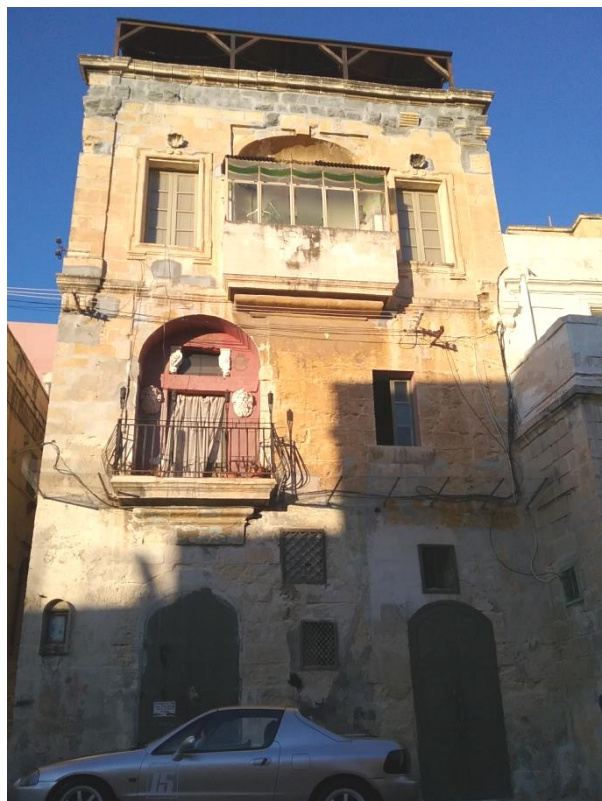
¹³² Though the St Helen’s Gate was officially inaugurated in 1740, it formed part of the first construction of the St Margerita Lines. By the 1670s the Gate led to the Polverista (gunpowder store) forming part of the Cottonera Lines. St Helen was the protector and patron saint of the Order’s gunpowder magazine.

¹³³ The painting was replaced by the government in the 1990s by a large allegoric painting depicting the Order receiving honours from Malta. After its removal in around 2001, on my request as local Councillor for Tourism and Culture, a copy of the same painting was reinstalled at St Helen’s Gate in October 2010 with the support of Heritage Malta.

¹³⁴ Guillaumier, 59.

¹³⁵ Cassar, 13,14. Guillaumier, 1972, 59.

¹³⁶ Cassar, 13, 14.



The Grand Master's Palace (Bormla) which in 1563 together with the Nativity church, gardens and its adjacent properties came under the administration of the Grand Prior of France, De Chantereine, known popularly as Santarena. © Photo: Author.

Before and After World War II

After 1668, there are no ecclesiastical records of the state of the rock-cut Nativity church, then referred to as St Helen's. A request dated 1671 for a '*domna sabiha tal-qaddisa*' by Fra Desiderio della Nunciata OCD, Sub-Prior of Terni, Italy¹³⁷ demonstrates that people were devoted to this saint. The Nativity church at that time had been sold since the Order needed money to build the fortifications around Bormla and Floriana. Fortunately, since the church was a sacred site, it was not destroyed. Ciantar confirmed this with his description of the still intact church.¹³⁸

In 1905 the installation of a new marble statue on the parish church parvis led to the transfer of an old statue from the parish church to the corner of Strada Santa Teresa with Strada Nuova.¹³⁹ The marble inscription on its pedestal reminded passers-by that this statue had been placed near the 'site of an ancient place of worship' (*Hoc templum antiquum...[est]*). This was further evidence of the existence of the rock-cut chapel.

Borg, Galea Scannura and other researchers thought that the references made to a church concerned the Madonna tas-Sokkors parish church.¹⁴⁰ However, this is not the case, as

¹³⁷ Galea Scannura, 1986, 6-7. Translation: 'beautiful token of the saint'.

¹³⁸ Ciantar, 531-533, Lib. II, Not. XXXIII.

¹³⁹ Part of Strada Santa Teresa was later given a separate street name, Triq il-Pellegrinaġġ, at whose southern end the statue was placed. Strada Nuova, known as Strada San Nicola till c. 1890, is now Triq l-Inkurunazzjoni.

¹⁴⁰ Vincent Borg, ed., *Marian Devotions in the island of St. Paul (1600 – 1800)* (The Historic Society – Malta), under the auspices of the Local Organising Committee of the 9th. International Mariological Congress, Malta,

the evidence presented in this paper demonstrates. Another mistake was made after World War II on the marble inscription affixed to the door of the building which leads to the site of the rock-cut church. This inscription attributed the church to Our Lady but made no reference to the Nativity of Jesus.¹⁴¹

Limitations and Recommendations

Further studies of publications and documents produced in the Middle Ages need to be perused to help one get a clearer picture of the religious situation in Malta at that time. Specialised scientific studies should be conducted on site and the surrounding areas to trace and rescue any tangible remains or artefacts which may shed more light on the history of the location. As no archaeological survey has yet been carried out on site, a ground-penetrating radar survey is highly recommended, followed by professional archaeological surveys both inside the church complex and underneath the surrounding houses, especially those which survived the war.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this paper derives from the subjective interpretation of various documents and artefacts. It is evident that this church was affected by the religious developments of Christianity in the Mediterranean. These conclusions emerge not only from the documents perused, but also from the study of the architectural characteristics of the church, the artefacts found in the area where it is situated, and the study of the history of religions in the Mediterranean at that time.

The evidence suggests that the rock-cut church dedicated to the Nativity of Jesus was established some time between the end of the 8th and the start of the 9th centuries. The study concludes that the Latin inscription was made much later when a built section was added in the first half of the 13th century. It found that in the early 14th century two distinct places of worship which existed in Bormla were the old rock-cut Byzantine church of the Nativity of Jesus (*Sancta Maria de Nativitate*), associated with the *Auxilium Christianorum* (*Madonna tal-Bāhrin*) devotion, and the *Del Soccorso* (*Tal-Marżabba*) Latin-rite church. Both places of worship were linked to significant attributes of Our Lady. Paintings and altar dedications found in the two churches led to distinct popular devotions.

The study concludes that the present Marian devotion in Bormla started with the presence of the 8th-9th century Byzantine Nativity or Theotokos icon which depicted the Holy Virgin as the bearer of God and therefore the conception of Jesus. This icon is now lost. During the 13th and 14th centuries the *Auxilium Christianorum* (*Madonna tal-Bāhrin/Our Lady of Sailors*) and the *Del Soccorso* (*Madonna tal-Marżabba/Our Lady of Rescue/Succour*) devotions respectively contributed to the increase of Marian devotion among the Bormla communities.

From the main historic events delineated above it emerges clearly that the rock-cut church fell under the Patriarchate prior to the Arabic period in Malta. During the Arab period,

1983: 92. Charles Galea Scannura, 'Immakulata Kuncizzjoni,' *Il-Knejjes Parrokkjali ta' Malta u l-Festi Tagħhom* (Publ. PIN, Malta, 1993), vol.1, 75.

¹⁴¹ The inscription reads: 'Sacellum hoc Beatae Virgini Mariae de Auxilio olim dicatum et pia religione veneratum sed postea diu oblitum et hostium impetu partim dirutum Melitenses denuo posteritati conservare studuerunt Anno a nativitate domini MDCCCCLIX'. Translation: 'This church, dedicated long ago with religious piety and veneration to the Blessed Virgin Mary of Help, but long forgotten and after [having endured] enemy attacks which partly destroyed Malta, is again being preserved for posterity. Year since the birth of the Lord 1959.'

its importance waned. It regained importance after the Arabic period, only to decline again once the Latin Roman Catholic Church became the predominant branch of Christianity in Malta in the 15th century. The church was eventually taken over by the Order's Infirmary in the mid-16th century. In the mid-17th century it was sold to private individuals and eventually served as a temporary parish church within the Maltese Roman Catholic Church. At the end of the 17th century it passed once more into private hands and later it was declared profane. The newly built parish church symbolically unified all three devotions when it was given the title of *Sancta Maria Concezione del Soccorso*.

This study confirms the great historical significance of the rock-cut church in the history of religion in Malta and in the Mediterranean. The findings demand that the remains of this church receive immediate specialised intervention to safeguard its unique heritage and make it accessible to those who appreciate the intricate history of our islands and Christianity.

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