

SCHOOLS OF PAINTING IN MEDIEVAL MALTA

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THIS is a brief and tentative effort to assess the evidence for the existence and character both of mural and panel paintings in Malta before the coming of the Knights of St. John. I have worked at the wall paintings in the disused chapel of the Annunciation at Hal Millieri and in the church of Santa Marija ta' Bir Miftuh, and in the crypt of the Abbatija Tad Dejra and in the cave church of St. Agatha at Rabat. But it is likely that further fragments survive hidden beneath the whitewash or the yellow plaster of some of the older chapels. While although I have examined nearly three hundred panels only seventeen of them can be proved to have been in Malta by 1530.

Greek ikons form a surprisingly high proportion of the paintings in the island. For the most part they are in private ownership; the most important collection that I have examined were the twenty-one ikons in the possession of Mr. Joseph Galea at Mdina. But it is remarkable how many families have from two to four ikons, sometimes showing rare Orthodox conventions like the vision of the dead in the separated diptych in the possession of Mr. Justice Caruana-Curran. Most of these were painted between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries and it is probable that the majority came to Malta after the expulsion of the Knights. Stylistically a number of them suggest an origin in Corfu and may have been brought to Malta when it was linked with the Ionian islands by a common English administration. The four Russian ikons that I noted might have come with the corn ships from Odessa. A small painting of the Panaghia Hodegetria had an Arabic inscription which suggests that it was an import from Alexandria. Perhaps the chief significance of the great quantity of ikons is that it implies a demand for them in Malta. Such a demand would have been stimulated by the presence of Greek immigrants in the period of the Knights, groups still represented by such surnames as 'Grech'. But the religious appeal may be much older. It will be noted that nearly all the wall paintings that survive from medieval Malta are cult images shown frontally.

Among the mass of late ikons there are at least three medieval panels which may well have been brought to Malta by the Knights. The most beautiful is the painting known as Our Lady of Damascus now in the care of Father Borgia in the Greek Uniate Church at Valletta. This is reminiscent of the Virgin of Vladimir. It follows the convention of the Panaghia Glykophilousa as the Child presses His cheek against His Mother's. It is certainly Constantinopolitan and possibly Comnenian of the late twelfth century. With it must be associated the broken fragments of a similar panel in the same church. In the Inquisitor's Palace at Birgu there is an accomplished ikon of a Mounted Saint which is also very probably Constantinopolitan and of the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century; according to tradition it too was brought from Rhodes.

Before 1530 the most obvious links were with the eastern seaboard of Sicily and, indirectly, with Catalonia. On 20 February 1505 Giovanni Salvo d'Antonio made a contract to paint a polyptych for the nuns of San Pietro at Malta. The predella showing Christ surrounded by his Disciples, which is stated to have come from the Benedictine nuns of San Pietro at Mdina and is now in the Cathedral Museum there, was presumably part of that polyptych; it is signed *Magister Saluu de d[...]i de messanensis me pinsit 510*. Another polyptych by the same painter in the same museum represents the *Madonna del Soccorso* flanked by St. Peter and St. James, and surmounted by a Crucifixion scene with the Archangel Gabriel and by the Virgin. But this is only from his workshop. Giovanni Salvo d'Antonio was a nephew of the great Antonello of Messina. His own very distinctive late Renaissance style is easily recognizable. He was employed on the decoration of the cathedral at Messina and signed his first known contract on 6 September 1493.¹ This artist's first cousin Antonio di Saliba, who was born in 1467 and died after 1535, also worked for Maltese patrons; a Deposition by him dated shortly after 1510 is in the church of Santa Marija in Gesù at Rabat.² And there is a St. Paul in the Mdina Museum, with serpent, sword and book, which suggests the early sixteenth-century school of Messina.

Behind the Sicilian background there lay a Catalan. With the

¹S. BOTTARI, *La pittura del quattrocento in Sicilia* (Florence, [1953]), 71, 72 n. 4, 90 (figs. 182-188).

²V. BONELLO, *La Madonna nell'Arte* (Malta, 1949), 8 (plate opposite p. 9); BOTTARI, 63-66, 83 (fig. 163); the painting is dated '151 . . '

possible exception of the Virgin of Damascus, the most important medieval painting in Malta is the Retable of St. Paul now in the Mdina Museum but once in the cathedral. It consists of eleven panels and has been dated about 1450. It seems likely that it was commissioned for the Cathedral. This is suggested by the prominence given to the scene of St. Paul's shipwreck and also perhaps by the position accorded to St. Agatha who appears with St. Peter who, according to her legend, healed her breasts when she was in prison. It was once proposed that the Retable was Sienese, but there is nothing in it to suggest Siena. It was either commissioned in Catalonia or comes from a school at Syracuse with Catalan derivatives. When I was working on it I inclined to a Syracusan origin. There is certainly some relation with the Retable of St. Lawrence at Syracuse in the Museo di Palazzo Bellomo and this appears as one of a group for there is resemblance to the polytych 'del Monasterio di Santa Maria' in the same Museum and this in turn is linked with the work of the Master of San Martino. But Catalan influences were strong in early fifteenth-century Syracuse and it is quite possible that the St. Paul Retable came direct from Catalonia, though inconceivable that it should have come from Siena. Clearly direct art-contacts with Spain were possible; in the Mdina Museum there is a Resurrection, a Dormition and a St. Michael of the early fifteenth-century school of Valencia to balance the Madonna from early fifteenth-century Sicily in the Augustinian church at Rabat.

This will provide the necessary setting for an attempt to analyse medieval wall paintings in Malta. The eleven paintings in the church at Hal Millieri and the thirty-one paintings in the cave church of St. Agatha at Rabat may be taken to represent a central grouping though they are perhaps a century apart. All are technically ikons; they are almost invariably single figures, and they are shown frontally in the Byzantine manner for the purpose of invocation. They share common characteristics, one of them seems to be unique; cult images are repeated on the same wall. There are two identical St. Georges at Hal Millieri and there are three St. Leonards and at least twelve St. Agathas at Rabat.

Since this paper is only intended to be a very tentative and personal contribution to the history of the study of Maltese art it is perhaps worth putting on record how I first became associated with the paintings at Hal Millieri and the archaeological characteristics of the site. I had been lecturing in the University at Valletta and I

was told of a barn at Hal Millieri where there were some Byzantine paintings half hidden beneath whitewash and with Greek inscriptions.

Hal Millieri was a deserted village between Zurrieq and Mqabba. It had once been a large village to judge by the number of wells and had had at its centre four small churches: the Annunciation, with the Visitation next to it and opposite St. John the Evangelist with St. Michael's beside it. The village must already have been deserted in 1575 when Mgr. Duzina reported that there was no resident priest.³ The 'barn' was the old church of the Annunciation, the 'Greek inscriptions' were fragments of Latin Gothic lettering, the paintings seem to be influenced from Sicily not from Byzantium. It was hard to establish the date of the church. It was 'Siculo-Norman' but that was a style that was in use in Malta well into the sixteenth century. Four slightly pointed arches divide it into five bays. Four of these bays are covered with wall paintings. The two paintings on either side of the entrance represent St. George on horse-back fighting the dragon in the presence of the Maiden; the two St. Georges are both facing the same way instead of facing each other. Seven other paintings consist of single figures shown alone, two others consist of figures shown as a pair, the twelfth painting only survives in fragments; a hanging textile which was probably once surmounted by the life-size figure of a saint, as in two of the paintings that survive. The principal colours used were orange and white and blue and red. Each painting was framed with a border of red pigment.

After the church of the Annunciation had been desecrated and put to secular uses the whole interior was kept white-washed; four coats of white-wash have been counted. The remains of white-wash still partially obscure the paintings; until this has been removed it is rash to suggest a date or an iconographic scheme, but I guessed that the date might be early fifteenth century.

Besides St. George, it may be possible to identify some of the other figures. The cult of St. Leonard was well established in late medieval Malta. He is painted three times at Rabat and nine churches are dedicated to him. Traditionally he was a Benedictine. He is first shown as a young deacon carrying a book on a Tuscan panel

³Valletta, Archiepiscopal Archives, Visitatio Dusina (1575), f. 140. (Information from the visitations is kindly provided by Mr. Mario Buhagiar.)

dated 1265 and now in the Jarvis collection in the Museum at New Haven and in a painting in Florence in the church of San Leonardo in Arcetri.⁴ I have noted the same representation in a fourteenth-century wall painting in the church of San Giovanni e Paolo at Spoleto. The convention went south about 1400 when it can be found at Andria and at Galatina. At Hal Millieri there is the image of a young Deacon carrying a book.

The cult of St. Agatha reached Malta from Sicily but it is clear that it was well rooted there by the fifteenth century. She is shown in company with St. Peter on the Retable for the Cathedral. Eight churches were dedicated to her. An original Sicilian convention for St. Agatha showed her holding a book as in a painting at Castroreale dated 1420; she is shown holding her severed breasts in a painting at Gaeta dated 1456. In the Museum at Syracuse there is an early fifteenth-century St. Agatha holding a scroll. On occasion she is shown in company with St. Peter who healed her.⁵ At Hal Millieri there is a woman in a halo carrying a book. She is in the company of a bearded saint who could be the traditional Peter. It might be suggested more tentatively that there is a hermit with a high cowl and a long staff who might be St. Anthony of Egypt as he is shown at Rabat, but it would be pointless to attempt to identify the three mitred bishops or even perhaps to distinguish between them as the duplication of St. George suggests it is well to be prepared for a multiplication of images.

The church of the Visitation stood next to that of the Annunciation. Clearly the former was the more important of the two; mass was said there weekly as late as 1618.⁶ It is likely enough that it also was painted, but it had been abandoned by 1758⁷ and now nothing is left except part of its ground plan.

I came back later to Malta at the invitation of Din L-Art Helwa and at the expense of the British Council and spent two months working there on paintings. I found the setting of Hal Millieri had been transformed by the youth group of Din L-Art Helwa under Mario Buhagiar, George Serracino Inglott and Roger Vella Bonavita.

⁴ G. KAFTAL, *Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting* (Florence, 1952), 627-633.

⁵ G. KAFTAL, *Iconography of the Saints in Central and South Italian Schools of Painting* (Florence, 1965), 5-14.

⁶ *Visitatio Cagliares* (1618), f. 103.

⁷ *Visitatio Rull* (1758-1760), ii, f. 378-379.

They had discovered a quantity of scattered evidence which taken cumulatively strengthened the case for a late medieval date. Three Sicilian coins were found wedged between the original flagstone paving and the later altar platform, all were fifteenth-century, one was of John II of Aragon (1458-1474). There were 'graffiti' of knights in armour, four shards of a medieval painted ware of red on yellow, the fragment of a finely carved stone head. I am still inclined to place the Hal Millieri paintings early in the fifteenth century.

The paintings at Bir Miftuh may prove to be of the same school as Hal Millieri; now they can be studied only in fragment. Santa Marija ta' Bir Miftuh is architecturally the most interesting of the medieval churches surviving in the island; it is also the largest. It was the centre of a parish in 1436, seven later parishes have developed from it. The church began to become derelict after 1656 when a new parish church was built at Gudja.⁸ Three of its side doors were blocked with stone and only little more than the foundations remain of the five small chapels that surrounded it. It seems clear that the church was once painted. On the wall half way up a narrow circular staircase leading to the choir loft there is an image of a Virgin carrying a lily. There are fragments of painting along the wall above the main door. It is also clear that two paintings have been white-washed. They could so easily be cleaned that it would be premature to describe them. But apart from the flames which might have accompanied a representation either of St. Paul or St. Vennera, they seem to be images of the same pattern as Hal Millieri; a woman with a palm, a saint with cross, a man shown frontally and then vestiges of other figures; a hand, a foot, perhaps a breast. The arms of the Kings of Aragon are carved on the church walls. At present the middle of the fifteenth century seems a tenable date for the paintings.

It seems likely that there were a number of painted churches in Malta at the time of the coming of the Knights. Don Achille Ferris recorded the destruction of the painted church of San Salvatore at Mdina and of a painted chapel next to the church at Bir Miftuh.⁹

Fifteenth-century Maltese wall painting will perhaps be best

⁸ A. FERRIS, *Descrittione storica delle chiese di Malta e Gozo* (Malta, 1866), 348.

⁹ A. FERRIS, *Storia ecclesiastica di Malta* (Malta, 1877), 154.

studied against a Sicilian background. It was natural to look for that background on the coast between Messina and Syracuse because of the precedent of the panel paintings. But the only Sicilian parallels that I could find were with the School of Niccolò di Maggio who worked at Trapani, Palermo and Castrogiovanni between 1399 and 1430.¹⁰ The nearest Sicilian approach to the figures at Hal Millieri seems to be the St. Cristina painted by Niccolò in 1402 and now in the Museo Nazionale at Palermo. The Palermo Museum also contains a St. George on horseback which may be related to the charging St. George on the walls of Hal Millieri. But at the most this seems an indirect influence perhaps exercised through some disciple of Maggio. When Hal Millieri and Bir Miftuh have been cleaned it seems likely that Maltese wall painting of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century may be recognized as a distinct variant among Mediterranean schools of painting. Its strongly indigenous quality is emphasised by its contrast with a fresco in the Chapel of St. Dominica at Zabbar showing the Virgin and the Child with St. Catherine of Alexandria; this suggests a date about 1500. It is smooth, accomplished and South Italian, and perhaps by a painter from Catania. On the other hand Hal Millieri has a close relation to one group of the Maltese catacomb paintings.

It is still too early to write anything definitive on the catacombs of Malta, and their extent is unexplored. Clearly they were not only places of burial but the setting for ceremonial meals. A common feature is a circular table carved from the rock with a bench surrounding it except where breached to give access. By custom they are called 'Agape' tables but there is no reason to link them with any Christian agape. Only one Christian inscription has been recorded and that is from the small family catacomb at Marsaskala. Among the 25 Government owned catacombs at St. Paul's at Rabat it is clear from carvings in relief that three belonged to the Weavers' Guild and four to the Jewish community. But inevitably, as the islanders became Christian, Christian engraving and painting would begin to be associated with their burial rites. Perhaps the earliest case is at Hal Resqun close to Bir Miftuh: an engraving of two pelicans and then a crowded scene possibly best explained as the Naming of the Animals in Eden.

The most enigmatic of the catacombs in Malta is that named

¹⁰ BOTTARI, 19-22, 78.

after St. Agatha at Rabat. I would suggest very tentatively that it may have been a hypogeum adapted into a catacomb and that the rock-hewn cave above it was the immemorial shrine of a fertility goddess before it became the crypt of the church at St. Agatha. But Christians were being buried in the catacomb by the fifth and sixth century with the emblems of their immortality. In 1973 I noted in the deeper recesses paintings of a dove, a wreath, a peacock's tail, a shell, a cross between an alpha and an omega, a dove on a branch above a drinking-cup.

The rock-hewn church above the crypt has been covered by paintings; it is likely that once they spread over the roof as well as the walls. For the cave has long been among the most sacred shrines of Malta. St. Agatha is held to have lived in it for three years while hiding from the Governor of Sicily. It is possible that a still older cult was fused with hers. The dominant motif in the paintings is an emphasis on the breasts. St. Agatha is shown bearing her severed breasts; even the Virgin is shown suckling her Child. Thirty-one paintings survive, some only in fragments. There was a partial restoration in 1881 but the restorers' work seems easily recognizable. The paintings were once described as thirteenth-century but that is fantasy. My own feeling is that predominantly they date approximately about 1510. Of course they are often archaic for the early sixteenth century but art in Malta may have been as archaic as 'Siculo-Norman' architecture. Only one stiff hieratic painting could possibly date from the thirteenth or fourteenth century. It is to the left of the entrance, a Virgin with an apostle holding a staff perhaps St. John; it is 65 inches high, 42 wide. It is quite unlike the others; the Virgin might have been copied from a portable ikon. It is possible that other earlier images survive beneath early sixteenth-century over-paintings. Sometimes there may have been votive offerings like the St. Agatha bearing the arms of Falzon. They are of quite different sizes. Occasionally they have charm like the painting (32 inches by 22) showing St. Margaret of Antioch leading her dragon on a rope. But normally they are pedestrian, there is none of the charging grace of the St. George's horse at Hal Millieri. Their interest lies in their iconography and in the evidence they provide for the Maltese conception of the sacred image.

The images are shown frontally for purposes of invocation and essentially in isolation. An analysis of the paintings in St. Agatha

in Rabat will suggest the absence of any detailed iconographic scheme. The series on the right of the cave church between the entrance and the epistle side of the central altar begins with a small St. Leonard, then a battered St. Vennera, then St. Lucy, then St. Agatha, each with her emblem, the flame, the eyes, the breasts. Next there is a St. Agatha (33 inches × 12), beyond there is a large St. Blaize with chalice and crozier (58 × 17), and next to him a large St. Agatha (60 × 26); then the scale alters, there is a bishop only 18 inches by 13 who is perhaps St. Cataldus, then St. Agatha (21 × 12) followed by a St. Agatha over 5 feet high. The line continues behind the altar and down the left side of the cave: St. Leonard, the bishop with pallium and crozier who may have been St. Cataldus, St. Leonard, St. Agatha, St. Agatha, St. Agatha, St. Agatha, a martyr possibly St. Catherine of Alexandria, St. Agatha, St. Margaret of Antioch, St. Anthony Abbot, two unidentifiable images, the broken representation of Mary suckling, St. Agatha, a Virgin and an Apostle (perhaps Mary and John) and at last again St. Agatha. In so far as it has any iconographic scheme it is a shrine to St. Agatha of the breasts.¹¹

The two cave churches at Mellieha suggest some parallels with St. Agatha at Rabat. They also have long been sacred. It is held in Malta that St. Paul and St. Luke sheltered there, and that St. Luke painted the Mother and Child on the rock face in the recess of the upper cave. Again it is possible that it was a pre-Christian shrine. The Mother and Child are still quite visible and perhaps are of the same period as the majority of the Rabat paintings.

It may be suggested very tentatively that the Maltese School of wall painting represented by Hal Millieri and Rabat belongs to the phase in the history of the island between 1412 and 1530 and that this also was the true period of 'Siculo-Norman' architecture. It is more difficult to attempt to reconstruct Maltese culture between 1282 and 1412. I could only find one church in either Malta or Gozo which I would attribute to those years and that is the disused chapel at St. Cyr at Gnien Fieres close to the road from Rabat to Fiddien. The near-by Abbatija Tad Dejr has a fragmentary painting which I would incline to place in the same period.¹²

¹¹On my last visit to St. Agatha I owed much to the help of the Rev. Vicar Camilleri SSP and Brother Bonnet SSP.

¹²On my last visit to Tad Deyr I benefitted greatly from the company of

A Crucifixion was painted in a recess by the opening of a late catacomb there. It was painted in a Gothic manner and skilfully and with sophistication. Technically it seems the best painting in medieval Malta and its Gothic elements might suggest a background in Angevin Naples. But the background would be remote. The small fragments that still remain at Tad-Deyr of an angel, of the Mother of God, of the Crucified and of St. John are very different from the monumental isolated images on the walls at Hal Millieri or St. Agatha, but they have this in common – there seems to be no exact equivalent outside Malta.

my friend the Rev. Mario Zarafa OP. My friends Mrs. V. Greer was also with me not only at Tad Deyr and at Mellieha but in St. Agatha; I owe her so much that I dedicate this article to her.