

BORDONI AND BORDONIERI

by

Louis Galea

In the "Inventario dello Stato degli Ori, Argenti, Gioje, et Altro della Maggior Chiesa Conventuale di San Giovanni" and so on, completed in October 1756 and now exhibited in the Cathedral's Museum in Mdina, there is the description of two sets of "bordoni". There are no illustrations of these because the twentyone watercolour drawings in the inventory are referable exclusively to pieces ornamented with precious stones, which the "bordoni" were not.

The Advocate Dr Ignazio Saverio Mifsud added by way of an appendix to his *Biblioteca Maltese*, printed and published in Malta in 1764, a monograph compiled jointly by Fra Gaetano Reboul and by Canon Don Gianfrancesco Agius de Soldanis. It is illustrated by an engraving showing to scale each one of the two sets of "bordoni" that formed part of the treasure of the Conventual Church of Saint John in Valletta till its despoliation by Napoleon in 1798. The "bordoni" of the shorter set, known as "minori", were made of silver. Those of the larger set, known as "maggiori", were used during pontifical high Mass and on special occasions: they were made of silver gilt.

The "Veneranda Assemblea dei Frati Cappellani Conventuali" used to appoint from among their own number four priests, expert at chanting, to carry out the duties of precentors: they were known as "bordonieri", and their leader as "bordoniere maggiore". Each of them carried in his right hand a pastoral staff made of silver with two large knobs of equal dimensions: one at the top and the other about a span below it. These staffs were called "bordoni" or "bacoli cantorali" (precentors' crosiers).

The usage of "bordoni" and "bordonieri" was probably derived from the rite of the Patriarchal Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

Four high stools, each raised on a dais, were set up in the choir, two on each side, for use by the "bordonieri" while they were functioning as such. Each of them wore a cope. They were not canons, just mere "cap-pisti", but in the case of the unavoidable absence of any one of them, his place was taken by a canon and not by a simple priest.

The choir of Saint John's Conventual Church in Valletta was ruled by the Prior of the Church, and in his absence, (a) by the Vice Prior, (b)

the "bordoniere maggiore", (c) the senior priest amongst those present. In any case, the "bordoniere maggiore" made the choice of what was to be sung on any particular occasion and who was to sing it. He admonished by tapping his "bordone" on the dais any one guilty of infringement of the rules, and he was enabled to inflict light punishment for infractions. The "bordonieri" were entitled to a certain precedence and enjoyed a number of privileges that were in those times held to be of considerable importance.

Canon Gianfrancesco Agius, writing in 1759, mentions that on 23 October 1756 he had seen in the Cathedral of Bologna two "cappisti" who were not canons, each of them hold a crosier during the celebration of high Mass, and compares those crosiers to the "bordoni" still in use at the time of writing in the Conventual Church of Saint John in Valletta.

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