

## GRAFFITI ON THE EXTERIOR WALLS OF ST. PAUL'S SHIPWRECK CHURCH

### Wied il-Qliegħa Mosta

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The small rural church of St Paul's Shipwreck sited on the outskirts of Mosta is known also as Tal-Mingiba. It was built around 1690 on the site of an abandoned earlier small church but, unfortunately, there is hardly any information about it. The present church was blessed by the Rev. Don Ferdinando Castelletti on 9 February 1695 and it is known that a new cupola was added some time later in the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> It seems that for some time there was some difficulty in tracing the provenance of the property of the church. While the parish of Mosta maintained that it had the right of jurisdiction on the small church now it is known that it belongs to the Cathedral Chapter of Mdina.

At present it is being opened daily for the sacred services and it is frequented by the local people living round it, mostly farmers.

The masonry work is in good condition and as the building stone from the globigerina layer was quarried from the vicinity of the church it withstood the ravages of time quite well.<sup>2</sup> The St Paul's Shipwreck church is a rare example which is equipped with stone benches round its interior walls. The decoration of the walls is kept to a minimum and perhaps the use of paint is undesirable on such an old rural church. Luckily the exterior walls were never affected by any type of restoration. The modern electric wiring and lighting on the facade are highly anachronistic.

The facade and the northern wall of the church are well preserved and show a grey/green patina which is the result of a kind of growth which most probably is lichen.<sup>3</sup> It has been suggested that the growth of lichens on its walls is facilitated by the fact that the church is built actually in the Wied il Qliegħa and surrounded by fields. The space between the small stone blocks was kept to a bare minimum and is a credit to local craftsmen. There was hardly any use for pointing and after three hundred years

1. A. Guillaumier, *Bliet u Rhula Maltin*, Malta 1972, 274, 275

2. It is a well known fact that when the local stone is utilised near the place where it was quarried it would probably last much longer than when it is adoperated on buildings a good distance away from its quarry.

3. P. Cassar, The Nautical Ex-Votos of the Maltese Islands in *Maltese Folklore Review*, i, no.3, 1966, 227

the two walls under examination can be rated as being in a relatively perfect condition. No plastering or whitewashing has ever been applied on the walls and that facilitated the evaluation of the genuine graffiti executed on the church walls up to the nineteenth century.

It is interesting to note that the church is partially screened on its southern western and northern walls by a bridge; that may have contributed an amount of protection from prevailing wind conditions and air pollution from modern traffic. The church is sited also on a lower level than the main roads; a condition which might have helped the preservation of the stone work.

The St Paul's Shipwreck Church at Wied il-Qliegħa offers an interesting case study of graffiti. The religious cult of "offering" a graffiti as *ex-voto* is widely diffused in Malta and Gozo.<sup>4</sup> It has been noticed that the greatest number of graffiti are found mostly on small rural or wayside chapels rather than on the greater parish churches.<sup>5</sup>

At the Tarxien Temples one finds the oldest graffiti in the Mediterranean dated to c 1600 B.C. But the tradition continued in classical times and in the paleo-Christian period and appeared again during the Byzantine times or the early Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> After the arrival of the Order of St John in Malta the building of churches flourished greatly and in the same manner the cult of "graffiti - offering" spread rapidly to all churches. One may assume that the Maltese have a vast tradition, if not the longest, of graffiti offering in the Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup>

Graffiti are accepted as *ex-voto* offering, especially those executed on holy places such as temples and churches.<sup>8</sup> It has been observed that the interior walls of some churches were utilised also for graffiti. It is believed that some mariners preferred to

4. J. Muscat, 'Maltese Ship Graffiti' in Christiane Villain-Gandossi, *Medieval Ships and the Birth of Technological Societies*, vol. II, Malta 1991, 337, 338 gives a list of forty three sites where ship graffiti were discovered.
5. The list of the greater parish churches where graffiti were discovered include the Cathedral of Gozo, St. Paul's parish church Rabat, Tarxien parish, the old parish church of Birkirkara and Attard parish.
6. Cassar, 1966, 226, unfortunately does not include the graffiti found at Tas-Silg Temple, San Pawl Milqī church, Hal Far tomb no. 3, Jesuit's Hill hypogea Marsa, St Paul's catacomb Rabat, Tad-Dejr catacombs Rabat and San Cir church at Rabat.
7. L. Basch, *Le Musée imaginaire de la marine Antique*, Athens 1987, 395. It has been observed that as restoration work on exterior walls of Maltese churches is spreading satisfactorily more and more ship graffiti are coming to light. The ritual of graffiti offering was widespread in the Maltese Islands especially between the end of the sixteenth century to the second half of the nineteenth century.
8. Cassar, 1966, 226; A. Luttrell, *Hal Millieri A Maltese Casale, its Churches and Paintings*, Malta 1976, 81.

offer graffiti as they were most likely to survive much longer than *ex-voto* paintings. The donor had the privilege of tracing his own symbol on stone while an *ex-voto* painting was generally executed by professional *madonnari* or painters.<sup>9</sup>

There were various motives which prompted a "donor" to inscribe a graffiti on a church wall. A good number of such graffiti were expressions of thanksgiving after a dangerous experience at sea but there were others which might have been "donated" prior to embarkation, in the case of ship graffiti, as a sort of "good luck" for a journey.<sup>10</sup>

The church of St Paul's Shipwreck is endowed with a relatively great number of graffiti and the great majority represent sailing ships. It has been observed that in Malta and Gozo ship graffiti are found everywhere on internal and external church walls, prison cell walls and fortifications.<sup>11</sup> One may ask why ships were so popular as a graffiti symbol. It is not quite easy to give a clear answer but the fact that the Maltese people, being islanders, sought their livelihood on the sea as fishermen, corsairs or sailors from antiquity, may explain the popularity of such a symbol.

Apart from the good number of ship graffiti, the St Paul's Shipwreck church shows other symbols such as the upraised hand, a bird, a game, a possible design of a sheaf of grain, pittings on ships, the eight pointed cross and perhaps other minor representations of dubious origin. There are at least fifteen graffiti on the facade or western wall and nineteen on the northern wall.

Pittings on Maltese graffiti are particularly interesting as they are not likely to represent gun or oarports on ships. They are most probably a decorative element with a possible link with the Maltese custom of decorating stone slabs and altars of ancient temples. Such pittings were easily executed and are found on many Maltese graffiti of ships.<sup>12</sup>

When searching for the graffiti on the church walls one must look attentively since they are not always easily discernible. The facade of the church will be exceptionally lighted up by the summer sunlight from 5 p.m. to 6.30 p.m.; one must examine the

9. The Marine *ex-voto* paintings are the subject of another research which the author pursued for these last twenty years and consist in the study of more than five hundred such paintings from thirty five churches in Malta and Gozo.
10. A.H.J.Prins, *In Peril of the Sea-Marine Votive Paintings in the Maltese Islands*, Malta 1989, 6; A. Cuschieri, and J. Muscat, Maritime Votive Paintings in Maltese Churches in *Melita Historica*, vol. X, no.2, 1989, 122 et seq.
11. Muscat, 1991, 337.
12. T. Zammit, *Malta - The Maltese Islands and their History*, reprint of the third edition Malta 1971, 42, 43.

northern wall from 9 a.m. to noon for an optimal vision of the graffiti on that wall and concentrate all attention on the wall from the third to the seventh course, the height at which one could execute his graffiti with ease. It is quite normal to find graffiti on the western and northern walls of churches. There are only few exceptions where one can trace graffiti of ships on all the walls of a church.<sup>13</sup>

Unluckily the threshold surface was smoothed with a powertool and consequently a game and a pitted graffito disappeared in that operation. On the upper stone step to the extreme right going through the main entrance one can see the graffito of a game known as *trija*. The same type of graffito was found at the Gozo Prison cells and in the cell floors of the Castellania in Valletta.<sup>14</sup> They indicate that people at such places had ample time to waste playing such a game. The one at the church of St Paul's Shipwreck might indicate that the church and the immediate area in front of the main entrance were endowed with the privilege of asylum and there might have been a law breaker living there for a space of time and availed himself of the privilege passing some of his time playing at that game.<sup>15</sup>

The symbol of the uplifted palm of the hand repeats itself in various other places in Malta and Gozo.<sup>16</sup> Although the symbol might be compared with Carthaginian and Muslim customs yet it might have been Christianised by certain people and adapted by them as a symbol of prayer. The ones found on the interior walls of the church of St Roque at Balzan<sup>17</sup> most probably were not inscribed by a Muslim; no "infidel" would have been permitted to enter such a church and deface the sacred wall with a pagan symbol.

The graffiti on the walls of St Paul's Shipwreck church show a number of ships and amongst them there is one of the largest to be found in the Maltese Islands.<sup>18</sup> It is found on the facade and to the right of the left pilaster of the church. Other ship graffiti show a galley on the northern wall and lateen rigged merchant ships. There are several lateen rigged ships but others are hardly identifiable.

13. The old parish church of Birkirkara is the best example where one can examine ship graffiti on all its exterior walls and interior walls of the belfry.

14. J. Cassar, and J. Muscat, *Report on the Graffiti in the Old Prisons at the Cittadella, Gozo*, Museums Department Malta 1989, part II, 10.

15. P.P. Castagna, *Lis Storia ta Malta Bil-Gzejjer Tahha*, Malta 1890, facsimile edition, Malta 1985, vol. II, 437; the privilege of asylum was abrogated in 1828 and a small marble slab reading *Non Gode L'Immunita Ecclesiastica* was affixed on the facade of each rural church.

16. Cassar/Muscat, 1989, part II, 9.

17. Muscat, 1991, 324.

18. Other similar extra large ship graffiti were studied at the Inquisitor's Palace at Vittoriosa and at the Zabbar Gate Cottonera Lines.

One may assume that the graffiti on the church walls are genuine considering that there were few superimpositions of modern graffiti.<sup>19</sup> Each donor respected the graffiti of his predecessors and one will notice how, in general, the whole surface area of a stone block was employed to inscribe one ship graffito only. But, of course, there are instances also when a graffito was spread on more than one stone block surface.

Fortunately, the church of St Paul did not suffer much from modern vandalic acts. Modern graffiti are easily recognized because they cut through the growth of the lichens, deep incisions are used and mostly they represent initials of those who wanted to leave their mark on the stone.

The stone on the northern wall is suffering from weathering starting at the first and continuing to the fourth course and mostly it is concentrated at the left hand side of the wall. Unfortunately, the decay seems to be affecting the rest of the wall but only at the lowest course. The facade is in a better condition of preservation although there is a trace of weathering at the base of the left hand side pilaster. The grey/green patina produced by the growth of lichens on the facade of the church is its unique characteristic.

The graffiti themselves are in a good state of preservation although in few cases they have faded. Few are superimposed by modern vandals and others are partially covered by the growth of lichens. Remembering that graffiti were never intended as a decorative element one must look carefully at close distance to discover them.<sup>20</sup> The incidence of the sunlight on the walls is of utmost importance to highlight the outlines of graffiti.

A brief description of each graffito is useful for a better appreciation of this Maltese cultural and religious cult. One cannot exclude the participation of foreigners as possible participants in such an *ex-voto* offering as has been observed in the study of other sites where graffiti were discovered.<sup>21</sup> It will be observed that most of the attention will be concentrated on ship typology and identification as their presence is much more numerous and important than any other symbol.

One must look objectively at graffiti without attaching subjective interpretations. Graffiti show basically the main lines of a ship and quite often they lack the

19. Other interesting places where ship graffiti were discovered are unfortunately ruined by the numerous modern vandalic inscriptions which were superimposed on the old, genuine graffiti.

20. Peter and Margaret Garlake, *Early Ships Engravings of the East African Coast*, Tanganyika Notes and Records no. 63 September 1964, 3.

21. Foreign names inscribed on the Gozo Prison walls and on those of the cells in the Inquisitor's Palace at Vittoriosa indicate foreign intervention.

representation of rigging. While suggesting a possible nomenclature for a ship one must not imagine details that cannot be deciphered in the graffito. The donor of a graffito was interested to imprint devoutly his mark on stone and not to execute a work of art or to trace a technically correct representation of a ship.<sup>22</sup>

#### The Western Wall or Facade

1. A fairly deeply cut symbol of a presumably Maltese, eight pointed cross.
2. A two masted vessel with a high freeboard probably a merchant ship decorated with pittings. The masts are incomplete or badly defaced; at the bows one can see the stays and at the stern there is a flagpole.
3. The three masted vessel represented by this 165 cm long graffito shows a high freeboard with a quarter and poop deck. The pittings on the main deck might represent gunports and the ship is rigged with square sails; the bowsprit carries three yards, also. At the stern there is a flag probably showing three vertical sections which might refer to the three colours of Italy or France.<sup>23</sup>
4. An eight pointed cross.
5. An unidentified and incomplete or rather badly damaged hull of a ship with an apparent spur at the bows and two masts; there is a flag at the stern.
6. An incomplete ship showing the bows, bowsprit and perhaps a mast. It should be noted that the area on the wall between graffiti numbers 5 and 6 is covered with incisions but unfortunately the majority are partly obliterated or faded away.
7. A low freeboard hull with a stern cabin; the fore mast shows the shrouds in place. Above the bows one can see an inexplicable quartered flag probably a white ensign. The graffito is decorated with pittings. The slanting lines on the fore, lower part of the hull might represent oars or the sea.
8. The square rigged vessel with square sails on the main mast and a high stern cannot be identified. There seems to be a mizzen mast at the stern; but that is highly improbable. Pittings are present as part of the decorations.
9. An incomplete or damaged outline of a palm of the hand which seems to have been superimposed on an earlier unidentified graffito. Pittings and vertical lines decorate the graffito.
10. The representation of two hands superimposed on an earlier ship graffito which shows a flag in place. Most probably the hand graffiti were incised much later than the other representations of ships.
11. A probable graffito of a sheaf of grain.
12. A vessel with a low freeboard, probably a galley, with an indication of a lateen sail and oars.

22. A number is attached to each graffito which corresponds with its position on the walls church; a scale in centimeters is provided under each drawing of the graffiti to indicate approximate dimensions.

23. Muscat, 1991, 354; inadvertently the author left out the bowsprit and yards from the graffito drawing.

13. An incomplete and unidentified part of a hull.
14. The *trija* or game based on geometrical lines.
15. The graffito shows the basic hull profile with three masts and a flagpole at the stern.

#### The Northern Wall

1. A ship with a high freeboard and three masts; a flag is shown on the main as well as on the mizzen masts.
2. A rounded two decked hull with two masts which are surmounted by two flags.
3. The low freeboard hull is equipped with one mast with sails folded round it.<sup>24</sup> The same type of representation is found on the walls of San Girgor Church Zejtun. The second hull outline below the main ship graffito is similar to others found on the two orthostats in the Tarxien Temples.<sup>25</sup>
4. The graffito represents a galley. One can notice the *sperone* at the bows, a low free board hull and two lateen rigged masts. Unfortunately the stern of the galley is defaced because the stone surface at that point is badly crumbled. Some superimposition of another graffito can be discerned but the overall good effect of the representation is retained.
5. An unidentified and incomplete ship design is presented with simply the deck line and a square rigged mast with shrouds. There is also an indication of the stern outline.
6. The bows of a decked hull can be seen but the stern is lost or was never incised. It is interesting to notice the sail with its foot indicating correctly the presence of the cloths.
7. The low freeboard of the hull indicated that the ship was a fast one and was equipped with a lateen rig. Most probably it was a galley. One can see some of the incisions below the lichen growth.
8. An incomplete ship design with a rounded hull and two masts; the main one is square rigged. There is an indication of a flagpole at the stern.
9. A good representation of a square rigged vessel with a lateen sail on the mizzen mast. There was an attempt to give a three dimensional representation of the stern which is provided with its flagpole. Another flag is flown at the fore mast. The ship is under way with all its sails except for the lower courses.
10. An indication of an attempted pitted hull representation which was never finished or faded away.
11. A unique representation of a bird. There might have been others near its head or they were never finished.
12. A two masted lateen rigged decked vessel with a high stern.

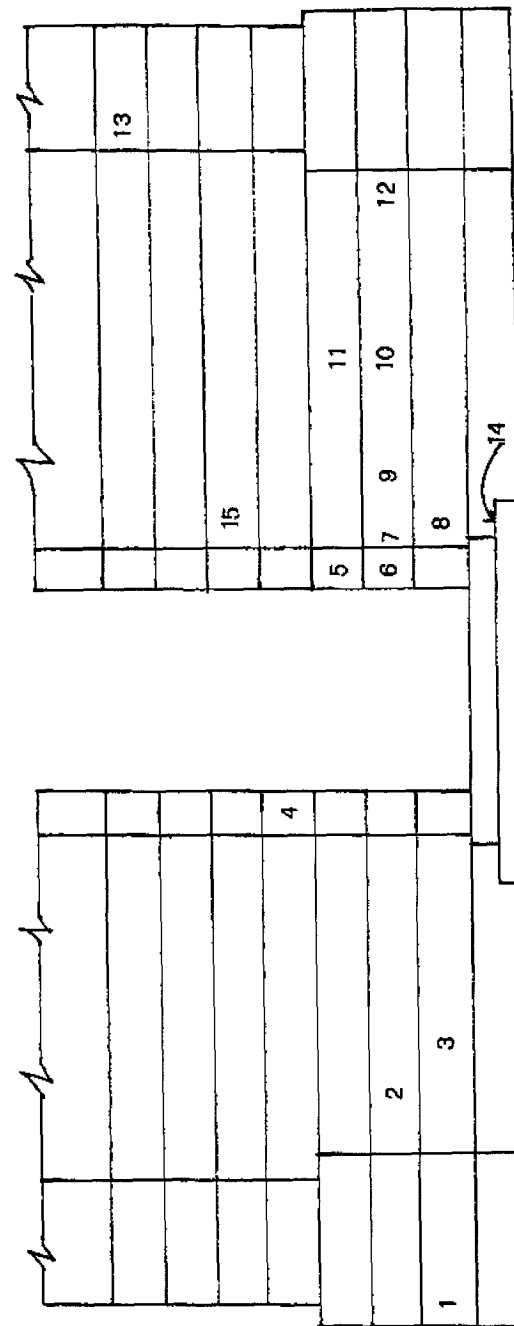
24. Muscat, 1991, 351.

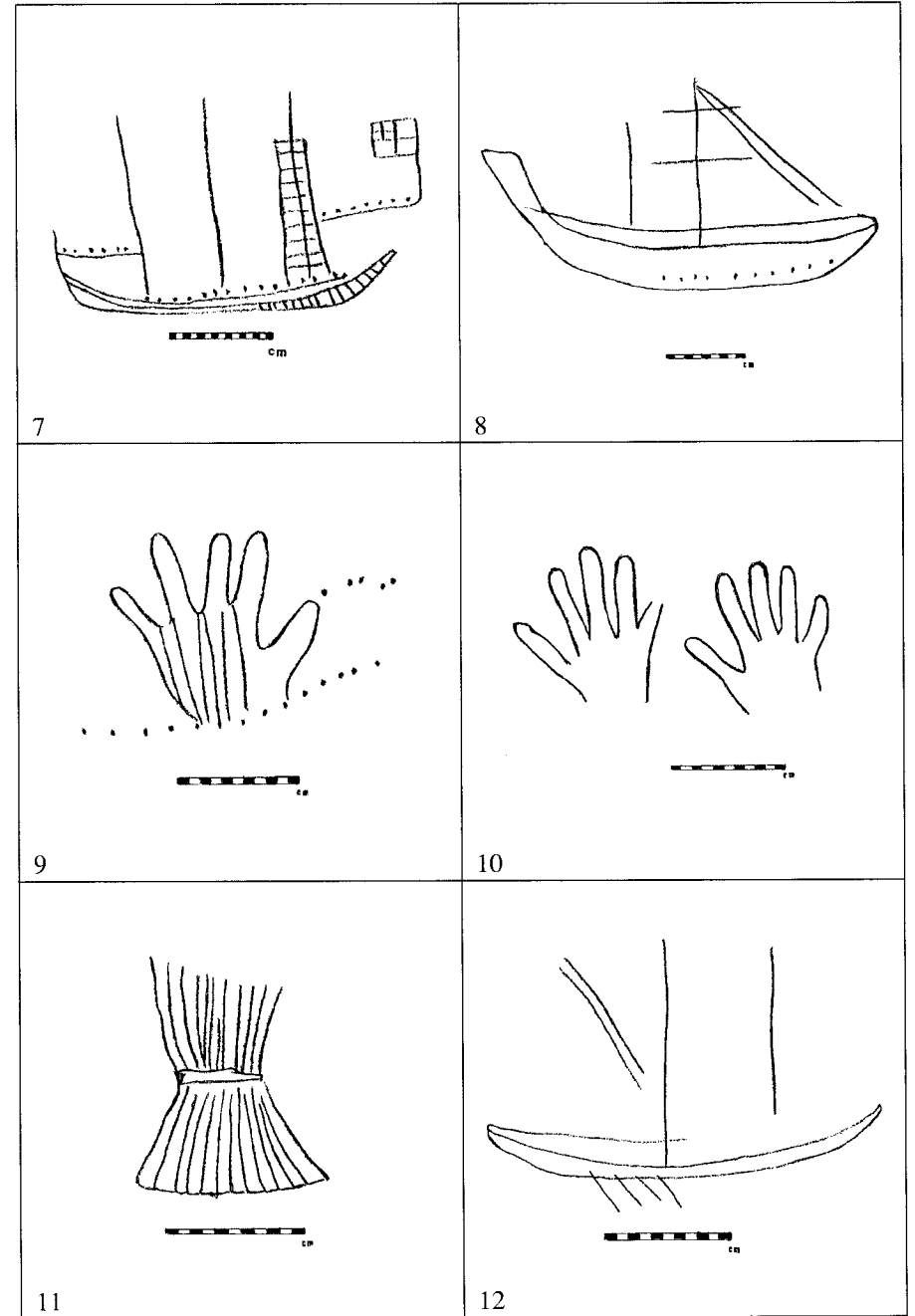
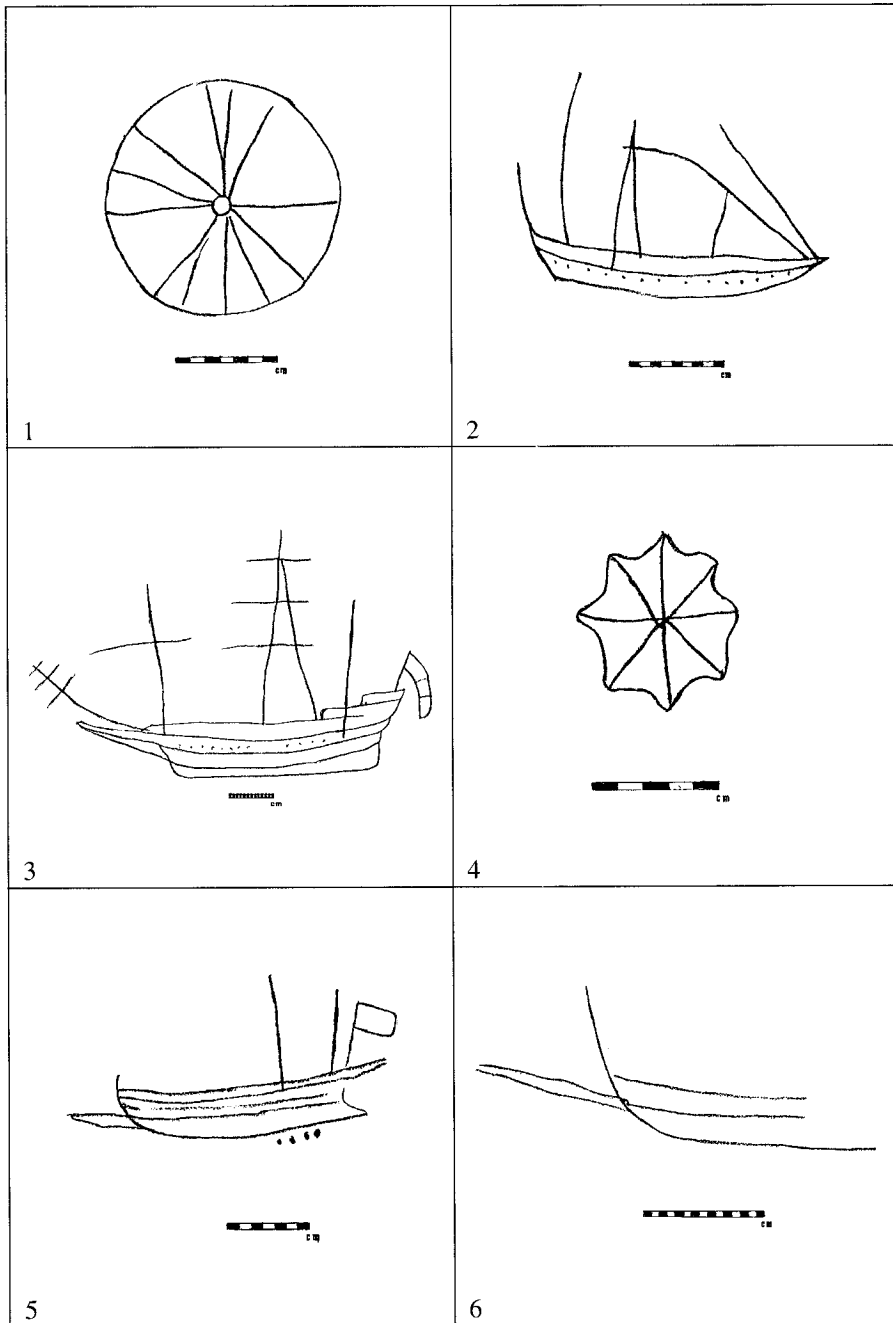
25. D. Woolner, D., 'Graffiti of Ships at Tarxien, Malta' in *Antiquity*, XXXI, 1957, 62, 66.

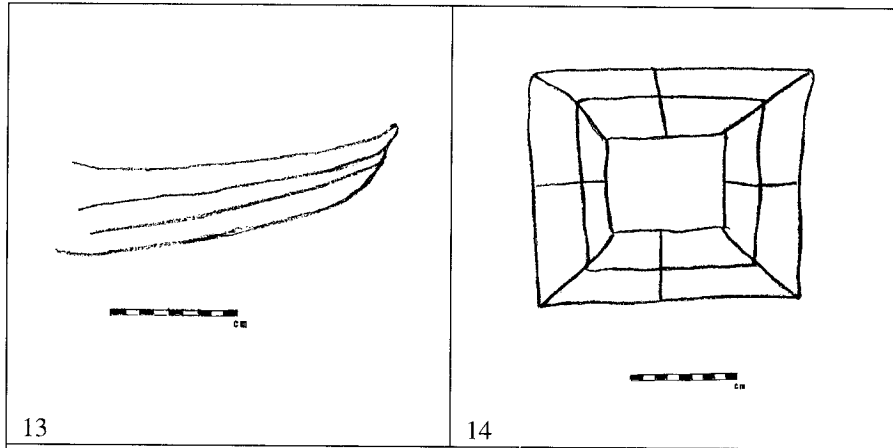
13. The ship design shows a *sperone* on the bows, a highly raised stern and two lateen rigged masts. There is the flag of the Order of St John at the stern and another one at the fore mast. The stepped up bows might indicate the presence of a forecastle.
14. A low freeboard decked hull equipped with one lateen rigged mast. The pointed bows might indicate the presence of a *sperone* and the stern is slightly raised too.
15. An interesting feature on the graffito is the raised bows similar to the *rambata* of a galley. One lateen rigged mast and sail is indicated at the bows but the stern leaves much to be desired. The graffito was superimposed by modern scribblings and some details of the original graffito might have been lost.
16. The badly defaced graffito shows the deck line and probably two square rigged masts.
17. The crude basic lines of a ship which shows the deck lines, a possible three dimensional stern representation and masts.
18. One palm of the hand representation.
19. The outline of the low freeboard of the hull and a probable *sperone* at the bows indicate the partly faded portrait of a galley.

It has been observed that the majority of ship representations refer to lateen rigged vessel. While lateen sails are presented in good outline and proportions, the use of oars is hardly ever indicated. As the present church was built in c. 1690 one may date the graffiti between the end of the seventeenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century. By that time the custom of offering a graffito as an *ex-voto* was discontinued as local fishermen and sailors made use of better vessels and a relatively better security was ascertained.

The majority of the old ship graffiti on church walls were an act of faith, an *ex-voto*, and are a witness to a cultural trait in Maltese history which deserves better recognition and further interdisciplinary studies.

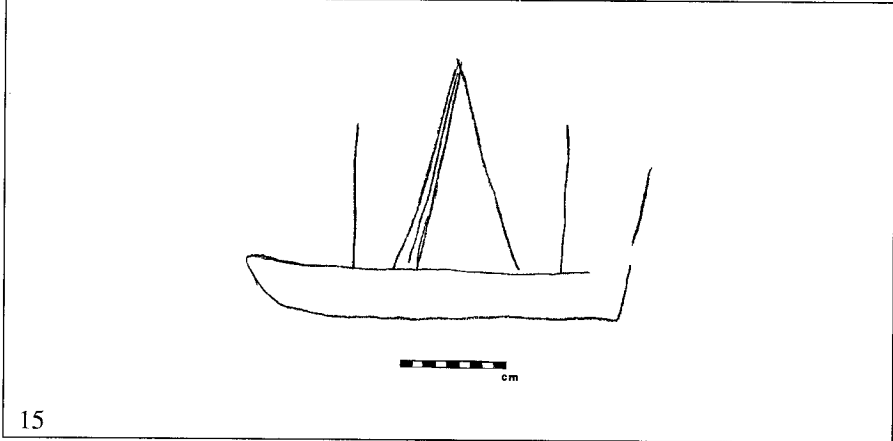




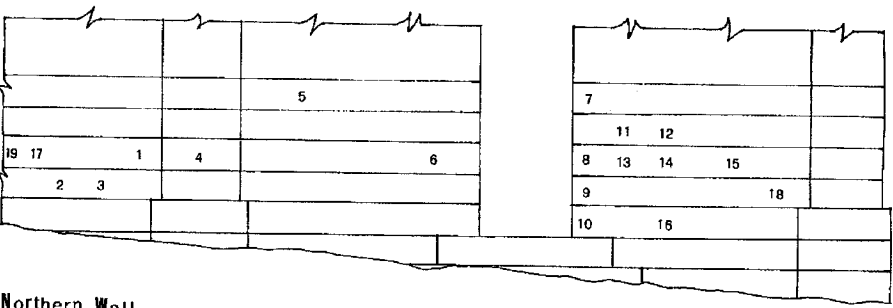


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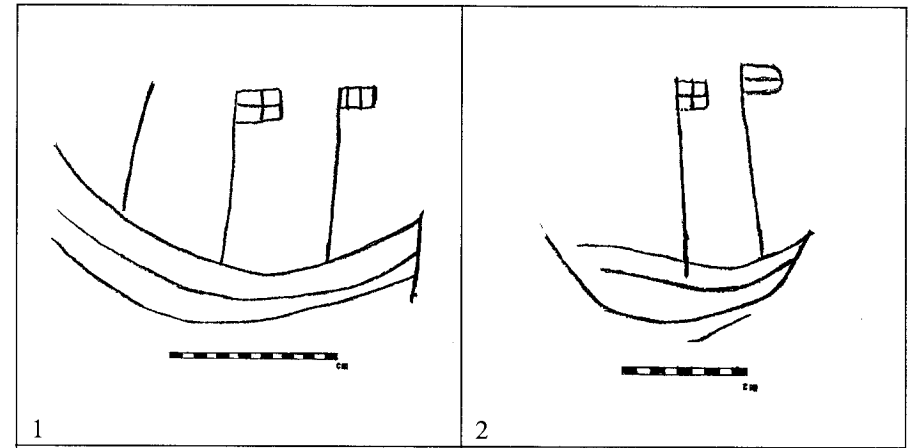
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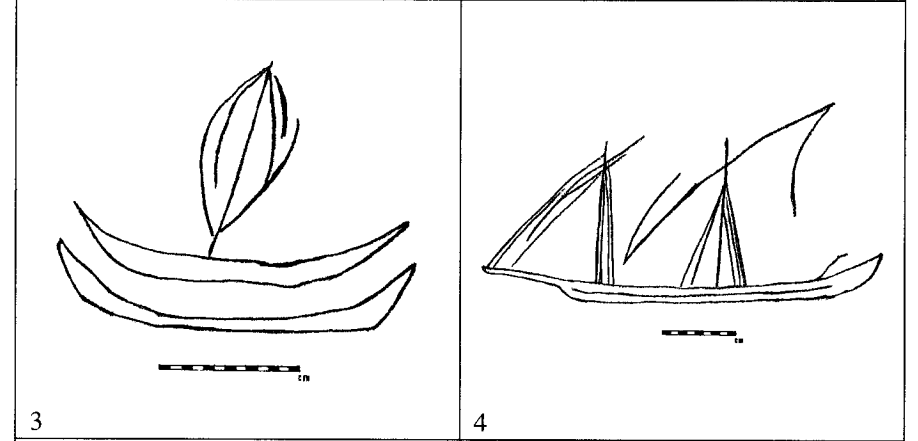


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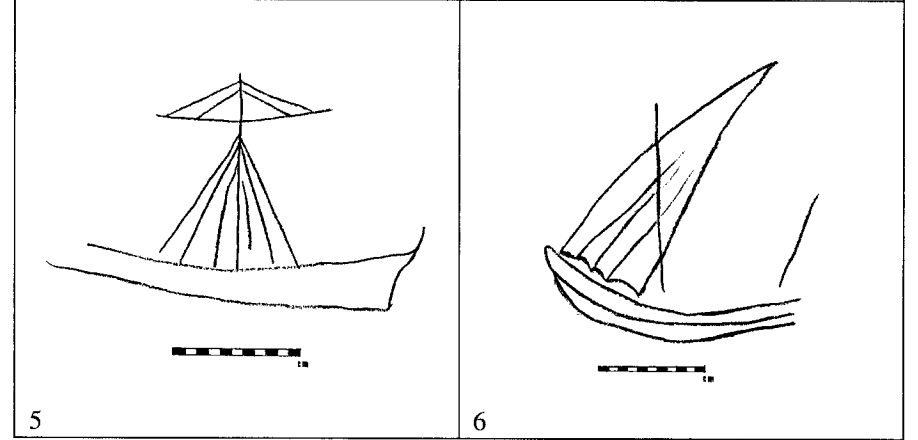
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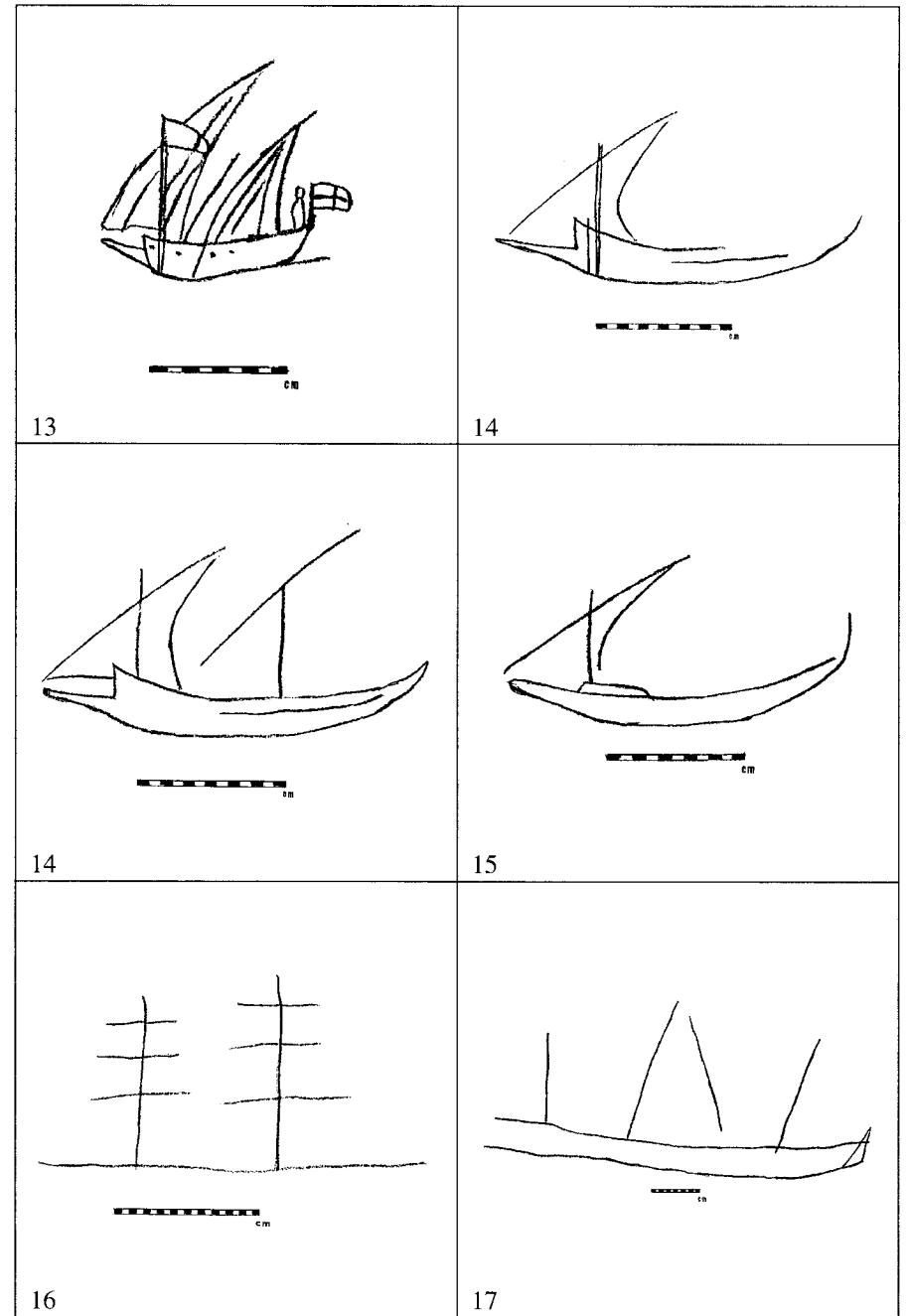
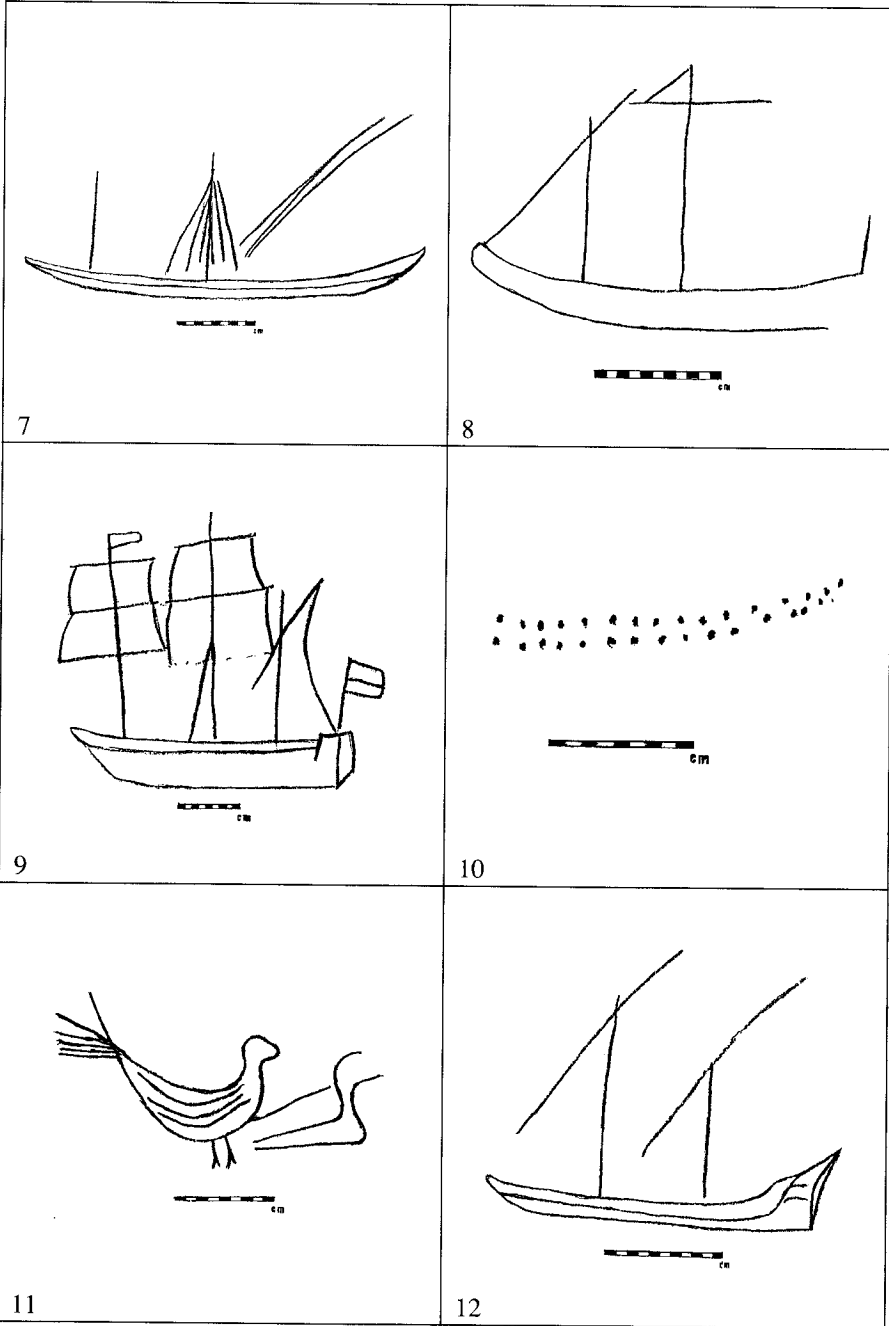
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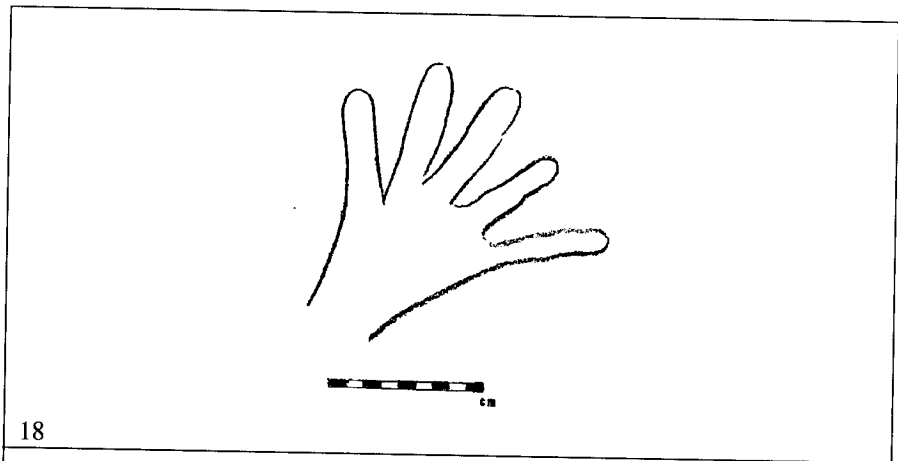


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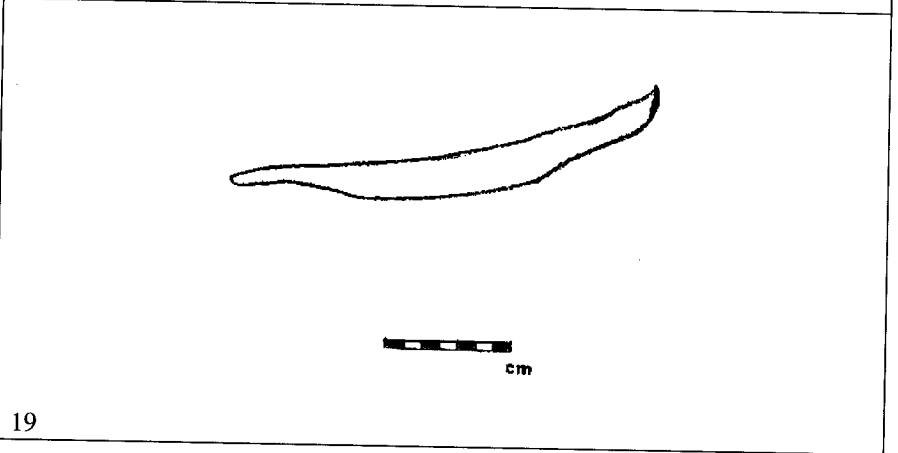
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