NEW LIGHT ON PETRONILLA, THE

OLDEST BELL IN MALTA

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Maltese links with Venice go back at least to the second half of the fourteenth century.[1] Malta's oldest bell, Petronilla – christened as such in the seventeenth century in honour of St Peter – was commissioned in 1370 for the Late Medieval cathedral at Mdina that no longer survives. This recently-restored bell comes from a Venetian foundry in the area known as *Calle dei Fabbri* whose collaborators were Victor, and his uncle and brother who had the same name, Nicolaus or Nicola.[2] This same foundry produced the 1358 bell at the Verona cathedral, by Victor and his father Vincenzo, which was commissioned by a member of the notable Scala family.[3] Therefore, it was a well-informed choice that brought about the commissioning of the Maltese bell from Venice, an item of distinguished execution that was to

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1. Links with Venice were not short-lived. It is documented that timber (*tavuli venetiani*) was imported from Venice, specifically from the Val di Fiemme area in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. *Vide* M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, Malta 2005, 19.
2. Victor's father's (Vincenzo) will, drawn up in 1361 with notary Rana, mentions that, in his *station granda*, there were eleven people making up the workforce. These included his nephew Belo, his two sons *Vettor* and *Nicoleto*, and his brother Nicola. Therefore, Vittore initially worked with his father Vincenzo, then alongside his brother Nicola and/or his son of the same name, and at some point also with his other son Antonio. Between 1361 and 1363, Victor seems to have lost his father and wife, probably due to a plague epidemic. This was a generally bad time for all Venetians and Victor was also called in to fight in the war of Chioggia (1378-1381) in 1379. Victor's son Antonio then took over the business. Other places where bells founded by this same workshop, situated in *Calle dei Fabbri*, have been traced include Dalmatia, Istria, Castello Tesino, Verona, Lucca, Urbania, Fermo e Teramo, and the region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia. *Vide* M. Bottazzi, "*Artigiani? Venezia: l'arte di fondere. Dalla documentazione d'archivio e dalle scritture incise (sec. XIII-XVI)*", unpublished and not paginated.
3. Two inscriptions on this Veronese bell read: "M. CCC. L. VIII. MAGISTER. VIVENCVS. ET. VICTOR EIVS. FILIVS. ME. FECIT. IN. VENECIIS" and "PETRVS DE LA SCALA DEI ET APOSTOLICE SEDIS GRATIA EPISCOPUS VERONENSIS FECIT FIERI HANC CAMPANAM". *Vide* M. Bottazzi, unpublished, footnote 40.

be part of the embellishment programme of Malta's most important Late Medieval building.[4]

Venice's strategic position at the apex of the Adriatic Sea made it quite impenetrable to unsolicited forces. Maritime trade flourished, and a general state of well-being was established. The west was inducted into the networks of the rest of the world and, thanks to Venice, exchanges of trade goods, art and artistic traditions with the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic world began to take place.

Many industries emerged in the twelfth century and continued to operate in Venice throughout the Late Medieval and Renaissance periods. These include production houses for glass and textiles.[5] Together, these *bottege* contributed to the lucrative Venetian trade and in turn to the flourishing of the municipality of Venice but little is, however, so far known of smaller industries such as foundries, from one of which Malta's oldest surviving bells has originated. Such production is considered commercial artisan work but this, nonetheless, necessitated a high technical specialisation. In the case of metallurgy, a rather industrial and monopolized sector, the guarantee of superior quality of the manufactured product became renowned.[6] Such elements are what made the Republic of Venice a unique and exceptionally important centre in the history of the economy of Medieval Europe.

Bells cast within the municipality of Venice between the mid-fourteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries have rather distinctive incisions on them and similarly particular profiles. One of the inscriptions on Petronilla commemorates the names of its manufacturers. It is situated on the lower part of the bell just above the sound-bow and is executed in low relief in a fine, ornamented, Gothic script that comes to an end with an irregularly-shaped star.[7] Its elongated, 'sugar-loaf' profile also bears connections with foreign Late Medieval bells. Moreover, Petronilla also carries Byzantinesque idiosyncrasies that had filtered into Venice via its connections with the east. This can be seen in the hieratic image of St Paul that is accompanied by three

shields executed in a similar technique but which are of inferior quality. These images were undeniably requested by the Maltese patrons. The *St Paul* is executed with an embossed outline and is particularly notable in its iconography where the elongated figure stands in a three quarter profile bearing a large halo, a bible in his right hand and a tall upright sword in his left, symbols of his beheading and preaching. Its execution is crisply done with multiple drapery folds emphasising the figure's elongation and they contribute to its rhythmical composition that is characteristic of later Byzantine art (from the twelfth century) when images of the Madonna and Child became more tender and intimate and, although the figure is still stylised as in the older Byzantine tradition, there is a slight roundness to the figure and a slight feel for the body beneath the drapery.

The Byzantine tradition was exercised to exude opulence in various works of art in order to prove the greatness and power of this Eastern Empire over the Mediterranean states. Through trade and other contacts, the sophisticated Byzantine style was filtered to the west and made itself particularly felt in the vast mosaic programmes undertaken in certain edifices. Close to the Maltese Islands, such a Byzantinesque influence can be found surviving in ecclesiastical and secular contexts in Sicily, such as the mosaic programmes in the Cathedral of Cefalù (as well as its east-end architecture) and the *Sala di Ruggiero* in the *Palazzo dei Normanni* at Palermo respectively. In Venice, examples of Byzantinesque influence in mosaic decorations was sometimes more direct, as can be seen in the splendid mosaics in the Cathedral of Torcello which, however, are probably earlier. Byzantine art's oriental traits were desired by the Normans in Sicily whereas, in Venice, a Latin imprint was grafted onto the style.[8] It is from the latter context that the embossed image of St Paul on Petronilla emerged. Venetian craftsmen had adopted the Byzantine style since the eleventh century and, after the Fourth Crusade in 1204 when a large amount of Byzantine works of art were looted, Byzantine artefacts were copied and the style adopted.[9] An eastern influence particularly seen in fresco painting was, moreover, introduced to Malta, Sicily and the Southern Italian regions via the Basilian monks who were especially active in the countryside.

Petronilla's size corresponds satisfactorily to the widespread Venetian tradition of bells produced in the Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance periods. These, and particularly those produced in the *bottega di Calle dei*

4. Bottazzi, unpublished and not paginated.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. The inscription reads: "*MAGISTER VICTOR ET NICOLAUS ET FRATER ME FECIT IN VENETIIS M. MCCCLXX*". Another inscription found on either side of the image of St Paul's halo reads: "*S./PAV-LVS*".For more information on this bell *vide*: Archivium Cathedralis Melite, Misc. 190, Alpheran Visitatio Pastoralis, f. 21ᵛ; M. Buhagiar and S. Fiorini, *Mdina, the Cathedral City of Malta: a Reassessment of its History and a Critical Appreciation of its Architecture and Works of Art*, 2 vols., Malta 1996, 1, 151; R. Cassar, *The Bells of Malta (1370-1900) - An Art Historical Consideration*, Unpublished MA History of Art Dissertation, University of Malta 2004, 7-8, 15, 81, 85-6, 91, 114, 123, 134, 145, 153, 164, 258 and File No. MDN005; Buhagiar 2005, 132.

8. D. Talbot Rice, *Art of the Byzantine Era*, Thames and Hudson 1997, 178.
9. *Ibid.*, 184.

Plate 1: The Petronilla Bell

Plate 2: Petronilla being removed from the Mdina Cathedral bell-tower (courtesy: Kenneth Cauchi)

Plate 3: Detail of one of three similar coats-of-arms on Petronilla
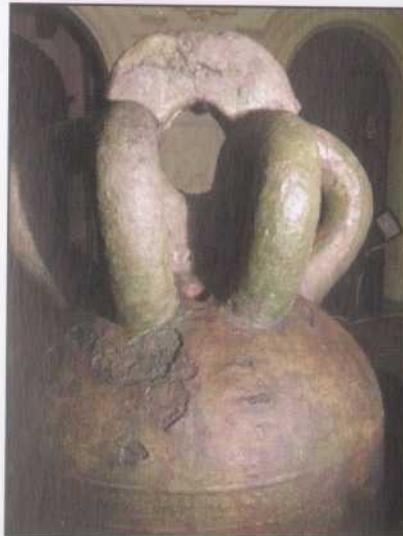

Plate 4: Detail of Petronilla after cleaning (courtesy: Kenneth Cauchi)

Plate 5: Detail of St Paul with a Gothic inscription on either side of his head and another beneath the figure
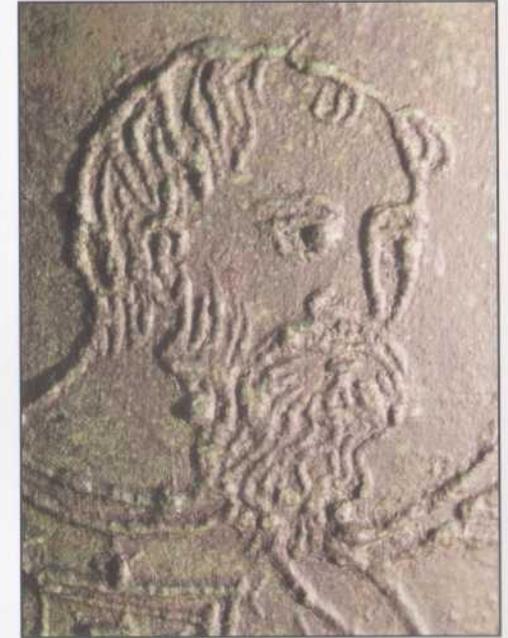

Plate 6: Detail of St Paul's head (courtesy: Kenneth Cauchi)

Plate 7: One half of the Gothic inscription found on either side of St Paul's head, together with the saint's name: "S./PAV – LVS", before restoration (courtesy: Kenneth Cauchi)

Plate 8: Detail of Gothic inscription (courtesy: Kenneth Cauchi)

Fabbri, as is the case with Petronilla,[10] are characterised by somewhat petite dimensions when compared to those produced contemporaneously in Pisa. The Venetian bells' dimensions were very well adapted to the demands of a niche market that required the exportation and thus transportation of the product, and were possibly even conditioned by these patrons. Such a restriction in dimensions was, moreover, adequate for the presumed self-effacing proportions of the edifices in which these bells were to be housed in, such as a belfry or bell-tower.

That the Maltese Cathedral's bell tower was of modest dimensions can be thus presumed, as well as the size of the main body of the Cathedral. However, unlike the general quadripartite vaulting to the belfry,[11] the Maltese example probably carried a hemispherical dome in the Moorish tradition termed *cuba* or *qubbah*, such as survives in the church of *San Giovanni degli Eremiti* at Palermo.[12] This came about due to the Siculo-Norman influence that was infiltrated into Mdina which had integrated Arab elements within it. Such Moorish features were commonly found in Norman Sicily whose architecture, both secular and religious, was very much a fusion of Islamic and Byzantine elements. And here, at Mdina, within the Maltese bell-tower there was a bell that had both western and eastern sophistication and a dome that was an imported image from North Africa.

As claimed by Gian Francesco Abela, Petronilla's possible donation to the Cathedral by a member of the Bordino family further adds to its interest, particularly because, if this were so, this could be one of the earliest references to well-versed art patronage in Malta.[13] The Late Medieval cathedral at Mdina may be presumed to have been the most important building in the Maltese islands at the time, so it seems fitting that works of a certain amount of artistic refinement were imported to adorn it.

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10. Venetian bells did not generally exceed 70cm in height and 40cm in diameter. These dimensions mean that the bell is not so heavy and runs less of a risk of being detrimental to the belfry's architectural structure or of being responsible for its collapse. *Vide* Bottazzi, unpublished and not paginated, footnote 13.

11. *Ibid.*, footnote 13.

12. The Maltese *qubbah* was constructed out of timber that was rendered waterproof; this is unlike other domes of its type that were, by and large, stone-built and covered on the exterior with a cement mixture made from ground pottery and lime that was in turn painted red. S. Fiorini, 'The Earliest Surviving Accounts Books of the Cathedral Procurators: 1461-1499', in *Proceedings of History Week 1992*, ed. S. Fiorini, Malta 1994, 104. *Vide* also G. Caracausi, *Arabismi Medievali di Sicilia*, Palermo 1983, 195-6; Buhagiar 2005, 27.

13. G.F. Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano con le sue Antichità, ed Altre Notizie*, Malta 1647, 333; Buhagiar and Fiorini 1996, 1, 154 and 159; Buhagiar 2005, 132.