



Malta  
Classics  
Association

# MELITA CLASSICA

Vol. I  
*2014*

*Journal of the  
Malta Classics Association*

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## From the Editor

Four years ago, the Malta Classics Association was founded with the aim of disseminating and furthering Classical Studies, and especially, the Greek and Latin languages – a daunting task, indeed, considering that the Classics Studies were only limited to University courses, and stood completely outside the curriculum of pre-tertiary education. Ever since its inception in 2010, the Association has successfully striven and has been instrumental in raising awareness of such an important aspect of Education, and its efforts are now bearing fruit. Moreover, the general public's response has been encouraging – membership has steadily increased, the web-site frequently accessed, Classical Studies introduced as a new subject in post-secondary education at the Junior College of the University of Malta, Naxxar Higher Secondary School and Gozo Higher Secondary School, and the public lectures held under the auspices of the Association have always been well-attended.

Inspired by that famous Latin proverb, *verba movent, scripta manent*, the Malta Classics Association has now taken this additional initiative of publishing its own annual Journal, *Melita Classica*, in which both local and foreign Classicists can find an appropriate forum wherein the fruit of their literary endeavours and their researches can be published. In this wise, no constraints are being made on contributors, save that the material submitted pertains generally to Classical Studies and Languages. Contributors are thus most welcome and are encouraged to submit original articles or material for future publications – writing guidelines are printed at the end of this journal.

On behalf of the Editorial Board, I wish to thank all the contributors to this first issue of *Melita Classica*, and earnestly hope that our readers would find the studies offered profitable and enjoyable.

**Fra Alan Joseph Adami O.P.**

**Editor**

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## The *MUTAT TERRA VICES* Inscription

Victor Bonnici

*“O, ’tis a verse in Horace; I know it well:  
I read it in the grammar long ago.”*  
Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, Act IV, Scene II<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the centuries, inscriptions have been set up to record historical events. Comprised generally of a durable material upon which a text has been incised, either free-standing or incorporated within an overall architectural complex, they stand nevertheless as memorials for contemporary and future generations of a human activity thought fit to be monumentalized.

The subjects of an inscription may range from the private or personal to the public, the civil to the religious, or constitute any combination thereof; it may also be of minimal significance or be of momentous importance, the timing contemporaneous or commemorative.<sup>2</sup>

And just as an inscription needs a stone-cutter to fashion a memorial architecturally worthy of the occasion, so also there arises the need of an author to provide the text to relate the historical event. One main limiting factor is the space available upon which the text is to be incised. The space available is generally too small for a long-winding narrative which would in consequence render the letters too small and cramped together to provide for an easy reading; legibility would become even worse if such an inscription had to be affixed at a considerable height.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Although Chiron is here referring to Hor. C. 1.22.1-2: *Integer vitae scelerisque purus | Non eget Mauris iaculis neque arcu*, it is still applicable to the opening words of the inscription. Cf. Hor. C. 4.7.3.

2 Woodhead (1992) 36. See also A.E. Cooley (2013) *passim*.

3 Woodhead (1992) 68.

The skill of the author thus manifested itself in the manner of his composition. Although the historical event would have been familiar enough to him as also its context, his composition would have had to be of such a kind that, even in the briefest of text, it had to encompass it wholly, or at least to hint at it in its totality, in a few chosen words, strategically spaced for easy reading and comprehension by his readers.

Needless to say, the author needed to be fluent in the language of his composition. In Malta, during the period of the Order (1530–1798), the languages used at the Curiae of the Order of St John, the Bishop's, the Holy Office's and of the *Castellania* were invariably in Italian and/or Latin. The vernacular was never used even where the local population was mostly concerned, for instance, in understanding the contents of their legal deeds, since even these were written in Italian or Latin.<sup>4</sup> But inscriptions seem to have been considered of a higher literary order, and it is a fact that almost all the inscriptions of whatever kind dating from this period were in Latin.

The people who could read and write in Latin during the Order's reign were few in number and consisted solely of the *litterati* of the period – ecclesiastics, lawyers, doctors, notaries, and the rank of gentlemen who could afford an education, and those who filled up the secretariats and higher echelons of the institutions prevailing – indeed, comparable to the whole population, this would have been a very small number indeed.

Composing in Latin, therefore, an author's readership would have then been extremely restricted except to his peers. In such a small community, where familiarity was predominant, probably all the possible readers would have been familiar with the details (context) of the event commemorated within an inscription (contents). The author, by his versatility of the language, the choice of words or even strings of words and phrases (neither was it uncommon even to draw upon small quotations from Classical authors and Holy Scripture) would have been able to draw a verbal canvas encompassing the event,

---

4 N.A.V. R468/18, ff. 21v-22: *Die quarto mensis Novembris viij Indictionis 1684. Lecto, et declarato tenore praesentis matrimonialis instrumenti, et omnibus, et singulis capitibus in eo contentis, et expressis lingua materna de verbo ad verbum a prima linea usque ad ultimam.*



hoping thereby to receive the approbation of his peers for his mastery of the language, his cleverness, his skill and, not least, his *urbanitas*.

With the passage of time, the context of the inscription might fade from common memory and only the incised words (or the extant part of them still discernable) would remain, rendering perhaps an incomplete comprehension concerning contents and context to succeeding generations.

It is with this purpose in mind that this writer proposes to research the *MUTAT TERRA VICES* inscription in order to deduce more fully not only what its author composed, but also its context, and to what extent did the author succeed in encompassing the totality of a historical event within the verbal incisions in the inscription and, hopefully, what has been briefly generalized and expressed above, might find its basis in the following research.

The *MUTAT TERRA VICES* inscription consists of 14 lines incised on a 91 cm by 51 cm plain white marble. Presently, it stands affixed at a height of 2.2 m from ground level on the right corner at the extreme end of the square immediately in front of the church of St Barbara or, as more commonly known, of Santa Liberata, the church forming an integral part of the Capuchins' monastery complex on the outskirts of Kalkara, Malta.

Although the wall to which this inscription is affixed seems to be of recent construction, it is probable that the inscription occupies the original position except that the coat of arms of Giuseppe Abela, sculpted in stone, mentioned by Count Ciantar and which used to stand above the inscription, has disappeared altogether.<sup>5</sup>

A monumental transcription of the *Mutat Terra Vices* inscription as it stands at present is reproduced hereunder.

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5 Ciantar (1780) 328: *davanti alla Chiesa in un angolo dell'orto si vedono pure le armi medesime, scolpite in pietra, colla seguente epigrafe incise in marmo.*

D. O. M.

MUTAT TERRA VICES

ET QUOD INHOSPITUM FUERAT, DIVA PARENS BARBARA

PERVIUM FRUGIFERUMQUE REDDIT SOLUM

5

MUNERA SUNT ABEL

IN QUÆ RESPEXIT DEUS, ET BONO CUM OMINE

JOSEPH NOMEN IN SUUM ADAUXIT

P.P. CAPUCCINI A PIO VIRO, INGENUOQUE PATRICIO

D. JOSEPH ABELA

10

PRO TEMPLO, CENOBIO, ARCA, ATQUE POMERIO

HOC AMPLO DONATI SOLO, FIDELIUM PIETATE

EDIFICIUM EXCITANTE, PERFICIENTEQUE

G. A. M. P. P.

ANNO 1754.

## Edited Transcription

*D[eo] O[ptimo] M[aximo]. | Mutat terra vices | et quod inhospitum fuerat, diva parens Barbara | pervium frugiferumque reddit solum. | 5 Munera sunt Abel | in quae respexit Deus, et bono cum omine | Joseph nomen in suum adauxit. P[atres] Capuccini a pio viro, ingenuoque patricio | D[omino] Joseph Abela | 10 pro templo, cenobio, arca, atque pomerio | hoc amplo donati solo, fidelium pietate | edificium excitante, perficienteque | g[rati] a[nimi] m[onumentum] p[osuerunt] | anno MDCCLIV.*

## Translation

To God, the Best, the Greatest. The earth is going through her changes, and what had been an inhospitable land, our mother Saint Barbara renders accessible and fruit-bearing. Abel had gifts towards which God had regard, and Joseph with good omen increased in his renown. Having been presented with this ample land for a temple, a monastery,

a cloister and also for a surrounding space by (that) pious man and native nobleman, the lord Giuseppe Abela, the Capuchin Fathers, while the piety of the faithful was erecting and completing (this) building, set up with a grateful heart this memorial in the year 1754.

On reading the contents of this inscription, one cannot help noticing the many themes, ideas, personages and statements, following each other in quick succession. Taken independently of each other, and unconnectedly, they may make very little sense, but altogether they provide the reader with its imagery and undertones, the historical context that underlay this inscription, like the many brush strokes that make up a painted canvas, thanks to the *urbanitas* of its author.

### Original or copy?

Count Ciantar, whose *Malta Illustrata* was published in 1780, and who thus was a near contemporary of the event, also prints out a monumental transcription, but differences can be perceived between the *in situ* inscription's reading and Ciantar's.<sup>6</sup>

Although this monastery passed through terrible times of war and suffered huge damage during the French Blockade and World War II, this writer could not ascertain whether the present inscription is the original or a copy, nor was any other transcription or reference found

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6 Ciantar (1780) 328. A comparison of the two elicits the following differences:

In-situ inscription	Ciantar	Line	In-situ inscription	Ciantar
none	comma after PERVIUM	12	EXCITANTE	EXCITANTES
none	semi colon after ABEL	12	PERFICIENTEQUE	PERFICIENTESQUE
P.P. (for PATRES)	PP.	13	P.P. (for POSUERUNT)	PP.
D.	DON	14	1754	MDCCLIV
ARCA	AREA			

by which to correlate the text.<sup>7</sup> By default, therefore, this paper refers to the *in situ* inscription.

## Patres Capuccini

The principal reason why this inscription was set up in 1754 is explicitly stated: that the Capuchin Fathers (*Ordo Fratrum Minorum Capucinatorum*) wanted to show their gratitude to the donor of the land upon which they had erected their new church and monastery. This appreciation was being broadcast to all and sundry, for present and future generations, by the erection of an inscription on a durable medium in a public place. And to augment their incised public message, they ensured its prominence by giving it further visibility through its incorporation within an architectural memorial complex by having the donor's coat of arms set upon it; but, as has been observed above, this coat of arms is now no longer extant.

But well before 1736, when this church and monastery started to be built, the Capuchins had already a monastery in Malta, and it had been a flourishing institution for the past century and a half, having been built in 1588 on the initiative of Grand Master Hugh Loubens de Verdalle.<sup>8</sup> Following his return from Rome, the Cardinal Grand Master allocated a piece of land outside, and at some distance from, Valletta's walls called *Dokkara* overlooking the *Xatt il-Qwabar*.<sup>9</sup> The site of this location, that is, outside the walls of a city and at a distance from it, was not dissimilar to the one enjoyed by the first, and even the subsequent, Capuchin monastery of Syracuse to which the Maltese

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7 Neither does Joseph Garzia in his detailed book *Il-Kapuċċini fil-Kalkara* (2003) record it, nor does F.V. Inglott (N.L.M. 372) include it in his manuscript listing hundreds of inscriptions extant in Valletta and the Three Cities in the latter part of the 19th Century.

8 Ciantar (1780) 324. No doubt, G.M. Verdalle must have been influenced and perhaps even desired to give a shining example to his knights in obedience, chastity, poverty while fighting on behalf of the Cross through that icon figure of the Siege of 1565, the Capuchin monk, Roberto da Eboli, of whom V. Castellano (1566) f. 26v. wrote: *is altera manu Christi simulachrum cruci suffixi gestans, altera strictum ensem, non solum hortabatur uerissimis orationibus ad uirtutem milites, sed saepe etiam ipse, in confertos se immittens hostes, egregia edidit facinora.*

9 Ciantar (1780) 324.

monastery was affiliated and formed an integral part of the Capuchin Province of Sicily.<sup>10</sup> At the time of its building, the *Dokkara* area was uninhabited, but later, through an overspill of the city's population,<sup>11</sup> it became an integral part of the suburb of Valletta, taking the name of Floriana from its architect, Pietro Paolo Floriani (1585-1638). Proof for the foundation date of this monastery (Ciantar corrects G.F. Abela)<sup>12</sup> was an inscription, incised on white marble, set upon the main door of the church:<sup>13</sup>

AREA QUAE QVONDAM FVERAT; JAM CREVIT IN ARAM,  
VERDALAE AVSPICIIS IN PIETATIS OPVS,  
DIE III MAII MDLXXXIX SVI MAGIST. A. IX.<sup>14</sup>

Ciantar supplies further proof that Grand Master Verdala was also the founder of this monastery by printing the following epigraph that stood under a portrait of the Grand Master located in the choir:<sup>15</sup>

F. UGONE DE LOUBENX VERDALA DELLA PROVINCIA DI GUASCOGNA,  
GRAN-MAESTRO, POSCIA CARDINALE, FONDATORE DI QUESTO CONVENTO.

Nor was this monastery of insignificant size. Designed by Girolamo Cassar, it boasted (apart from a magnificent view of the Grand Harbour) of a cloister, a refectory, a library, storage rooms and eighteen cells spread over three corridors and, of course, a church.<sup>16</sup>

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10 Frati Cappuccini Siracusa, [fraticappuccinisiracusa.it/scheda\\_convento.php?id=11](http://fraticappuccinisiracusa.it/scheda_convento.php?id=11) (last accessed 07/05/2014).

11 This increase in population led GM Vilhena to declare Floriana a suburb of Valletta and to allocate to it a source of water from the Wignacourt Aqueduct. The inscription affixed to the Lion's fountain in St Anne Street, Floriana still records the occasion: *Accolis Vallettae | in dies augescentib(us) | em(inentissimus) m(agnus) m(agister) d(ominus) Antonius | Manoel de Vilhena | 5 pr(in)ceps populi studios(issi)mus | suburbium concessit | fontemq(ue) tribui jussit. | an(no) sal(utis) MDCCXXVIII.*

12 Abela (1647) 16, gives the foundation date as 1584.

13 Ciantar (1780) 324.

14 For correlation of dates, see Ciantar (1780) 324-325.

15 Ciantar (1780) 325.

16 Ciantar (1780) 325.

Subsequent additions extended it further. Verdalle himself erected another chapel dedicated to St Anne, adjacent to the exterior wall of the chapel of St Francis, for the *comodo alloggio de' benefattori*. As a memorial, he also had his coat of arms as well as a distich sculpted on the main arch alluding to the wolf on his coat of arms.<sup>17</sup>

NE PAVEAS; TVTAMVR OVEM, NEC VESCIMVR AGNIS:  
SI CAVEAS STYGIOS, RES TIBI SALVA, LVPOS.

A further major extension was undertaken by Bishop Cagliares in 1624. At his own expense, *per onesto suo divertimento*, he erected a further complex consisting of six rooms with their own kitchen and supporting rooms laid out on two floors, together with another small chapel. The good bishop also added another three cells for the friars.<sup>18</sup>

Later benefactors also contributed to the adornment of the church, most conspicuous of which were those of the Bali of Brandenburg, Fra Wolffgang Phillipus Guttenberg (whose benefactions and memorial tablets abound in many churches spread throughout the Island)<sup>19</sup> and Fra Jean Lanfranc Ceba,<sup>20</sup> *ricevitore* of Grand Master Wignacourt, whose contribution to the chapel of St Francis was also commemorated with an inscription adorned with his coat of arms.<sup>21</sup>

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17 Ciantar (1780) 326.

18 Ciantar (1780) 325.

19 Most notably in the Church of Our Lady of Victories, Valletta, and at the Franciscan Friars Conventual Church and Monastery, Rabat, Malta, among many others. All his inscriptions include his name and titles: *Frater Wolffgang Phillipus liber baro de et a Guttenberg Sacri Hierosolymitani Ordinis Baiulivii Brandenbourgensis nec non Preceptor commendarum Kleinerdtlingae Bruchsalz et Cron Weissenbourg*.

20 In the Joachim Wignacourt inscription (1615) in the church of Our Lady of Jesus, Rabat, Malta, he is described as *fr(ater) Io(annes) Lanfrancus Ceba* <sup>10</sup> *mag(ist)ralium proventuum receptor urbis Notab(ilis) eo tem- | pore armorum capitaneus*.

21 Ciantar (1780) 326.

D. O. M.

FRATRE ALOPHIO DE WIGNACOVRT MAGISTERIVM

APVD MILITES JEROSOLYMITANOS EGREGIE MODERANTE,

FRATER JOHANNES LANFRANCVS CEBa, APVD IPSVM

5

RECEPTOR, D. FRANCISCO TVTELARI SVO

DONAT, DICATQVE ANNO SALVTIS MDCIX

By 1643, the church and monastery of the Capuchins in Malta was so enlarged with these and other additions, that Rocco Pirro, in his *Sicilia Sacra*, described it as *Capuccinorum nobile coenobium cum adjuncto perspicuo viridario intra menia ad tertium lapide inceptum est exemplo Fr. Roperti de Evoli Capuccini...*<sup>22</sup>

But Pirro exaggerated the distance by two miles. Nonetheless, the importance of a substantial distance from a city needs to be noticed. The Order of Capuchin Friars Minor was an off-shoot of the Franciscans, established in 1527 by Friar Matteo da Bascio<sup>23</sup> professing extreme austerity, simplicity and poverty, claiming to be more consonant to the original precepts of St Francis of Assisi. Moreover, this new Order stressed the importance of the hermetical life for its professed members, far from the bustle of city life, considered detrimental to the ascetical life. Consequently, their first monastery in Malta was erected not in the city of Valletta itself as other Orders' were, but at a distance; but neither was it so far. Moreover, being a mendicant Order, the Capuchins were forbidden by their constitution to own but a few-days provisions at any one time, and thereby the proximity of a city would be a great advantage from where alms (Malt. *iċ-ċirka*) could be regularly begged. Since these facts are so important to this narrative, the relevant text from the 1536 Constitution of the Capuchin Friars Minor is here translated:

In order that lay people may avail of our spiritual services and assist us in our temporal needs, we order that our friaries shall not

22 Quoted in Ciantar (1780) 325; for *exemplo Fr. Roperti de Evoli*, see note 8 above; for the life and times of Roberto da Eboli, see F. Azzopardi (2000).

23 <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03320b.htm> (last accessed 30 Aug. 2014).

be built too far from cities, towns or villages, nor too close to them either, lest we suffer harm from too many visits. A distance of about a mile is sufficient, but following the example of our holy fathers, and especially of St Francis, we should prefer to go to solitary and deserted places, rather than to fine cities.<sup>24</sup>

Another important point that must be stressed is the ‘poverty’ that the Order must continuously practise. The revised constitution of 1608<sup>25</sup> stipulates specific instructions on how such poverty ought to be exercised. The Order shall have ‘no jurisdiction, dominion, ownership, legal possession, usufruct or legal use of anything at all, even of the things we use of necessity, or of the places where we live’. Moreover, the Constitution even supplies the details on how the Order can come to possess territories for its monasteries, and they are worth quoting now, for they also shall have great bearing, together with distance and the begging of alms, of what would be narrated later.

Therefore we order that when the brothers wish to establish a new house, in addition to obtaining the consent of the Provincial Chapter and the permission of our Father General, according to the teaching of St Francis they shall first go the bishop, or to his Vicar, and ask permission to take that place in his diocese. When the permission has been obtained, and with his blessing, they shall go to the Civil authorities or to the owner and ask for the loan of a house or a piece of land to build on. Or else they should wait until the authorities or an owner ask them to take a house in their territory.<sup>26</sup>

There is no doubt that regarding their first monastery in Malta, the Order’s Constitution was followed to the letter – the Grand Master and

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24 Const. (1980) vol. 1, 35-74: *Et accio li seculari possino di noi servirsi ne le cose spirituale : et noi di loro ne le temporale: si ordina: che li nostri lochi non si pigliano molto lontano de le cita Castelli et ville: ne ancho troppo proximi: accio per la troppo frequentia loro: non patiamo detrimento: basta che regolarmente siano distanti un miglio: et mezzo o circa approximandoci sempre piu presto (a exemplo de sancti patri: et precipue del nostro) alli solitarii deserti che alle delisiose citade.*

25 Const. (1608) 6.79: *per demonstrare in effecto che non habiamo alchuna iurisdictione: dominio: proprieta: iuridica possessione: uso fructo; imo ne iuridico uso dalchuna cosa: etiam de quelle che per necessita usiamo.*

26 Const. (1608) 6.80.



other benefactors obliged the Order with land and means of building a monastery at a distance, though not so far, of a city or a town. Its life support was based upon *iċ-ċirka* of Valletta, but later extended further unto the three Cities on the eastern side of the Grand Harbour. It shall be seen how these same fundamental conditions were applied in the building of the next two Capuchin convents, one of which relates to the subject of this paper.

### **The Nuova Custodia<sup>27</sup>**

But first, for the question begs, why did the Capuchin Order need other monasteries when it already had a flourishing one in the suburb of Valletta? Was this monastery not large enough to cater for at least twenty-four friars, or did the Capuchin community need further monasteries for a larger population of friars called to its Order?

It is probable that size and number of vocations had nothing to do with the erection of further monasteries, although the Capuchin community was sizeable with Maltese friars serving both in Malta and in Sicily. It has already been mentioned that the first monastery in Malta formed part and fell under the jurisdiction of the Capuchin Province of Sicily and paid obedience to the Provincial Master residing in Syracuse.

This obedience to the Sicilian Province had now been in force for almost a century and a half, but by the third decade of the 18th century, discord seems to have arisen. The Capuchin Brother Joseph Garzia, who wrote in extreme detail on the Kalkara convent, although admitting of discord between the Maltese members of the Order and those of Sicily, yet glosses over the details of these grievances, listing them only in the sparsest of terms.<sup>28</sup> It is true that he later described a couple of further grievances between the friars of Malta and Sicily, but these had occurred *after* the Maltese community had obtained its

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27 Thus Ciantar (1780) 324-330: *Della Nuova Custodia dei PP. Cappuccini*.

28 Garzia (2003) 53-56.

own Custody, and after it had become independent of the Capuchin Province of Sicily.<sup>29</sup>

Still, Br. Garzia does mention *passim* some of the grievances existing: that the Maltese friars had to serve occasionally in Malta and at other times in Sicily, having to undergo all the perils that the voyage entailed; that since the Provincial superiors were mainly resident in Syracuse, communication was long and difficult; that the Maltese friars were frequently assigned to the small and unimportant monasteries throughout the island of Sicily; that notwithstanding the fact that the Maltese Capuchin community boasted of learned and capable men, yet none had ever been elected to the higher echelons of the Order.<sup>30</sup>

What brought to a head this ill-feeling was an 'incident' that occurred in 1732 during a visit to Malta by the Provincial Superior of Syracuse, Br. Giovanni Maria da Piazza. The Capuchin authors, no doubt in deference to Christian piety, do not elaborate more on this 'incident', but it must have been of a very grave nature to the Maltese Capuchin community since a certain Brother Giuseppe (Grech) da Bormla sought immediately the assistance of Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena, who in turn brought the matter before Pope Clement XII (1730-40) in Rome.<sup>31</sup> Brother Giuseppe was aided by another Capuchin friar of no mean standing, Ercole da Paluzza, a German Capuchin Brother of the Tyrolean Province, who was not only the confessor of Bishop Cagliares, but a spiritual confidant of many high ranking knights and even of Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena himself.

This formidable group of four promoters, no doubt for reasons of their own, now set their sight on a separation of the Maltese Capuchins from their Sicilian Province. According to the statutes of the Capuchin Order, this could only come about with the forming of a Maltese *Custodia*, independent of the Sicilian Province and subject only to the Minister General of the Capuchin Order in Rome. But the Order's Rule

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29 Garzia (2003) 54-55.

30 Garzia (2003) 53-54; 66 note 16, quoting Alfons Maria of Valletta, O.F.M.Cap., *Itra Cirkulari*. In *Terzjarju ta' San Franġisk*, 1/10/85.

31 Garzia (2003) 53.

stipulated that a Custody could only be granted if a territory had three functioning monasteries.<sup>32</sup>

These four promoters, and *disposta la pieta d'alcuni nostri cittadini a soccorrergli colle loro limosine*,<sup>33</sup> managed in the space of a few years to build two further monasteries in addition to the one in Floriana, and by 1740, the Capuchins in Malta had obtained an independent Custody of their own, the Order's constitutional requirements having been fulfilled.

Judging from the activities undertaken following the 'incident' of 1732, it seems that the Capuchins fell upon a plan to take over some ready-built church on the outskirts of a city or a town, and with the financial assistance of the faithful, built a monastery around it. Although attempted, since it would have saved on time and costs to build, such a plan failed to materialize in Malta, yet it was successful in Gozo.

The failed attempt in Malta occurred in 1735: a proposal was made to build a monastery around the lately built church of the Immaculate Conception on the outskirts of Ħaż-Żebbuġ.<sup>34</sup> This church stood at a distance of a mile from the centre of the village of Ħaż-Żebbuġ, and at a somewhat longer distance from Hal Qormi. Grand Master Vilhena offered tools and money, and generous benefactors came forward with their offerings. But the Capuchins refused this offer on the grounds that it was too far from their other monastery at Floriana.<sup>35</sup>

This writer believes that such an excuse fails to convince: for the distance overland between Floriana and Ħaż-Żebbuġ is nearly equal to that between Floriana and *l-Ghasli*, the area outside the San Salvatur Bastion at Birgu, where the Capuchin monastery was eventually

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32 Ciantar (1780) 324.

33 Ciantar (1780) 324.

34 Ciappara (2001) 53-55. Built as a vow following the May-Sept. plague of 1676 by Giovanni and Paolina Azzopardi. For the deed of donation, see Acts of Not. Benedetto Vassallo, 21 Aug. 1677. Ciappara describes it as *la maggiore fra le chiesole ed è una della più belle e valide*.

35 Garzia (2003) 16-17, quoting Patri Pelaġju and Patri Timotju Attard, both historians of the Capuchin Order in Malta.

built; even if a traveller, at that time, had to use a ferry boat to cross Grand Harbour, the distance would still have been of the same length since reaching the Floriana monastery from the Harbour would have entailed a long walk either from the Porta Marina, through Valletta, or from the Xatt il-Qwabar through the Porta Sant' Anna. More probably the real reason rested elsewhere: were the Capuchins more concerned that the alms of the populations of the nearby villages of Ħaż-Żebbuġ and Ħal Qormi would not be able to sustain their new convent? Did the parish priests of these two villages object on the grounds that their income and rights would be diminished through the activities of a mendicant Order in their midst?<sup>36</sup> Or had the Capuchins already been made aware of Giuseppe Abela's deliberations regarding a donation of land situated on the outskirts of the San Salvatur bastion, with its proximity to the populous Birgu, Bormla and Isla to the East and a growing Ħaż-Żabbar to its West?

The timing of the next move of the Capuchins would point out that the latter was a more valid reason. The Capuchins refused the Ħaż-Żebbuġ offer in 1735. In the first week of January, 1736, six days before Giuseppe Abela made his donation by a public deed, *suppliche*<sup>37</sup> had already been dispatched to the Civil and Ecclesiastical authorities asking permission to build a monastery on the outskirts of the San Salvatur Bastion. The application to the Civil authorities was dated 7 of January, 1736, and addressed to the Commission of War.<sup>38</sup> In their petition, the Capuchins claimed that they were in possession of a written promise for a grant of land on the outskirts of Birgu and Bormla for their new monastery, but that mindful of the proximity of the fortifications, they were seeking the Commission's opinion for the best location where to build their monastery lest, by their building, they might affect the efficiency of the fortifications. Within three weeks from the application, the Commission of War gave its approval (28 Jan. 1736), having had, in the meantime, dispatched separately its engineer and its ordinary

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36 This was the main obstacle raised by the local church dignitaries against the Kalkara convent (see below).

37 Petition and grant translated into Maltese, in Garzia (2003) 59-61 and 67, note 26, referring to originals in L.N.M., *Registrum Bullarum*, Arch. 539, ff. 137v.-137.

38 Garzia (2003) 60.

commissioner for an on-site inspection, both of whom independently found no objection to the building. Yet, the Commission found it necessary to stipulate the following conditions, namely, that the new monastery and church had to be built at a specified distance from the San Alwiġ Bastion, that the church must not be too large or high,<sup>39</sup> and that if the occasion so required, it had to suffer demolition.<sup>40</sup>

The ecclesiastical authorities gave their approval three months later (9 April, 1736), but the reason for this somewhat late reply was because the parish priest of Birgu and the existing Dominican monastery in Birgu and the Carmelite Discalced monastery in Bormla had to be consulted.<sup>41</sup> Although not specifically stated in the Church's approval

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39 Garzia (2003) 61: *Ukoll, li ma jagħmlux il-knisja kbira u għolja hafna, anzi li jahbuha ffit kemm xejn*. Which is why it nestles on the sloping side of the Kalkara Valley, almost hidden from view but, nevertheless, it was still built within the line of fire from the fortifications. On the importance of a clear line of fire, see G. Bonello (2012a) 48-49.

40 Garzia (2003) 61: *...taht il-kondizzjoni li l-kunvent li se jinbena, għandu jiġi mahtut jekk ikun hemm bżonn li tiġi mharsa dik il-pjazza*. A fate already suffered in 1551 by the Augustinian Monastery, which was built on the present site of Howard Gardens, directly opposite the main gate of Mdina. The inscription in St Mark's monastery, later built a short distance from the original site, records the event.

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AUGUSTINUS ERAM, NUNC MARCI NOMINE SURGO:

AT SI FATA DABUNT NOMINA PRISCA GERAM.

PRIMAEVUM AUGUSTINI COENOBIIUM

5 ANNO DN. MCCCCLX FUNDATUM

ET TURCARUM METU, AN. MDLI DESTRUCTUM,

QUINQUE MOX TRANSACTIS ANNIS,

AN. MDLVI REÆDIFICARI COEPIT,

RURSUSQUE VETUSTATE CONFECTUM,

10 AN. MDCCLIX A FUNDAMENTIS ERECTUM FUIT

ET IN HANC FORMAM REDACTUM.

41 Garzia (2003) 57-58.

letter, yet, from the gist of the wording, it is probable that these existing institutions found objection on the grounds that their own incomes might be affected by this new mendicant Order in their midst. Mindful of these objections, Bishop Alpheran gave his approval (pending the final approval of the Holy See) on condition that the Floriana Capuchin monastery would in future refrain from alms begging in the Three Cities and that, henceforth, this *ċirka* would be undertaken in lieu by the new monastery, thus safeguarding the incomes of the existing monasteries in Birgu and Bormla; and in the interest of the Parish Priest of Birgu, the Bishop ordered that the Parish Priest of Birgu should not be deprived of his rights should any burials occur in the Capuchins' new church.<sup>42</sup> The status quo was thus maintained.

### ***Hoc amplo donati solo***

While the *suppliche* were being processed, Giuseppe Abela appeared before Notary Pietro Antonio Madiona at Ħal Tarxien on the 13th of January, 1736, in order to make a donation of land to the Capuchin friars.<sup>43</sup> Notary Madiona, as was generally his wont, but even more so in this deed, aware that copies of this deed would be circulated to the Bishop's Curia and other ecclesiastical entities in Rome, wrote in Latin and with a minimum of abbreviated words. He even wrote the date in full and formally aligned the current year to the pontifical year of the Pontiff in Rome, the reigning Grand Master and Prince of these Islands, and the Bishop of Malta, none other than Manoel de Vilhena and Paolo Alpheran de Bussan respectively. The witnesses present for this deed were Don Federico Habela, the Parish Priest of Ħal Tarxien, and Giovanni Maria Hellul.

The Capuchin Order, in its humility and in the exercise of poverty according to the precepts of its Rule, was not present, but the Notary appeared *ex officio* on its behalf.

The act of donation was declared *irrevocabilis* and *inter vivos* in favour of the Reverend Capuchin Fathers, and consisted of eight

42 Garzia (2003) 56-58 and 66 note 23, quoting source: Lorenzo Lanzon, *Memorie Diverse*, Tomo I, ff. 63-64, Arkivju Kollegjata Birgu.

43 N.A.V. R322/18, fol. 495v-497v. Not. Pietro Antonio Madiona, 13 January, 1736.

tumuli of land, called *ta' Wicc il Kbir*,<sup>44</sup> situated outside the Cottonera fortifications and bounded on the east and south by a public road and on the west and north by territory belonging to the donor Abela himself.<sup>45</sup> The purpose of this donation was duly expressed:

ut praedicti reverendi patres possint, libereque valeant in huiusmodi bonis supra donatis, fidelium auxilio, charitate, ac eleemosinis, novum aedificari facere conventum cum ecclesia, stantiis, et commoditatibus pro residentia dictorum reverendorum patrum, ac viridariolo placitis, et benevisis insimul coniunctis.<sup>46</sup>

It was also stipulated that the Father Capuchins could take possession of this donated land as from the following 1 of July.<sup>47</sup>

Giuseppe Abela imposed two conditions. The first concerned the pending *suppliche* to the civil and ecclesiastical authorities. It was declared in the deed that, should the monastery fail to be built for any reason whatsoever, then the donation would be null and void.<sup>48</sup>

The second condition that Giuseppe Abela imposed was that the church ought to be under the title of St Barbara, Virgin and Martyr.<sup>49</sup> Presumably, the dedication to St Barbara was to the memory of Giuseppe Abela's mother whose name was Barbara and who had died

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44 Also known in other documents as *ta' l-Ghassieli*, *ta' Aasli*, *Hissieli*, *Terra Habela* (Garzia {2003} 19).

45 This land extended through the Kalkara valley; so much so, that the Kalkara Parish Church was after WWII built upon land that had belonged to Abela (Garzia {2003} 20).

46 N.A.V. R322/18, 496v.

47 N.A.V. R322/18, 496v.

48 N.A.V. R322/18, 497: *Et primo quod si forte quavis ex causa, seu occasione Conventus praedictus non fuerit aedificatus in bonis supra donatis, et nominatis, tunc illico, et immediate praesens donatio intelligatur et sit cassa, irrita, et nulla, nulliusque roboris, efficaciae, et momenti tanquam si minime facta fuisset, videlicet ex nunc pro tunc, eo adveniente casu, dictus Donator illam revocavit, et revocat, annullavitque, et annullat, et non aliter.*

49 N.A.V. R322/18, 497: *Demum quod praedicta ecclesia ut supra coniunctim aedificanda sit, ac esse debeat sub invocatione Divae Barbarae Virginis, et Martiris, et non aliter.*

of the plague in 1676 and had been buried at St Laurence's cemetery, Birgu.<sup>50</sup>

In regard to the area of land donated, the author of the inscription had, with good reason, qualified it *amplum*, which it is; considering the area in modern terms, each *tomna* being equivalent to 1124 sq. m., the whole area donated was thus equal to 8992 sq. m.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, this area does not include the other land portions donated by Abela in the following year.

Needless to say, the inscription's author, aware of his public mission, recorded the purpose of the donation in grander terms than the Notary had in his deed (line 10: *pro templo, c<o>enobio, arca, atque pomerio*).

### **EDIFICIUM EXCITANTE PERFICIENTEQUE**

With the deed for the grant of land duly signed, the Ecclesiastical and Civil applications approved, and a substantial sum of money (5375 scudi) donated *da diverse persone devote*<sup>52</sup> but well before the handover date as stipulated in the deed of donation, a procession was held on the 26 April 1736, led by the Parish Priest of the Annunciation church and including no less a figure than that of the Inquisitor Carlo Durini, (later Cardinal of the Roman Church), and made its way from the Church of the Annunciation in Birgu to the site where the church and convent were to be built. When a cross was planted on the site, Giuseppe Grech (one of the group of four and later destined to head the Maltese Capuchin Community) delivered a sermon.<sup>53</sup>

On 18 June 1736 another even more solemn procession to lay the foundation stone was led by Bishop Alpheran, in which the Cathedral Chapter, Knights, title holders and a large concourse of lay people took

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50 Garzia (2003) 20. Although Garzia marks this entry with a footnote (15), yet all the footnotes for the first chapter, presumably by some type setting error, are missing.

51 Garzia (2003) 20 is wrong in his calculations.

52 Ciantar (1780) 326.

53 Ciantar (1780) 326-327.



part. Buried beneath the foundation stone, Ciantar assures us<sup>54</sup> – the evidence is now buried beneath one of the massive pillars beside the High Altar – was a lead casket in which, apart from some sacred relics and gold coins, there was also deposited a copper plate with the incised coat of arms of the Capuchin Order as well as of the Order of Jerusalem together with the incised effigies of St Barbara and St Francis. It also contained the following inscription.<sup>55</sup>

MAGNO MAGISTERIO  
PER TERNA JAM PROPEMODUM LUSTRA  
GLORIOSE FUNGENTE  
EM. DOMINO D.  
5 FRATRE ANTONIO MANOEL DE VILHENA,  
FUNDAMENTALEM HANC PRIMAM PETRAM  
S. BARBARAE VIRG., ET MART. TUTELAE  
DICATAM  
RITU SOLEMNI POSUIT  
10 ILL. ET REV. D. ANTISTES MELITENSIS  
F. PAULUS ALPHERAN DE BUSSAN ETC.  
XV KAL. JULII  
INCIDENTE DOMINICA IX POST PENTECOSTEN  
MDCCXXXVI  
15 REGIMINIS SUI  
ANNO IX

Work proceeded so fast that, by the end of the year, the edifice was declared *Ospizio formale di Residenza permanente*.<sup>56</sup> But there occurred some snags in the building lines: it was thought that the sacristy would

<sup>54</sup> Ciantar (1780) 327.

<sup>55</sup> Ciantar (1780) 327.

<sup>56</sup> Ciantar (1780) 327.

be too small, that a larger *vestibulum* would better befit the church and, most important of all, that the faithful lacked a proper access road from the Bastions to the Monastery.

*Hilari facie*,<sup>57</sup> the donor Giuseppe Abela again appeared before Notary Madiona on 2 of January, 1737, and donated further land out of his own property to address these deficiencies.<sup>58</sup> But this time round, Giuseppe Abela stipulated some further conditions, in addition to those in the original donation, the most important being that it should be allowed to him and his descendants to construct at his own expense two cells within the monastery should ever he or his descendants wish *per aliquod temporis spatium sibi benevisum a seculo separare, et viam spiritualem exercere*<sup>59</sup> (similar to what Bishop Cagliares and Grand Master Verdala had done at Floriana) and that the donor, again at his own expense, be allowed, if he ever so desired, to build a sepulchre for himself and his descendants within the church.<sup>60</sup> No evidence has been discovered that Giuseppe or his descendants ever made use of these two stipulations, for Giuseppe Abela was buried in the church of St Theresa of the Discalced Carmelites at Bormla; nor does Garzia make any mention of any of Abela's descendants ever spending time at the monastery.

Four months later (28 April, 1737), the works had progressed so far, that a small chapel was built so as to receive the Holy Sacrament on a permanent basis; again, the translation of the Sacrament was conducted in the full pageantry of a procession, this time starting from the church of San Lorenzo.<sup>61</sup>

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57 So wrote Notary Madiona in the deed referring to 2 Cor. 9.7: *hilarem enim datorem diligit Deus*.

58 N.A.V. R322/19, ff. 498-499v. The largest part consisted of the public access lane: *176 cannarum* (equivalent to 459 metres) *mensurandarum a vestibulo dictae ecclesiae recta linea usque ad fossam munitiorum Cottonerae ac largitudinis cannarum duarum* (equivalent to 4.27 metres) *inclusis parietibus pro construendo publico itinere*.

59 N.A.V. R322/19, f. 499.

60 N.A.V. R322/19, f. 499v.

61 Ciantar (1780) 327.

By the last day of July, 1943, the building of the church had been completed and was blessed on 2nd August, 1743, by P. Giuseppe Grech.<sup>62</sup> The solemn consecration was performed on 18 of July, 1747, by Bishop Alpheran as the following inscription on white marble (still extant on the left hand side of the high altar) commemorates.

TEMPLUM HOC  
 DIVAE BARBARAE VIRGINI, AC MARTYRI, SACRUM,  
 DIVINA SIC DISPONENTE PROVIDENTIA  
 SUMMA M. M. D. ANTONII MANOEL LIBERALITATE,  
 5                      PIISQUE FIDELIUM ELE<A>EMOSINIS  
 AC SEDULA ADM: R.R. P.P. F.F. JOSEPHI A MELITA EX CUSTODIS  
 ET HERCULANI A PALLUZZA CONCIONAT. MISSIONARII APOSTOLICI  
 ATQUE PROVINCIAE TYROLENSIS PROFESSI CURA,  
 A FUNDAMENTIS ERECTUM,  
 10                      MATERIALI JAM CONSTRUCTIONE ABSOLUTUM  
 AD SPIRITALIS AEDIFICATIONIS COMPLEMENTUM  
 ILLMUS. ET RMUS. DNUS. FR. PAULUS ALPHERAN DE BUSSAN  
 MELITAE ANTISTES ET DAMIATAE ARCHIEPISCOPUS  
 DIE XVIII MENS. JUNII REP. SAL. ANNO MDCCXLVII  
 15                      RITU SOLEMNI  
 CONSECRAVIT

It is to be noted that on this inscription<sup>63</sup> there were inscribed the names of the four main promoters who undertook the separation of the Capuchin Order from that of Syracuse so as to form the new Maltese

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62    Ciantar (1780) 327.

63    Ciantar (1780) 328 also prints this inscription, but it is worth mentioning that he had rendered the abbreviated R.R., P.P. and R.R. (line 6) into RR., PP., FF. Similar rendering had been done by Ciantar in the *MUTAT TERRA VICES* transcription (see note 6 above). Such editing flags a note of warning that Ciantar's monumental transcriptions may not represent exactly the original inscriptions.

Custody. Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena, although he had been dead since 1736, still got a mention for his support and for his *liberalitas*. No specific mention was made of Giuseppe Abela's donation; but, in fairness, it has to be stated that he was probably included in the generic term PIISQUE FIDELIUM ELEEMOSINIS (line 5).

In the meantime, the promoters for the New Capuchin Custody were not idle. In September, 1736, while on his second pastoral visit to Gozo, Bishop Alpheran espied an old church in an area called *Fomm il-Gir* on the Marsalforn road, lying at a small distance from the Citadel and its suburb, which church could be incorporated within a complex to serve as the third Capuchin monastery requisite by the Capuchin constitution for an independent Custody. Also the site was ideal in terms of distance, that is, not far from a town (in this case the *Citadella* and its Rabat) and yet, not so close.<sup>64</sup>

The concept of utilizing an existing church around which the monastery could be built was this time round successfully adopted. This church was quite old and had previously been dedicated to St Julian, then to St Agatha, and later still to Our Lady of Graces. Bishop Alpheran thought fit that the monastery should be incorporated around this church. Similarly, also, consent was demanded from the Collegiate Archpriest and from the Order's Governor of Gozo because of the proximity of the site to the town's fortifications.<sup>65</sup>

Work on both monasteries in Malta and Gozo progressed so far that the New Custody of Malta was declared on the 25 June, 1740, with Brother Giuseppe Grech being nominated the first Custodian.<sup>66</sup> The consecration of the churches came later; that of Malta, as shown in the inscription above, in 1747, and that of Gozo in 1755 during Bishop's Alpheran fourth pastoral visit. The consecration tablet in the Gozo Capuchin Church is self-explanatory and narrates the full story.<sup>67</sup>

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64 Ciantar (1780) 328-9.

65 Ciantar (1780) 329.

66 Garzia (2003) 65. No doubt, in recognition of his pains to set up the Maltese Custody.

67 The source of this transcription is the *in situ* inscription affixed just above the entrance to the crypt. Ciantar (1780) 329-330 also prints this inscription, but takes quite a few liberties with the line divisions (26 lines for the actual 15) and in

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ECCLESIAM, QUAM MAGNÆ ANGELOR. REGINÆ A GRATIJS NUNCUPATAM,

A MAJORIBUS EXTRACTAM, DENUO RESTAURATAM,

ILLMUS. ET RMUS. DNUS. FR. PAULUS ALPHERAN DE BUSSAN

5 EPUS. MELITEN. ARCHIEPUS. DAMIATEN,

IN DECURSU SECUNDÆ SUÆ SANCTÆ VISITATIONIS ANNO 1737,

FRATRIBUS MINORIBUS CAPPUCCINIS CONCESSERAT;

QUARTA IN HAC VISITATIONE

ASCETERIO ORNATAM, PIETATE EXCULTAM,

10 RELIGIOSORUM MANSIONE, CURA, ORATIONIBUS DECORATAM

IDEM ILLUS. ET RMUS. DNUS. SOLEMNI RITU CONSECRAVIT

DIE 5 MENSIS OCTOBR. ANNI 1755

CUJUS CONSECRATIONIS MEMORIAM

DOMINICA INFRA OCTAVAM NATIVITATIS EJUSDEM B. VIRGINIS

15 CELEBRANDAM MANDAVIT.

**FIDELIUM PIETATE**

From the context of its occurrence, *pietas* is manifested by a tangible donation of one's own possessions for pious causes. Since possessions were held at God's pleasure (*bonis ex Deo collatis*),<sup>68</sup> it was only just and dutiful that the possessor acknowledged God's bounty by donating all or part of it in alms or in the foundation of churches and other charitable works upon which God was thought to especially look with favour; on the other hand, it was also piously hoped that this liberality would

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the abbreviations and spellings (cf. line 7: FRATRIB. MINORIB. CAPUCCINIS for FRATRIBUS MINORIBUS CAPPUCCINIS CONCESSERAT; also, in line 6, he prints ANNO 1736 for 1737. For such reasons as these, Ciantar's transcriptions, as has been noted above, ought to be considered suspect.

68 Cf. N.A.V. R284/15, Notary Tommaso Gatt, Testamentum Ercole Testaferrata 11 Oct., 1748, f. 345v: *cupit dum tempus habet de bonis suis sibi a Deo collatis salubriter disponere*.

rebound onto the donor, as Christ himself had promised: *date et dabitur vobis*; and moreover the promised return was extremely generous: *mensuram bonam confersam et coagitatam et supereffluentem dabunt in sinum vestrum; eadem quippe mensura qua mensi fueritis remetietur vobis*.<sup>69</sup>

The concept of giving with the expectation of a return, especially in regard to donations for pious works and remission of sins, was elaborated in a homily of Haymo of Halberstadt<sup>70</sup> where he explains Luke's 6.38 *date et dabitur vobis* as *ad dandam eleemosinam pertinet*<sup>71</sup> quoting Lk. 11.41: *date eleemosynam et ecce omnia munda sunt vobis*. Moreover, the close connection of forgiveness, donations and remission of sins is elaborated in his injunction: *dimittere enim iniurias debemus et eleemosynas dare, ut detur nobis vita aeterna*. For, continues Bishop Haymo,

Qui enim pro Deo in praesenti vita maiorem amorem assumpserit, et uberiores eleemosynas tribuerit, maiorem remunerationem in aeterna vita recipiet, teste Apostolo, qui ait: qui parce seminat, parce et metet; et qui seminat in benedictionibus, de benedictionibus metet (2 Cor. 9.6) in vitam eternam.

Subsequently, the highly important and influential Lateran Council IV duly incorporated this manifestation of piety in Canon 62,<sup>72</sup> which text, in one form or another, made its way into the prologues of donation deeds drawn up by notaries for would-be donors for pious causes. Hence Notary Madiona, not to be outdone, also added his own prologue in this sense for Giuseppe Abela's donation:

considerans nihil animarum saluti salubrius esse, quam servos Dei in construendo pia loca pro cultu Divino auxiliare, totisque viribus

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69 Lk. 6.38.

70 M.P.L. 118, 0615C.

71 M.P.L. 118, 0619A.

72 Lateran Council IV, Canon 62: *Quoniam, ut ait Apostolus, omnes stabimus ante tribunal Christi, recepturi prout in corpore gessimus, sive bonum sive malum fuerit, oportet nos diem messonis extremae misericordiae operibus praevenire, ac aeternorum intuitu seminare in terris quod reddente Domino cum multiplicato fructu colligere debeamus in caelis; firmam spem, fiduciamque tenentes, quoniam "qui parce seminat, parce et metet, et qui seminat in benedictionibus, de benedictionibus et metet in vitam aeternam.* ([http://www.intratext.com/ixt/eng0431/\\_P1Q.HTM](http://www.intratext.com/ixt/eng0431/_P1Q.HTM) (last accessed 12/09/2014).

sublevare cum id praemaxime apud Deum Salvatorem nostrum gratum acceptumque venit; cupiens itaque huiusmodi charitatis opus in Thesauro celesti per elemosinam reponere; quapropter... qui (ita volente, et expresse mandante dicto Domino donatore)... veniamque, et peccatorum remissionem eidem domino Donatori et...concedere, et impetrare, ipsosque in extremo vitae puncto unde pendet aeternitas ab insidiis Diaboli defendere dignentur.<sup>73</sup>

Such a concept was not lacking among the faithful. The inscription duly notes that the manifestation of *pietas*, that is the donations, were instrumental in the building and the completion of the church and monastery destined for the service of the Capuchin Order. Not least was, of course, Abela's land donation, but mention should also be made of the donations of the faithful which spanned all social classes. Thus, apart from Grand Master Vilhena, who had already donated 500 scudi together with various building implements and the provision of workers, others came forward with their pious donations, notably 17 benefactors who offered the substantial sum of 4575 scudi<sup>74</sup> and the Bali Scolaro who offered 3200 scudi.<sup>75</sup> Nor should the lower classes be forgotten; for the Capuchin Order also organized collections, known in Maltese as *iċ-ċirka*, in which the petty donations of the common folk were also presumably invested as remission for their sins.<sup>76</sup>

No wonder then that *disposta la pieta d'alcuni nostri cittadini a soccorrergli colle loro limosine*,<sup>77</sup> their *pietas* was recorded both in the inscription (line 11: FIDELIUM PIETATE) and, moreover, even on the head stone of the original main door which had:

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73 N.A.V. R322/18, f. 496. In the second donation, N.A.V. R322/19, f. 498v, the last sentence is substituted by *eosdemque ad caelestia gaudia perducere dignentur*.

74 Garzia (2003) 18.

75 Ciantar (1780) 328, par. xiii.

76 Garzia (2003) 17-18.

77 Ciantar (1780) 324, par. i.

## PIETAS POPULI AEDIFICAVIT

–inscribed upon it, before it was removed by the later addition of the present portico.<sup>78</sup>

It is to be noted that, while in the present inscription *pietate* is rendered in the ablative absolute with the participles *excitante* and *perficiente*, in Ciantar's rendition the participles are rendered as *excitantes* and *perficientes* agreeing with the *Patres Capuchini*, and *pietate* is therefore an ablative of means. Both renditions are of course grammatically correct, but considering that the Father Capuchins were bound to poverty and a mendicant life, I consider that Ciantar's rendition is less factual and does not fully acknowledge the deeds and beliefs of the generous population. Even Notary Madiona, in his second deed of 1737, acknowledged that it was the love and the donations of the faithful that was erecting the building when he wrote: *fidelium charitate, ac elemosinis iam in constructione reperitur*.<sup>79</sup>

### ***Stemmata quid faciunt?*<sup>80</sup> Part 1**

Very little is known of Giuseppe Abela. The patrician title attributed to him in the inscription (line 8: INGENUOQUE PATRICIO) is difficult to attest since, if he ever was a descendant of the Abelas, barons of *Pietra Lunga*, he was definitely far removed from the direct line of descent. The titles attributed to him in the notarial deeds of donation consist solely of *perillustris dominus clericus Joseph Abela*. These same titles are similar to those attributed to a Doctor of Both Civil and Ecclesiastical Laws. Count Ciantar describes him simply as *gentiluomo maltese*.<sup>81</sup> Notary Tommaso Gatt describes him as *il signor Giuseppe Abela*, his wife as *signora Domenica* and his father-in-law as *don Pietro Saliba*.<sup>82</sup>

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78 It now reads: DIN HI D-DAR T'ALLA.

79 N.A.V. R322/19, f. 498v.

80 Juv., *Sat.* 8.1.

81 Ciantar (1780) 326, par. ix.

82 N.A.V. R284/16, f. 203v.



That Giuseppe was very rich there is indeed no doubt. The extent of land and houses and shops he possessed and the incomes he received were extensive as can be seen from the inventory of possessions drawn up following the death of his daughter (heir to her father's estate, following her own death which occurred within 4 years of her father's decease) in the acts of Notary Tommaso Gatt dated 3 of July, 1750.<sup>83</sup> In fact, it was estimated that her own income amounted to some 1200 scudi a year, a very substantial sum indeed.

Son of Giovanni Paolo, a Doctor of both Civil and Ecclesiastical laws, and Barbara Farrugia (married 1662 and who died in the plague of 1676 and was buried in Birgu), he does not seem to have progressed far up the social ladder, and seems to have led the comparatively simple life of a *benestante*. The fact that two of his great uncles and a paternal uncle had entered monastic orders (the Capucchin Order) meant that his father, and ultimately Giuseppe, were the major recipients of the paternal inheritance. Giuseppe's only sibling, Anna, married in 1684 to Giovanni Maria Mamo, had no issue. Giuseppe was a cleric who married in 1701 to Veronica Saliba<sup>84</sup> from whom he had two daughters, Veneranda and Rosalea.

The notarial deeds also state that Giuseppe was born in Birgu, but that he resided in Tarxien where he had extensive properties, including a house in the area of *ta' Kejka*. He died in 1745 and was buried in the Chapel of Santa Marija tal-Għolja tal-Karmelu within the Church of Santa Theresa of the Order of the Discalced monks at Bormla.<sup>85</sup>

The early 1730's looked bleak for Giuseppe's house and his extensive wealth. He must have been over 60 at this time and a widower. His daughter Rosalea was a widow with no issue and his first-born daughter, Veneranda, now in her thirties, was a spinster in his house.

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83 N.A.V. R284/16, ff. 166v-208v.

84 *Libro d'Oro di Melita*, <http://www.maltagenealogy.com/libro%20d'oro/abela2.html> (last accessed 18/03/2013). But the inventory in the acts of Tommaso Gatt R284/16 f. 204 describes a portrait in Ercole Testaferrata's house as *un ritratto della fu signora Domenica Saliba moglie del detto signor Giuseppe Abela*.

85 N.A.V. R284/15, f. 346.

## ***Stemmata quid faciunt? Part 2***

On the 24th day of March, 1714, at the age of 59, the Noble Paolo Testaferrata<sup>86</sup> was laid to rest in a magnificent tomb prepared for himself and his descendants on the presbytery just beneath the High Altar in the church of St Theresa of the Discalced monks at Bormla.<sup>87</sup> Claiming descent from the ancient Roman Capiferri *gens*, Paolo boasted in his epitaph that he had carried up to the highest extremes of fame the noble Testaferrata family's name since he had managed to combine the baronies of Cicciano in the Kingdom of Naples and of Gomerino in Malta. Adding the name of his maternal uncle, Bishop Baldassare Cagliares, for good measure, to whom he acknowledged the grant of right of patronage for his family's sepulchre, he left little else spiritual in his inscription except to say that he fostered the Discalced Carmelite monastery. Paolo Testaferrata's epitaph reads as follows:<sup>88</sup>

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86 For the early history of the Testaferrata family, see Abela (1647) 532-537; for subsequent history see Ciantar (1780) 487-488.

87 Paolo Testaferrata's epitaph is still extant, though it is now partly covered by the altar-table.

88 Edited transcription to read: line 6: *seri<e>*; line 8: *barona<li>bus*; line 11: *ad*.

D. O. M.

NOBILEM TESTAFERRATAM FAMILIAM,  
 VETUSTISSIMAE CAPIFERRIAE GENTIS ROMANAE  
 INCLITUM GERMEIN,  
 5       QUAE ROMAE, ET MESSANAE INTER PATRITIAS RELATA,  
 VIROS HABUIT IN OMNI HONORUM SERI PROBATISSIMOS  
 PAULUS TESTAFERRATA  
 ADIECTIS BARONABUS DITIONIBUS,  
 CICCIANI IN REGNO NEAPOLITANO, GOMERINI IN HAC INSULA  
 10       AD SUMMAE CLARITUDINIS FASTIGIUM EVEXIT.  
 ET NE QUID EI DEESSET AD GLORIAM,  
 HAERES AMORIS MAGNI AVUNCULI SUI  
 BALTHASSARIS CAGLIARESII EPISCOPI MELITENSIS,  
 IN CARMELITAS DISCALCEATOS QUOS ACCIVIT, ET FOVIT  
 15       IN HOC MAIORI SACELLO, SUIS IN PATRONATUM ADDICTO,  
 SEPULCRUM SIBI, ET POSTERIS PRAEPARAVIT.  
 OBIIT DIE XXIV MARTII ANNO MDCCXIV  
 AETATIS SUAE LIX

With all these noble titles and honours (since the Testaferrata *primogenito* had always retained the post of *Depositario* of the Inquisition ever since its inception in Malta,<sup>89</sup> and the fact that the Testaferrata family were always on good terms with the Order),<sup>90</sup> Paolo must have indeed faced death tranquilly, assured that the future of the Testaferrata house was safe – his first-born, Fabrizio, although now a widower for three years, had already fathered a son, Pietro Antonio, and the perpetuation of the Testaferrata house was thus assured.

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<sup>89</sup> Ciappara (2000) 55.

<sup>90</sup> Paolo Testaferrata had even been the *secreto* of Grand Master Perellos (Ciantar, 1789, 487).

But Nature's debt inadvertently intervened. Still in his teens, Pietro Antonio was married to a Testaferrata relative by the name of Pulchra to whom a daughter was born. Three years later (1730), Pietro Antonio himself was dead.

Proud Paolo Testaferrata's house had now no male descendant – the title of Baron of Gomerino could only be transferred by nomination to a male heir or to the first-born – and faced extinction unless some quick measures were taken in hand. Paolo's widow, Beatrice Cassia, still alive, also took a prominent lead to perpetuate the House.

It seems that at first Fabrizio was reluctant to remarry. But then Rosalea, the daughter of Giuseppe Abela, and widow of Antonio Mallia, a Doctor of Both Laws, was proposed. Rosalea refused, and with all the connections that the Testaferratas had with the Inquisition, Rosalea was confined within the cloistered convent of Santa Scolastica at Vittoriosa to reassess her position.<sup>91</sup> But to no avail.

Further drastic action had now to be taken. Fabrizio had a younger brother, Ercole Martino, now advanced in years, still unmarried and a cleric and, apart from suffering certain infirmities, lacked 'certain personal qualities'. Neither were his financial interests founded on a sound basis, since much of his income had been earmarked for the payment of his outstanding debts.<sup>92</sup> But whatever Ercole Testaferrata lacked was surely made good by his holding of one of the most idyllic places in Gozo, the Lunzjata benefice, bestowed upon him by the Order of St John on whom the dominion of the benefice rested.<sup>93</sup> To show his gratitude, Ercole had inscribed a heart-touching inscription upon the

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91 Ciappara (2000) 126, quoting AIM, Corr. 94, ff. 266v-269r.

92 Grounds of objection raised by Inquisitor Passionei to Ercole Testaferrata's appointment as *depositario* of the Inquisition. Cf. <http://www.chemistrydaily.com/chemistry/Gomerino> (last accessed 18/03/2013). But Ercole Testaferrata was still nominated *depositario* after the death of his elder brother, since he carried the Testaferrata name.

93 Cf. Abela (1647), 356-357; Agius de Soldanis 79-80; Stanley Fiorini (2001) 13.2.165-208. Only clerics were nominated. Since they did not marry, the rectorship devolved back upon the Grand Master when they died or married. Ercole was nominated on the 5th May, 1678, by Grand Master Perellos. No insinuation of nepotism is suggested, but Ercole's father, Paolo, was the *Segreto* of Grand Master Perellos (Ciantar {1780} 487).

fountain he undertook to be constructed to channel the flowing waters of the Lunzjata Valley within a monumental setting incorporating the coat of arms of Grand Master Perellos and the Testaferratas.

STEMMATA QVAE CERNIS RENOVATO IN FONTE VIATOR

HAEC PRIVS AVCTORIS PECTORE SCVLPSIT AMOR.

HERCVLES MARTINVS TESTAFERRATA EX MVNIFICENTIA

SER. DNI. M. M. FR. DON RAIIMVNDI PERELLOS ET

5 ROCCAFVL RECTOR HVIVS BENEFICII POSVIT

ANNO DOMINI 1698

And as if this public show of gratitude was not enough, Ercole also had a large portrait of Grand Master Perellos hung in his own house as it was later included in the inventory recorded by Notary Tommaso Gatt.<sup>94</sup>

And so, Veneranda, the first-born daughter of Giuseppe Abela, growing old in her father's house, was proposed to Ercole. Ercole, bestowed in the title of Baron of Gomerino (his brother Fabrizio, while retaining the Barony of Cicciano, refused to hand over the Gomerino estate),<sup>95</sup> suffered the loss by resignation of the Lunzjata benefice but gained the hand of Veneranda in marriage in 1735.

## **BONO CUM OMINE**

With these three words, subtly weaved into this inscription, did the erudite author immortalize the nuptials of Veneranda Abela and Ercole Martino Testaferrata, upon whom, heavily outweighed by the odds of biological time, the future of their respective houses lay. The reader would of course have immediately noticed the origin of this word-string, deceptively commonplace, yet unique in Classical literature,

94 N.A.V. R 284/16, f. 177v: *un ritratto del G. M. Perellos colla sua cornice dorata alto cinque palmi in circa.*

95 He did later, on his death-bed. Cf. N.A.V. R284/14: Not. Tommaso Gatt, *Testamentum Fabritii Testaferrata*, 12 Aug. 1744, f. 272.

and recalled its provenance. For Catullus (*Car.* 61) had of old sung an Epithalamium for Junia and Manlius, and some of its verses<sup>96</sup> stood also most apt to the marriage of Veneranda and Ercole Martino.

160	transfer <b>omine cum bono</b> limen aureolos pedes, rasilemque subi forem.	Lift across the threshold with a good omen your golden feet, and enter within the polished door.
	aspice intus ut accubans uir tuus Tyrio in toro totus immineat tibi.	See how your husband within, reclining on a purple couch, is all eagerness for you.

Moreover, the perpetuation of both the Testaferrata's and Abela's Houses through legitimate offspring and in the shortest possible time were of utmost concern, and even here Catullus has the right words for the present occasion:

205	Ludite ut lubet, et brevi liberos date. Non decet tam vetus sine liberis	Sport as you will, and soon bring children forth. It is not fit that so old a <b>name</b> should be without children, but that they should be ever born from the same stock.
	<b>nomen</b> esse, sed indidem Semper ingenerari.	
210	Torquatus volo parvulus Matris e gremio suae Porrigens teneras manus	I would see a little Torquatus, stretching his baby hand from his mother's lap, smile a sweet smile at his father with lips half parted.
	Dulce rideat ad patrem Semihiente labello.	

Substitute Torquatus for a Testaferrata-Abela and the similarity is complete.

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<sup>96</sup> Text and translation, *Catullus, Tibullus, Persius, Vergil, Propertius, Ovid, Lucan, Seneca, Juvenal, Persius, Propertius, Ovid, Lucan, Seneca, Juvenal*, 2000, Trans. F.W. Cornish, Loeb Classical Library, HUP.

## Enter Abel and Joseph

These two Biblical figures make an appearance in lines 5 to 7 of the inscription. Although Abel's entrance and exit in the Bible is done over in just ten verses,<sup>97</sup> Joseph's occupy the last fourteen chapters of Genesis.<sup>98</sup>

The connection concerns not only the similarity of the biblical names to Giuseppe Abela, name and surname, but also relative to their deeds.

In the first instance, the surname Habela or Abela is very close to Abel, and to make the connection even more evident, the inscription's author wrote 'Abela' and not the more usual 'Habela' commonly used in that period.<sup>99</sup>

In the second instance, just as Abel had unreservedly offered of his firstlings and of their fat,<sup>100</sup> so also did Giuseppe offer amply of his lands. And as God had regard<sup>101</sup> to Abel's offerings, so also had He regard to Giuseppe's. Paolo, upon whom the perpetuation of the Testaferrata's and Abela's houses now depended, was born soon after, to be followed by a Maria. So important was this marriage, and so tenuous the link that propagated it, that, in recognition ever after, this branch of the Testaferrata family, claiming the Barony of Gomerino, appended the surname of Abela to the patrilineal Testaferrata according to the Maltese custom.

Moreover, although *Genesis* does not qualify Abel by any epithet, yet Matthew 23.35 does: *Abel Iustus*.<sup>102</sup> The author of the *Letter to*

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97 Gen. 4.2-11.

98 Gen. 37-50.

99 Notary Madiona had always referred to Giuseppe Abela as 'Habela'.

100 Gen. 4.4: *Abel quoque obtulit de primogenitis gregis sui et de adipibus eorum et respexit Dominus ad Abel et ad munera eius.*

101 For Gen. 4.4 and 5, both verbs in the *Vulgata* are *respexit* although the Septuaginta reads *ἐπείδε* and *οὐ προσέσχεν* respectively. P.P. Saydon (Bibbja Saydon {1982} vol. 1) uses also a common verb *hares*, and *ma haresx*.

102 Mt. 23.35: *ut veniat super vos omnis sanguis iustus, qui effusus est super terram, a sanguine Abel Iusti usque ad sanguinem Zacchariae filii Barachiae, quem occidistis inter templum et altare.*

*the Hebrews* took up the cue and also recalled Abel as ‘the Just’.<sup>103</sup> Thereafter, the epithet *Iustus* stuck to Abel through Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage<sup>104</sup> to Ziegler, a 16th century writer of plays based on Biblical personages.<sup>105</sup> And although other biblical personages such as Noah<sup>106</sup> or Joseph, the husband of Mary, were also called ‘the Just’,<sup>107</sup> Giuseppe Abela chose only Abel because of the close similarity to his surname and the favourable offerings upon which God had regard.

Thus, on such a background, Giuseppe not only paid tribute to a Biblical personage whom he imitated by offering God the first-fruits of what God had blessed him with, but also adopted the figure of Abel offering his sacrifice to God as an addition to the Abela coat of arms and had the words *IVSTVS ABEL* written immediately beneath the figure.

The biblical Joseph, the son of Jacob, was a dreamer and an interpreter of dreams by which his fame grew so great, that the reigning Pharaoh appointed him lord of the land of Egypt,<sup>108</sup> besides gaining dominance in his own father’s House.<sup>109</sup> Also, his economic policies, both during the seven years of plenty and during the seven years of want, resulted in all the lands and goods of Egypt coming into the possession of the Pharaoh. Upon this background and others inferred from the context, one cannot help noticing how loaded the inscription’s reference of Joseph to Giuseppe is. For *NOMEN* can refer both to *Fama* and to *Gens*. Through the marriage alliance of his daughter to the noble Testaferrata family, Giuseppe not only increased his prestige and renown within

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103 Hebr. 11.4: *Fide plurimam hostiam Abel, quam Cain, obtulit Deo; per quam testimonium consecutus est esse iustus, testimonium perhibente muneribus eius Deo; et per illam defunctus adhuc loquitur.*

104 Caecilius Cyprianus (249-258) 174: *imitemur, fraters dilectissimi, Abel Iustum qui imitavit martyria, dum propter iustitiam primus occiditur.*

105 H. Ziegler (1559).

106 Gen. 6.9.

107 Mt. 1.19.

108 Gen. 41.44: *dixit quoque ad Joseph: ego sum Pharaos; absque tuo imperio non movebit quisquam manum aut pedem in omni terra Aegypti.*

109 According to Joseph’s dream of the sheaves (Gen. 37.7).



his own Abela *gens*, but also gained progeny and perpetuation for his own *familia*, which would otherwise have become extinct through lack of offspring.

Beside the reference to Fame and House, and the allusion to the marriage alliance of two families on the brink of extinction, there is also the literal sense of the dream. For Giuseppe is also said to have had a dream, or rather, as he himself had claimed, an apparition.<sup>110</sup> Even Bro. Garzia, perhaps reluctant, or even embarrassed, by introducing such a friar's tale in his History of the Kalkara Capuchin Monastery, went to great pains to enlist his sources, quoting the previous histories of Fra Timoteo Attard, a Reader of Church History and Fra Gerardo Debattista, a historian and author of various publications as evidence. The latter had based his narrative on a manuscript of Fra Giovanni Aloisio who in turn got his information from the erudite and prolific writer Fra Pelagio Mifsud Piscopo (1708–81), a contemporary of the building of the Kalkara monastery.<sup>111</sup>

Bro. Garzia narrates that when two friars were one day collecting alms for the building of the Kalkara monastery and had knocked at Giuseppe Abela's, he himself answered the door and spontaneously exclaimed that he already knew what they were after, and that, although he was not giving them any money, he would be donating whatever of land was needed upon which to build the monastery. For, he explained to the bewildered friars at such an outburst, he had that night had a dream in which he saw two of his uncles dressed in their Capuchin habit upbraiding him that his great wealth was due to their not receiving any inheritance except for the pittance of three *uncias* each,<sup>112</sup> and thus they ordered him to make reparations to them by providing their Order with sufficient land upon which to build their monastery. Giuseppe also wondered whether it was a dream or

110 *Gen.* 37.5: *Visum somnium*; *Mt.* 1.20: *ecce angelus Domini in somnis apparuit ei dicens*.

111 For a short biography and *opera*, see Ciappara (2001) 91-93.

112 Children in Religious orders, bound by the vow of poverty, were generally excluded from their parents' inheritance since any goods inherited would have gone to their Order. In order to conform to the law, a small token was bequeathed for their immediate necessities such as clothing; which is why many noble families had their children settled in monasteries so that their whole inheritance might be kept intact for the *primogenito*.

apparition, but concluded on the latter, perhaps consonant to so many apparitions of biblical origin.<sup>113</sup>

The fact that this dream was related by a contemporary Capuchin friar may indicate that Giuseppe Abela had truly believed that he had an apparition, and the erudite inscription's author did not fail to make an allusion to it in his composition.

## MUTAT TERRA VICES

With this word-string from Classical literature, the inscription's author begins his tale. 'Aptly and almost unbidden',<sup>114</sup> it recalls to mind Horace's *Ode* 7 in Book IV with its brief but highly illustrative vignettes of the changing seasons, following each other, year in, year out – in perpetuity, in fact – in contrast to human destiny, where no such mutability and regeneration occur, but having once been born, immutable death follows.<sup>115</sup> Neither riches nor fame of House would ever bring Man back from the world of the dead.<sup>116</sup>

Thus far, Horace is factual and commonplace. The rest is Epicureanism. In death, Man is nothing more than dust and a shade.<sup>117</sup> The changing seasons warn Man to seize the day and enjoy the present life because there is no assurance that Man's fatal hour be not nigh and thus the end of life's joy. So enjoy your possessions yourself before they come into the avid hands of your heirs.<sup>118</sup>

Thus Horace, whose *carmina*, so loved among the Christian faithful, yet whose Epicurean injunctions are so contradicted by the Christian faith. For Christian doctrine teaches that death is not the end of all; that

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113 Garzia (2003) 18-19.

114 A. Lentin ed. (1997) xiv.

115 Hor. C. 4.7.7-8: *Immortalia ne speres, monet annus et alium | quae rapit hora diem.*

116 Hor. C. 4.7.21-23: *Cum semel occideris et de te splendida Minos | fecerit arbitria | non, Torquate, genus, non te facundia...*

117 Hor. C. 4. 7.16: *Pulvis et umbra sumus.*

118 Hor. C. 4.7.19-20: *Cuncta manus avidas fugient heredis amico | quae dederis animo.*

in death there is still life spiritual; that the dust seeks Resurrection and that *pietas*<sup>119</sup> is recompensed by the Beatific Vision.

With such a beginning, the inscription's author leads us into both the literal sense of a changing land from an agriculture or pastoral land unto a land bearing spiritual fruit, and the fact that the donor's *pietas* (manifested by *donatio/eleemosina*) would rebound onto him in matters spiritual and in God's blessings.

In his humility, Giuseppe Abela is attributing this change to St Barbara to whom he appends *PARENS*, Barbara being also the name of his mother who had died long before in the plague of 1676.

Partly following Horace, but with different motives, Giuseppe Abela is seen to have deprived permanently himself, his daughter and her husband of an inheritance of a large plot of land, but acted so in the interest of his and their spiritual lives, for he surely must have believed, unlike Horace, that *pietas* would restore him and his heirs in God's good graces through the remission of their sins, having expressly stated this very aim in the two deeds of donations, represented by *PERVIUM* and *FRUGIFERUM* at line 4 in the inscription:

veniamque et peccatorum remissionem eidem domino donatori,  
ac illustrissimo domino Erculi Testaferrata, et dominae baronissae  
Venerandae suae coniugi, et respective dicti domini Iosephi filiae  
concedere, et impetrare...dignetur.<sup>120</sup>

And Giuseppe Abela must have passed away *aequo animo*<sup>121</sup> in 1745, having seen two grandchildren born, his son-in-law Ercole bestowed not only with the baronial title of *Gomerino*, but also with the estate, generously passed over to him by his brother Fabrizio on

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119 Hor. C. 4.7.23-24: *non te | restituet pietas*.

120 N.A.V. R322/18, f. 496: Notary Pietro Antonio Madiona, 13 Jan. 1736 (*Donatio intervivos pro Veneranda Religione Capuccinorum contra Clericum Iosephum Habela*).

N.A.V. R322/19, f. 498v: Notary Pietro Antonio Madiona, 2 Jan. 1737 (*Donatio intervivos pro Venerando Conventu sub titulo Divi Francisci subregola Capuccinorum contra Illustrem clericum Iosephum Habela*).

121 Sen., *Luc.* 30.4: *cum adventat hora illa inevitabilis, aequo animo abire*.

his death-bed,<sup>122</sup> his daughter honoured with the title of *Baronissa* and his monastery and church dedicated to St Barbara almost completed. God's blessing in dying when he did spare him the sight of the misfortunes and the tragedy that was to befall his grandson and only link to posterity.

## 1754, the date of the Inscription

Three years later, Ercole Martino died and, although buried in the same church as his father, yet did not share his father's sumptuous tomb, but elected to be buried in Giuseppe Abela's.<sup>123</sup> A year later, Veneranda too passed away.<sup>124</sup> Their children, Paolo and Maria, were described as *pupilli*, and procurators were appointed for them. An inventory was made of their parent's possessions, and they were to come into the inheritance when they came of age.<sup>125</sup>

In the meantime, the Capuchin Monastery outside the walls of Birgu was consecrated in 1747 – but, strangely, the faithful hardly ever came to worship, so much so, that the Father Capuchins were extremely worried that their church was always empty.<sup>126</sup> In order to address this

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122 N.A.V. R284/14, f. 272-272v: Not. Tommaso Gatt, Testamentum Fabritii Testaferrata, 12 Aug. 1744: *Essendar compiacuta sua Divina Maesta far continuare la mia familia Testaferrata nello posterio del Signor Barone Don Ercole Testaferrata mio diletissimo fratello, al quale concesse prole mascolina, stimo esser mio dover cooperar, che detta posterità sia decorata con qualche corpo stabile riguardevole, e magnifico tanto più che mi costa esser stato volontà delli furon signori genitori, che il Giardino di Gomerino fosse posseduto da quelli a quali il Signor averebbe dato prole, che porta il nome della famiglia, affinche questa non solo forse decorata del titolo Baronale ma anche dell'istesso fondo su del quale fu imposto il titolo suddetto e perche la famiglia de' Testaferrata continuare con il medesimo...*

123 N.A.V. R/284/15, ff. 345v-349. Testamentum Baronis Ercolis Testaferrata, 11 Oct. 1748, f. 346: *cadaver vero suum seppelleri voluit in sepulchrum familiae infrascriptae Dominae suae uxoris erectum in Capella sub titolo Sanctae Mariae de Monte Carmelo Venerandae Ecclesiae Ordinis Carmelitani Discalceator Sanctae Theresiae Civitatis Burmulae, in qua adest sepultum cadaver Domini Joseph Habela sui socii.*

124 23 August, 1749. See *Libro d'Oro di Melita*, Said Vassallo, quoting Cassar Desain, *Genealogia della Famiglia Testaferrata di Malta*, 1880, 116; Gauci (1992) table 45.

125 For a description of the Inventory, see N.A.V. R/284/16, Not. Tommaso Gatt, 3 July, 1750, ff. 166v-208v.

126 Garzia (2003) 69: 28: (Malt. *mikdudin sewwa*), quoting Padre Gerardo Debbattista (1935).

situation, they begged of Pope Benedict XIV a martyr's *corpus sanctum* and obtained one of Saint Liberata. The relics were dressed and adorned and placed in a well-wrought and adorned casket, and following huge celebrations accompanied with much pomp and pageantry and very many Latin inscriptions lauding the saint, it was deposited in their church in 1752. The church then became a centre of pilgrimage and the faithful flocked to visit.<sup>127</sup>

One of the visitors in the succeeding years must have been young Paolo Testaferata-Abela, and I believe that he must have been truly troubled by what he saw – a built monastery and church, supposedly dedicated to Saint Barbara in honour of his great grandmother, yet more often recalled of as Saint Liberata,<sup>128</sup> innumerable inscriptions immortalizing its benefactors and historical dates for the past two decades, but none of his grandfather's, recording the donation of land upon which the Capuchin complex was built. On such righteous indignation, the *MUTAT TERRA VICES* inscription, I believe, came to be set up so late in the day (1754). And the Capuchin Fathers, acknowledging the just ire of this young Testaferata-Abela scion, must have obliged by commissioning an inscription in which the donor and his donation were acknowledged, enhancing the contents with allusions from Biblical and Classical texts, besides adding a title of nobility to Giuseppe, to which he had little claim, lest evil tongues might conjecture that Veneranda, his daughter, was simply a recipient for the Testaferata seed.<sup>129</sup> To give prominence, the Capuchin Fathers also erected this inscription in a very public place within an architectural setting.<sup>130</sup>

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127 For a full narrative of the *korpsant* of St Liberata, see Garzia (2003) 69-106; Bonello (2012b) 39-54.

128 Even today, it is still commonly referred to as "Santa Liberata"; the wide road which runs next to it is also named "Santa Liberata". Bro. Joseph Garzia's composite frontispiece for his book also sports prominently the Saint Liberata *korpsant*.

129 Libro d'oro di Melita, *Reassessment of Favray's portrait of an elderly lady with an infant*, March 2011, ([www.saidvassallo.com/SME/maltese nobility/nobility/depiro/Favray.html](http://www.saidvassallo.com/SME/maltese%20nobility/nobility/depiro/Favray.html)) (last accessed 25/02/2013).

130 Most interesting and worth researching is the fact that while all the letters and the first two digits of the year 1754 are drawn from stencils, yet the two final digits

Moreover, the Cappuchin Fathers also commissioned a portrait of Giuseppe Abela, which they hung in their sacristy.<sup>131</sup> The painting<sup>132</sup> is very illustrative and, apart from showing a portrait of Giuseppe Abela, it also shows at the top left an image of St Barbara protecting a bastion with the standard of the Order, a church in the middle and, on the far left, a *puttino* with a plan of the church in his hand. At the top right hand corner, there is depicted the coat of arms of Giuseppe Abela in two fields. The usual Abela coat of arms is shown dexter blazoned on a blue field charged with a chevron and in chief three spurs all gold; sinister contains a representation of Abel burning gift offerings. At the bottom of these two fields, the words IVSTVS / ABEL are inscribed. As if all this imagery were not enough, the following Latin text was drawn beneath it, highlighting Abela's name, noble title and donation and the insistence on the name of St Barbara.

DON JOSEPHI VALERII ABELA, MELIT. PATRITII, PRO CONLATO SOLO,

ANIMO CONDITAM EFFIGIEM, GRATO PENICILLO EXPRESSAM

REFERT SERAPHICUS CAPUCCINORUM CÆTUS,

MART. BARBARÆ A NO. D. BARBARÆ MARTYRIS INAUGURATO TEMPLO

5

ANNO DONI. MDCCCLV

It seems that Paolo Testaferrata had come of age and had asserted his claim. For in 1752 and still in his mid-teens, Paolo had married his own first cousin, and despite the objections of consanguinity raised by the spurned family that sought his marriage to their daughter, the Inquisitor quickly smoothed matters for its young *depositario*. His young wife, burdened with grief at her father's sudden death (1756) and the inter-family litigations with her own brother that ensued,

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(54) are hand painted and incised. Neither is there any evidence of erasion on the marble.

131 At the time of writing, this painting now hangs in the main staircase of the convent.

132 Reproduced in Garzia (2003) 81; see also Ciantar (1789) 328.

failed to produce any children in the first years of their marriage upon which so much depended.<sup>133</sup>

Then, one day in 1760, Baron Paolo was walking down one of the streets of Birgu when he felt himself offended by a passing Knight. Paolo challenged him to a duel; but the times of chivalry had long since passed, and this knight, instead of apologising or accepting the challenge, fetched a couple of his comrades, and gave a beating to young Paolo so hard, that within a couple of days the only remaining scion of the Testaferrata-Abela family lay dead. Only then did his young wife proclaim to all and sundry that she was with child, and indeed, a posthumous son, Pietro Paolo, was born, again saving by a hairbreadth the Houses of Testaferrata and Abela from extinction.<sup>134</sup>

## Epilogue

In 1798, the French Republic expelled the Order of St John from Malta and took over the sovereignty of the Island. But soon afterwards, the Maltese rebelled and besieged the French forces within Valletta and the Three Cities for two years. The concerns that the Order's War Commission had raised regarding the position and construction of the monastery and its proximity to the Cottonera fortifications were now very real. For the monastery complex proved an obstacle to the besieged within the Cottonera walls and an advantage to the besieger. And although the buildings were not demolished as had been contemplated for such an occasion, yet they still suffered almost total destruction, being caught in the belligerents' cross-fire. Also, the French troops regularly ransacked them for their fire-wood, while the insurgents used them as blind houses to shoot at any of the French troops who dared to show his head.<sup>135</sup>

A few meters in front of the *MUTAT TERRA VICES* inscription and in a straight line towards the Cottonera Walls stood a cross adorned with the Passion instruments, all carved in wood. Emboldened more

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133 Ciappara (2000) 155-160.

134 Testa (1997) 699, note 82.

135 Garzia (2003) 140-142.

by daring the enemy than by piety (despite the claims of the inscription below), a few *bravi* from Zejtun, oblivious of the injunctions on the inscription on its base (VIDE ET PERPENDE TORMENTA MEA)<sup>136</sup> took the risk of uplifting this cross from its pedestal under the threatening fire of the enemy and carrying it in triumph to their home town. At the end of the blockade, the Capuchin Fathers asked to have it back. The people of Zejtun refused, claiming it a trophy in conquest. It still stands in the main square of Zejtun and its inscription records the event.<sup>137</sup>

CRUX  
QUAM HEIC SURGERE VIDES  
QUAEQUE  
IAM CAPPUCCINORUM CIV. VICTOR. COENOBIO  
5 ADERAT  
IN GALLICA OBSIDIONE AN. DNI. MDCCC  
EREPTA  
AB HUIUS TERRAE INCOLIS PIETATIS ERGO  
INVICTOQ. ANIMO AB HOSTIUM MANIBUS  
10 HIC IN MEMORIAM  
POSITA

The good Capuchin Fathers accepted the situation and raised another one in its place, although much simpler in ornament. The monastery complex also rose anew, as it also did after suffering similar extensive damage in WWII,<sup>138</sup> and still draws a sizeable crowd of worshipers who, perforce to enter the church, have to pass astride the Cross and the *MUTAT TERRA VICES* inscription – silent memorials that still broadcast eloquently their eventful history.

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<sup>136</sup> Garzia (2003) 230.

<sup>137</sup> Garzia (2003) 230-231. See also Testa (1980) 2. 299-300: *kuraġġ bla sens u bla bżonn*. Abela (2002) 30-33 argues that the date should read 1798.

<sup>138</sup> Both by enemy action and by the war refugees who sought shelter in it. Cf. Garzia (2003) 179-180.



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