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[p.127] The old Parish Church of the Assumption of the Virgin at Mqabba*

An Art Historical Appreciation

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Immediately after being granted the status of independent parish in 1598 the inhabitants of the small village of Mqabba felt the need of having a larger church which would adequately perform the functions of a parish church.

Twenty-three years earlier Mgr Dusina had recorded a total number of seven churches when he visited the village on 7 February 1575. First visiting the church dedicated to St Basil (*S. Basilii*), seemingly the better equipped of the group, he records a main altar above which was a panel painting, side altars (the number and dedication of which is not specified), floor paving, and a wooden door.¹ The church was abutted on the south by another church dedicated to St Michael. The other churches, scattered in the village, were respectively dedicated to St Catherine, the Annunciation, the Assumption, St Peter, and the Visitation. The last church was deconsecrated as unfit for Divine service while the Assumption and St Peter were found lacking in all that was necessary. The churches of St Catherine and the Annunciation were apparently well looked after and both had a panel painting.²

During the same pastoral visit, the Mqabba residents requested Mgr Dusina to consider their claim for an independent parish, or to provide them with the services of a *Vice Cappellanus*, since the parish church of Birmiftuh was too far away.³ This request was first partially conceded in 1592 when the villages of Safi, Kirkop, and Imqabba were united in an independent parish, with the church of St Jacob, between Safi and Kirkop, acting as parish church. The inhabitants of Safi and Mqabba were, however, seemingly not **[p.128]** happy with this arrangement and requested Bishop Gargallo to review the new parochial division and reunite them with Birmiftuh. In 1593 Gargallo confirmed the divisions but ordered that the Mqabba/Safi/Kirkop parish-priest should administer the sacraments from the church of Birmiftuh, which now came to house two parishes. Following subsequent requests Mqabba was finally raised to independent parish in November 1598, under the title of the Assumption of the Virgin.⁴

The 1600 Gargallo Visitation Report describes a very well equipped church of St Basil, *nuper erectam* to the status of parish church.⁵ The report contains valuable information. The church

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¹ Archives of the Cathedral of Malta [ACM], Miscellanea 182, Pastoral Visitation of Mgr Pietro Dusina, p. 234.

² *Ibid.*, p. 237.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ D. Laurenz Zammit, *Descrizioni Storica tal Cnisia Parrochiali tal Imkabba* (Malta, 1927) 7.

⁵ Mqabba Parish Archives [MPA], Libro delle Pie Fondazioni, Ad Futuram Rei Memoriam, p. 9.

had three altars. The main one in the chancel was surmounted by a painting on wood showing the Virgin accompanied on one side by St Basil and on the other by Joseph Confessor. A side altar of the Rosary had a painting of the Virgin of the Rosary surrounded by insets of the fifteen Rosary Mysteries. This altar stood on the left hand side of the chancel and opposite it on the right hand side was a third altar dedicated to the Visitation surmounted by a painting depicting the Virgin visiting St Elizabeth.⁶

Most of the eight churches which the Gargallo Report describes seem to have been adequately furnished. The churches of St Michael, St Catherine, St Peter, the Annunciation, and the Assumption all had altar-paintings.⁷ Abutting the church of the Annunciation was another church dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin. This had three altars, *unum majus et duo minora*.⁸ Besides the above mentioned churches the report describes also a church dedicated to the Nativity of the Virgin. This church, not mentioned in the Dusina Report was found lacking in liturgical necessities.

The next few years saw the construction of a new church which was larger than the Church of St Basil. It was built on the site of the twin churches of the Annunciation and the Assumption of the Virgin and was intended to house the new parish church. Dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin, it [p.129] was surely completed before 1 October 1607 when parish-priest Pietru Pace records the death of Gioanella Camilleri, *sepulta...nella parrocchiale chiesa di S. Maria della Micabba*.⁹

Pastoral visitation reports abound in the description of the church's furnishings, but there is little mention of the architecture before 1636. The sitings of the altars seem however to have remained unchanged. It is therefore doubtful whether the church did undergo rebuilding programmes between 1607 and 1636.

The lack of the word *nave* in the 1615 Cagliares Report seems to indicate that the nave had not yet been built. By way of hypothesis one may suggest that the two churches of the Annunciation and the Assumption had been fused together to form the original nucleus of the parish church. These two churches became the transepts of the new church when the nave was eventually built.

Cagliares (1615) refers to a total of five altars, which was to increase to seven by 1658. The main altar was adorned with a painting on canvas depicting the Assumption of the Virgin while, to its right, was an altar with the same dedication founded in 1609.¹⁰ There is no mention of a painting above this second Assumption altar. Next to this altar was another dedicated to the Virgin of the Rosary adorned with a painting of the Rosary Mysteries. The Cagliares Report does not give an indication of the site of this altar but its location in the church can be established from the 1636 Visitation Report of Bishop Balaguer.

To the left of the main altar was another altar. Dedicated to the Immaculate Conception it also carried a painting. A fifth altar under the title of the Annunciation of the Virgin lacked all

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.10-12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹ MPA, Liber Primus Parrochialis Sacramentorum, f. 125.

¹⁰ Archbishop's Archives, Floriana [AAF]. Visitationes Pastorales [VP], viii (Balthassar Cagliares, 1615), f. 236^v.

necessary furnishings.¹¹ It is interesting to note that the painting representing The Annunciation of the Virgin which until 1600 adored the main altar inside the Church of the Annunciation did not apparently find place in the new church built on the same site.

[p.130] The titular painting which Bishop Balaguer describes in 1636 might have probably been a new one. The possibility, however, that Balaguer was being lavish in his description, as he frequently is, must not be discarded. He notes that the Virgin was accompanied by the twelve apostles and that above them hovered God The Father.¹² The work was still preserved in the parish vestry by 1927.¹³ It's present whereabouts are, however, unknown. Four steps led to the main altar, behind which was a sacristy entered through an iron door to the left of the same altar.¹⁴

The painting on the side-altar of the Rosary is described by Cagliares (1615) as representing The Rosary Mysteries. In 1636, Balaguer, however, noted that the altar painting represented The Virgin of The Rosary and The Fifteen Rosary Mysteries. The fact that Cagliares fails to note The Virgin of the Rosary in a painting which it must have surely dominated may hypothetically indicate that the 1636 painting was a new one. This hypothesis must however be treated with great caution since both Bishops might have been possibly describing the same work. There is also the possibility that this painting may be identified with the seemingly beautiful altarpiece representing *Ssme. Mariae Rosarii cum Misteriis* described by Gargallo in 1600 as adorning a side-altar in the Church of St Basil. There is no reference to this painting in the 1615 and subsequent reports of St Basil's church and it is therefore not unlikely that this beautiful painting might have been transferred to the new parish church some time between 1607 and 1615, and put above the new Rosary altar. In 1636 this altar had two steps, one of stone and the other of wood.¹⁵

Balaguer, noting that the second Assumption altar was situated between the titular and the Rosary altar, provides us with precise information on the siting of the Rosary altar.¹⁶ He describes the painting adorning the second Assumption altar as *vetustissima* or very old.¹⁷

Not described by Cagliares (1615) is the altar dedicated to the Madonna Del Soccorso which according to the Balaguer Report of 1636 stood to the left of [p.131] the main altar. On the same side was an altar dedicated to the *Annuntiatio Immaculae Virginis*¹⁸ which was well furnished and equipped with a painting which is probably the same one now kept in the north vestry of the present church.¹⁹ This altar lacked all furnishings in 1615. The altar dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, described by Cagliares, is not mentioned by Balaguer. It must have probably been substituted by the Madonna Del Soccorso altar. The cult of the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, f. 236.

¹² AAF, VP xiii (Miguel Juan Balaguer de Camarassa, 1635-1637), f. 115^v.

¹³ Zammit, 13.

¹⁴ Balaguer (1636), f. 116^v.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Appendix I tentatively illustrates the location of all altars.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, f. 116.

¹⁹ The painting is described in detail in M. Buhagiar, K. Sciberras, "Three early seventeenth-century vernacular paintings at Mqabba," *Melita Historica*, xi (1) (1992) 27-34.

<http://www.xs4all.nl/~nizaar/Melita%20Historica/MH.11.1/Three%20Early%20Seventeenth%20Century%20Vernacular%20Paintings%20at%20Mq%85.pdf>

Immaculate Conception and the *Madonna del Soccorso* were interchangeable in the seventeenth century.

The nave of the church is first indicated when, in *navi dictae Parrochialis Ecc'* Balaguer locates an altar *noviter erectum* under the title of the Visitation of the Virgin.²⁰ It lacked everything, except for an altar-lamp.²¹

Balaguer describes the church as *competentis magnitudinis*, with its roof resting on seven arches and having three doors. On the roof was a bronze bell.²² What type of vault there was at the crossing is, however, unknown.

In 1647 Gio. Fran. Abela describes Mqabba as a casale which *racchiude ottanta nove case, e mette in essere tre cento cinquanta anime*.²³

By 1658, the date of Balaguer's other visitation report, the church seems to have undergone further embellishment. The old painting which adorned the side-altar dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin was removed in favour of an *icona recens eleganti picturae*²⁴ representing the Virgin being carried up in heaven on a putti filled cloud. God the Father and Christ, who holds the penant of the Knights of St John, puts a crown on her head while in the lower part of the picture are St Joseph, St Catherine of Alexandria and souls in Purgatory. This painting can be securely identified with the altar-painting today adorning the altar of the Coronation of the Virgin in the present church. Iconographically in a belated Mannerist idiom it is a work of considerable charm by a Maltese artist working in a tradition popularized on [p.132] the islands by Filippo Paladini (c. 1544-1616). The preoccupation with bright colours and transparent atmosphere is however indicative of the conservatism of the artist who was cut off from contemporary artistic currents and shows no knowledge of either Caravaggio or Baroque. None the less, the work must not be discarded as a naive manifestation of popular art. It should rather be regarded as an interesting example of the gradual, but consistent, development of native art during the seventeenth century. In the seventeenth century it was probably the best work that the church possessed.

The Visitation altar, which was lacking in all essential furnishings in 1636, also had a new painting in 1658. It represented the Virgin's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. This painting is most probably the one which still survives in the south vestry of the present church.²⁵ It is however a work of limited artistic merit, though not without interest to Maltese vernacular art.

Balaguer (1658) also refers to an altar under the title of the Holy Spirit which was apparently new. It carried a painting which depicted the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles on Pentecost Sunday. Once again it is possible to identify this painting with the one preserved in indelicate conditions in a store room next to the roof of the present church.²⁶ The work, which is in urgent need of restoration, carries the inscription VOTUM FECIT GRATIAM ACCEPIT 1637 in the bottom right hand corner. The date explains its exclusion from the 1636 pastoral

²⁰ Balaguer (1636), f.117^v.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, f. 117 C.

²³ G.F. Abela, *Della Descrittione Di Malta* (Malta, 1647) 104.

²⁴ AAF, VP xvii (Balaguer, 1656-1659), f. 108.

²⁵ The work is also described in Buhagiar/Sciberras.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

visitation report. By May 1663 the painting had a panel, or board, which protected it from dust.²⁷

In the same 1663 visitation report, the main altar is described as properly adorned, *constructum sub fornice supra quod retro tabernaculum SSmi Sacramenti est posita icona demonstrans Assumptionem B. M. semper virginis ... ad quod ascenditur per duos gradis lapidis et unum suppedale ligneum*.²⁸

The same report mentions for the first time the construction of a new church and vestry.²⁹ For this purpose, Vicar General Can. A. Bologna proposed the nomination of John Paul Magro, a resident of Mqabba, as procurator of the [p.133] building of the new church. This proposal was accepted by the parish clergy,³⁰ who immediately undertook the task of raising the necessary funds. Moreover, in order to facilitate work on the construction of the new church, there were to be no services in the church after 9:00 a.m. between March and October and after 10:00 a.m. between November and April.³¹ This church was to be built enveloping the old parish church.

On 12 October 1663 parish-priest Andrea Farrugia died to be succeeded by Don Domenico Pace.³² In 1667 the new parish priest noted to Bishop Lucas Bueno that Mqabba had a total number of 487 parishioners, residing in 130 houses gathered together in the village core. They were mainly farmers or peasants, with the exception of eleven priests, two deacons, eight clerics, ten craftsmen, and seven food vendors.³³

The present urban distribution in the immediate areas around the parish, particularly on the St Basil side, have probably not changed much since the seventeenth century. Moreover, a considerable number of houses have also retained structural qualities typical of the period.

On 30 September 1671 Bishop Lorenzo D'Astiria called a pastoral visit to the village. The new church seems not to have been begun, or at least it was only in its initial stages, since D'Astiria avoids any mention of it. He describes the older church in a context which has been described above.

Parish-priest Domenico Pace died of the plague in 1676. He was succeeded by Don Angelu Mallia who, in the years which followed, immediately devoted all his energies to the building and completion of the new church.³⁴

In 1680 there is once again no mention of the new church. Bishop Molina, in the visitation report of that year, describes the old parish church, in which *si celebrano dieci messe al giorno*.³⁵

²⁷ AAF, VP xviii (Balaguer, 1662-1663), f. 380.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, f. 378.

²⁹ “pro fabrica Ven. Ecc. Parrochialis Cas. Micabiba et sacristia ejusden noviter erigent”; *Ibid.*, f. 383.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, f. 385^v.

³² Zammit, 14.

³³ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

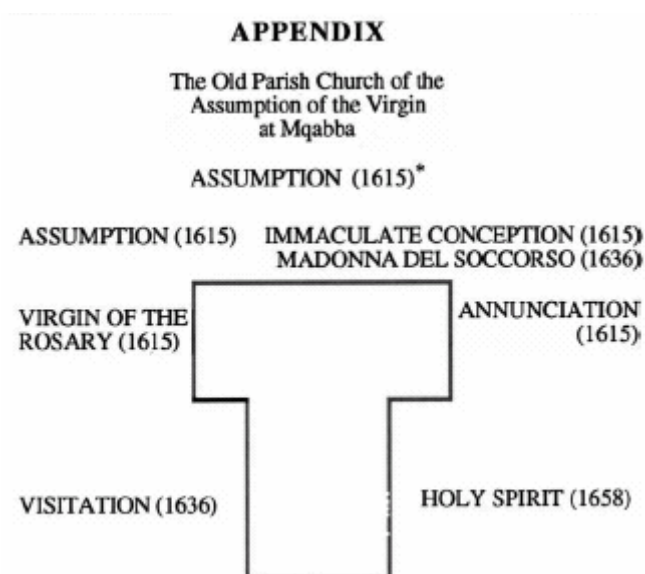
³⁵ AAF, VP xxii (Michael Gerolamo Molina), f. 208^v.

The effects of the 1675-76 plague can be traced in his account of the parish's population which lists 500 *anime* in 100 families. The meagre population rise of thirteen people in 16 years and the significant drop of 30 family cores is [p.134] indicative. Scientific estimates are, however, handicapped by the probability that Molina rounded up his numbers. This makes a sure estimate difficult. A drop of 8 members of Imqabba's ecclesiastical community is also manifest. Molina gives a total compliment of 13 priests, deacons, and clerics.³⁶

The construction of the new church seems however to have progressed at a steady pace by May 1686, when Bishop Cocco Palmieri noted that he had to extend his visit to parts of the new church, built around the old one.³⁷ The titular painting was already in place in the church choir, whilst the side-altar paintings dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin and to the Rosary adorned a wall temporarily built for security reasons. On the north wall, seemingly next to be built after the choir, work had progressed to the height of the cornice.

Seven years later, in May 1693, Bishop Cocco Palmieri returned to note that the choir, both transepts, and the dome were completed. The nave was still however under construction and so the altars dedicated to the Visitation of the Virgin and to the Holy Spirit were still housed inside the old building.³⁸ Apart from the nave, the extent of what remained of the old church is unknown. By the third visit of Bishop Cocco Palmieri in June 1699 the new church was complete. There is no mention of the older building. It had most probably been dismantled.

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³⁶ *Ibid.*, f. 212^v.

³⁷ Zammit, 16.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.