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Caravaggio on the Frontier

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Abstract

The established and widely-recognised art historical reading of Caravaggio's Maltese period refers to a relatively calm interlude during which the artist produced some of his best works. This paper seeks to trace and examine the evidence for theorising Caravaggio's Maltese period. It reviews the core elements of the Mediterranean frontier on which early seventeenth-century Malta stood and the varied values which shaped the context for Caravaggio's brief stay. It also considers some of Caravaggio's paintings, commissioned and painted in Malta during his brief but eventful ten month stay, as containing evidence of the artist's interface with the frontier as defined through Frederick Jackson's Turner original frontier thesis and its varied reviews. Caravaggio's paintings are thus securely qualified as the very evidence on which to build a theoretical model for his brief stay in Malta.

1. Context

Michaelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's stay in Malta is a relatively brief episode from his colourful albeit short life. His presence on a small island south of Sicily, close to the then Ottoman North African coast, has been read in terms of a unique contribution. Scholarship considers the few works he painted in Malta as evidence for his standing as the man of his times; products of a relatively calm interlude in comparison to his Roman and Neapolitan periods. Indeed, his Maltese works are Spartan and subdued, distinctively different from what he had produced earlier, perhaps inspired by the visual culture of the Order of St John¹. It is perhaps the

¹ Stone, D.M. (2007). Fra Michaelangelo' and the art of knighthood. In K. Sciberras & D.M. Stone, *Caravaggio – Art Knighthood and Malta*, (p. 67), Malta: Midseabooks.

frontier status of early seventeenth-century Malta, close to Catholic Sicily yet strategically located on the European frontier with the Ottoman territories in North Africa, that may have had a decisive influence on Caravaggio's art in Malta. This particular context and the island's society were certainly shaped and influenced by the frontier context.

No discussion about the significance of the frontier and its effects on the socio-political ecology of a given society can ignore Frederick Jackson Turner's seminal 1893 paper *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Turner's frontier hypothesis charts how and in what ways the frontier has shaped the American character. The unusual environment of the American west and the continuous rebirth of society as it moved forward into the wilderness are singled out by Turner as the key agents that bring about this decisive change². The civilisation of settlement and the savagery of wilderness forged a new character beyond the different national characters of the early settlers. Turner also singles out violence, individualism and a mistrust of authority as characteristics of this new communal identity.

Critics of the frontier thesis argue against some of Turner's conclusions. Rather than single out the staggered westward expansion suggested by Turner as one of the key agents shaping the American character, recent studies emphasise the Indian-European conflict as the main catalyst shaping the character of the community³. Frontiersmen might have been more cultured than Turner suggests they were⁴ and frontier violence is also identified with standing armies rather than exclusive individual or communal initiatives⁵. Turner nonetheless also acknowledged the radically different characteristics of the largely political European frontier. Contrary to the American experience outlined by Turner, the European frontier did require standing armies and an established church. Instead of democracy and liberalism, the European frontier enforced reactionary frameworks in its quest to promote otherness. Rather than acting as an agent of change forging a new identity, the European frontier forged reactionary identities embracing fundamentalist values. Seventeenth century European and Mediterranean frontiers are nonetheless also in constant flux, certainly not

2 Simonson H.P. (1964). Frederick Jackson Turner – Frontier History as Art. *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 201–211.

3 Griffin P. (2007). *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier*. New York: Hill and Wang.

4 Agard W. R. (1965). Classics on the Midwest Frontier. In W. D. Wyman & C. B. Kroeber (Eds.), *The Frontier in Perspective* (pp. 165–183). University of Wisconsin Press.

5 Dykstra R.R. (2009). Quantifying the Wild West: The Problematic Statistics of Frontier Violence. *The Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 321–347; Di Lorenzo T. (2010). The Culture of Violence in the American West – Myth versus Reality. *The Independent Review – Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 15, no 2.

delineating a clear divide between two isolated blocks standing homogenous civilisations⁶.

2. Seventeenth-century Malta, Caravaggio and the Frontier

The seventeenth century Mediterranean frontier on which Malta stood was a pressure zone of two contrasting cultures; Islamic and Catholic. Recent studies have explored Malta's frontier context, understood as demarcation lines between cultural territories, heavily militarised and under constant threat⁷. Indeed, Malta was a strategic outpost of Catholic Europe, by then recognised as a *Propugnaculum Europea* or the bulwark of Europe⁸, and standing on what Samuel P. Huntington in his seminal 1994 paper *A Clash of Civilisations?* aptly defines as a culture rift. The break in culture and economic unity between the two shores of the Mediterranean on which Henri Pirenne builds his thesis was certainly institutional albeit under constant pressure and in a state of flux akin to the American wilderness⁹. The island, a frontier outpost in the hands of the military-religious Order of St John of Jerusalem since 1530, had been defended from a heavy Ottoman siege forty years earlier but the enemy down south was still recognised as a constant threat. No efforts were spared to manifest catholic belief through symbols and conventions in a deliberate attempt to emphasise distinction and otherness from the Ottoman enemy.

In Malta, Catholicism was promoted as the dominant identity value by a triad of authorities namely the Grandmaster, the Bishop and the Inquisitor, all answerable to Papal Rome. The subjects which this power structure mustered were however oftentimes described in travelogues as an indigenous community whose language, culture and dress was strikingly Arab¹⁰. In 1582, the Venetian Gian Battista Leoni writes home from *Barbaria, nell Isola di Malta*¹¹. In 1588, the German traveller Hieronymus Megiser described Malta as African territory with a deeply rooted Arab culture manifest in the language, culture and heritage of the local population¹². The English traveller Hieronymus Welsh, who came to Malta in 1633, also

6 Buttigieg E. (2007). 'Clash of Civilisations' Crusades, Knights and Ottomans: an analysis of Christian Muslim interaction in the Mediterranean. In J. Carvalho (Ed.), *Religion and power in Europe: Conflict and Convergence*, p. 205. Pisa: Plus-Pisa university press.

7 Brogini A. (2006). *Malte, Frontiere de Chretiente (1530-1675)*. Rome – Ecole Francaise de Rome.

8 Freller T. (2009), *Malta and the Grand Tour*. p. 30. Malta: Midsea Books.

9 Ibid., p. 206.

10 Freller T. (2005). *Malta Africana or Malta Europea? – 16th & Early 17th Century Descriptions of Maltese Traditional or Customary Dress & its Sociological and Political Background*. N. de Piro, V.A. Cremona (Ed.), *Costume in Malta – A History of Fabric, Form and Fashion*. Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti. p. 43.

11 Freller T. (2009). p.30.

12 Ibid.

classified the Maltese as Arabs in language, habits and dress¹³. Not all travellers were unanimous in their definition of Malta as an Arab country. Some considered Malta as an extension of Sicily, at least in identity. Reactions may have been influenced by comparisons with previous territories given the fact that travellers would generally be moving southwards. Most travellers hesitated on whether to classify Malta as Arab or European and this is certainly indicative of a frontier reality.

The history of the Knights of the Order of St John of Jerusalem also concerns the retreating frontier of Christendom which, following the fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1291, was pushed back in stages by Muslim forces, the most recent of which was the Ottoman Empire. Retreat, understood as a reaction to expansion, kept the frontier defined albeit difficult to chart accurately and defend effectively, particularly at sea. Within this relatively vast stretch of Mediterranean waters, frontier powers clashed in skirmishes and fully fledged battles of which the 1571 battle of Lepanto is perhaps the most significant. Maritime military activity enjoyed institutional support and attracted noble travellers to participate in the naval exploits of the Order of St John¹⁴. Corsairing, known as *guerre de course*, was also actively promoted. Maltese corsairs were authorized to hoist the colours of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem and by consequence enjoying institutional protection¹⁵. Corsairing was also practiced by members of the Order of St John with the more restless and turbulent knights in Convent taking centre stage.

Attitudes and ambitions on the other side of the culture rift are strikingly similar. Turkish historiography too defines Ottoman corsairs as holy warriors of religion forming a powerful lobby in Istanbul on matters of political and military interest¹⁶. Documents also confirm that the Order of St John was considered much akin to an organized community of 'Habsburg corsairs' and evidence does suggest at least one instance in which a corsair was eventually admitted into the Order of St John. Alonso de Contreras, a well-known corsair with a shady reputation, was admitted by the Grandmaster in 1612 after having lived in Malta for ten years at the service of the same Grandmaster¹⁷. Both sides plied the Mediterranean wilderness where the frontier was as fluid as the waters which either side claimed. The objectives of each side were oftentimes dictated by reasons beyond

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid. pp. 605–620.

15 Cassar P. (1960). The Maltese Corsairs and the Order of St John of Jerusalem. *The Catholic Historical Review* (pp. 137–156). Vol. 46, No. 2.

16 Gurkan E. S. (2010). The Centre and the Frontier – Ottoman Cooperation with the North African Corsairs in the Sixteenth Century. *Turkish Historical Review*, 1/2 (2010), pp. 125–163.

17 Bonello G. (2005). Fra Alonso de Contreras – Corsair and Knight of Malta. G. Bonello (Ed.), *Histories of Malta – Ventures and Adventures*, p. 110. Malta – Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti.

the defense of faith from the other's threat. In 1555, and later during the early 1580s, the Papacy intervened with the Grandmaster to check his men from molesting Venetian shipping¹⁸. In 1589, 1591 and 1600, shortly before Caravaggio's stay in Malta, grain ships were sought and forced to sail into Valletta harbour to unload their cargo and ease a raging famine¹⁹. Much like their catholic counterparts, Ottoman corsairs enjoyed institutional protection, this in spite of raiding French, English and Venetian vessels granted safe conduct when trading.

There is little evidence to the contrary that both sides plied waters which they considered akin to the American wilderness in spite of regulatory structures, including legislation and treaties, intended at establishing order at sea. The diary of Alonso de Contreras refers to moments of sheer savagery, committed by both Christians and Muslims alike²⁰. Such violent encounters, made necessary by constant engagement with the enemy, were frequently transferred back on land. Caravaggio's Malta was indeed a violent place, amongst the most violent catholic territory south of Naples²¹. The chroniclers of the Order also occasionally suggest that the unruly behaviour of particular knights was of greater concern than a possible Ottoman invasion²².

By the end of the sixteenth century, the cosmopolitan society of the islands included mercenaries, merchants, slaves and a conspicuous number of military men, mostly youths, trained in warfare and constantly engaged in anti-ottoman activity. Duelling was commonplace and future high-ranking members of the Order of St John were also occasionally involved²³. In 1599, the future ambassador of the Order of St John in Sicily, Fra Carlo Valdina was banned from Malta for one year following his involvement in a brawl²⁴. Later in 1605, the future Prior of Venice and Admiral of the Fleet Fra Giulio Accarigi was condemned to two years imprisonment for a similar crime²⁵. Even the then Bishop of Malta had committed his share of violence. Tommaso Gargallo, Bishop of Malta between 1578 and 1614, had been sentenced to six months imprisonment in 1556 and later in 1661 for violent behaviour against third parties²⁶.

18 Cassar P. (1960). p. 152.

19 Ibid. pp. 153–4.

20 Buttigieg E. (2007). p. 210.

21 Freller T. (2009), p. 567.

22 Cassar C. (2010). Monks of Honour – The Knights of Malta and Criminal Behaviour in Early Modern Rome. ed. M. Caleresu, F. de Vivo and J.P. Rubies (Ed.). *Exploring Cultural History – Essays in Honour of Peter Burke*. p.82. Ashgate.

23 Bonello G. (2002). Duelling in Malta. G. Bonello (Ed.), *Versions and Diversions*, pgs. 73, 84. Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti.

24 Ibid. p. 81.

25 Ibid. p. 83.

26 Bonello G. (2001). From Rogues to Grandmasters and Bishops. In *Histories of Malta – Fragments and Fragments*. p. 20. Malta – Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti.

This Mediterranean frontier, which concerns the island of Malta, stands for a very particular backdrop to Caravaggio's well-documented brief stay in Malta spanning one year two months. A broader reading of Caravaggio's stay on this frontier underpins the importance of this remit of frontier characteristics and broadens the narrative of Caravaggio's stay in Malta. The artist sets sail from Naples on the galleys of the Order of St John, captained by the Knight Fabrizio Sforza Colonna, a controversial personality and grandson to the hero of the battle of Lepanto, Marc'Antonio Colonna. On approaching Malta, news that seven large vessels from the Barbary provinces of the Ottoman territory lay close the island of Gozo reached them and a frontier skirmish became a likely possibility²⁷. The Order's fleet nonetheless successfully avoided the Ottoman vessels to lay anchor at Valletta's Grand Harbour on 12th July 1607, then bustling with corsairing activity. The Knights Fra Opizio Guidotti and the same Fabrizio Sforza Colonna are frequently recorded sailing in and out of harbour and bringing to Malta supplies of food and cereals, cloth, slaves between June 1607 and August 1608²⁸.

Caravaggio was then a fugitive from Rome after having killed Ranuccio Tommasoni, a protégé of the Farnese family, but nonetheless succeeds in attracting the attention of Grandmaster Aloph de Wignacourt, a military man actively promoting frontier crusading activity, who lobbies and succeeds in getting endorsement for a knighthood thanks to a special papal dispensation. Caravaggio is knighted on the 14th of July but his rebellious and quarrelsome nature soon lands him into trouble yet again. On the 18th August 1608 he gets involved in a conspicuous brawl during which a knight of Malta is mortally wounded by a pistol shot, declared an illegal possession after sunset. Some of the perpetrators of this act are known to have been relapsers²⁹. Fra Prospero Coppini, whose door was smashed during this fight, had earlier in 1590 committed homicide. Fra Giulio Accarigi, the future admiral and head of the Italian langue, had committed murder twice and was a well-known trouble maker. Caravaggio was subsequently imprisoned in Fort St Angelo, one of the fortresses overlooking Valletta and Grand Harbour, but successfully escapes by October 1608, flees to Sicily and is subsequently defrocked from knighthood (*in absentia*) in December 1608. His crime in Malta was certainly not concerned with duelling, a common occurrence in Malta at the time, but probably concerns his escape and departure from the island.

27 Sciberras K. (2007). *Virtuosity Honoured, Chivalry Disgraced*. K. Sciberras, D. M. Stone (Ed.), *Caravaggio – Art, Knighthood and Malta* (p. 22), Malta: Midseabooks.

28 Scicluna H.P. (1925). *Il Gran Maestro Aloisio de Wignacourt attraverso un manoscritto – Estratto dell'Archivium Melitense*. Pgs 16–17. Malta – Empire Press.

29 Bonello G. (2005). *Caravaggio Friends and Victims*. In G. Bonello (Ed.) *Histories of Malta – Ventures and Adventures*. pgs. 67–79. Malta – Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti.

3. Patrons as Frontiersmen

Caravaggio's works in Malta were painted for a restricted group of powerful military men, active in frontier crusading activity that would have shaped their spirit and character. Particular paintings from the artist's restricted Maltese repertoire also include clear references to the frontier context. The portraits of his mentors explain Caravaggio's opinion about them as military men on the frontier.

The portrait of the French Grandmaster Aloph de Wignacourt (fig. 1) is a visual image of the crusading ideals of a knight of Malta on the frontier. A veteran of the battle of Lepanto, Wignacourt actively pursued corsairing and personally equipped vessels for this purpose, including one acquired in 1602 shortly after becoming Grandmaster³⁰. Three years later in 1605 he also set up an apposite tribunal known as the *Tribunale degli Armamenti* to regulate corsairing activity in Malta. Wignacourt spearheaded significant military campaigns against Mahomett (modern Hammamet in Tunisia, 1602), Patras and Lepanto (modern day Lafpaktos in Greece, 1603) and the island of Lango in the Aegean sea (1604). A daring attack against the town of Laiazzo (modern Yumurtalik in Turkey, 1610) confirms that anti-Ottoman military activity was high on the agenda throughout the decade³¹.

Caravaggio depicts the Grandmaster as a military leader holding the general's baton of command with both hands, ready to do battle. A page stands to his side holding his plumed helmet and military tabard as he sets his gaze into the distance, perhaps alerted by what is happening beyond his immediate context. Wignacourt's sense of aloofness is highlighted by the low lighting, suggesting an aura of drama and suspense, and protected by the penetrating gaze of the page who checks the viewer's advance. There are no trappings of authority to confirm Wignacourt's status as Grandmaster other than the general's baton of command which is not strictly representative of the magistracy. By comparison the established typology for official portraiture of the magistracy shows the seated Grandmaster wearing the black monastic habit of the Order of St John as in versions showing the same Grandmaster with no references to his military role, occasionally accompanied by pages or at his desk complete with call bell and crucifix.

Caravaggio's portrait of Wignacourt is a personal comment about an outstanding military personality which complements his portrait of the Knight of Malta, presumably the Knight Antonio Martelli (fig. 2)³². This is the image of a member of the brotherhood, collectively engaged in cru-

³⁰ Scicluna H.P. (1925), p. 10.

³¹ Debono S. (2007). *Understanding Caravaggio and his Art in Malta*. p. 29–33. Malta – Midsea Books.

³² Gash J. (1997). The Identity of Caravaggio's 'Knight of Malta'. *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 139. No. 1128. p. 156–60.

sading activity on the frontier. He wears the Order's religious habit, as he checks the rosary beads against the sword; an attempted balance between an active military and a contemplative religious life. The portrait stands for the ideals of military-religious activity as contemplated by the Order of St John and an idealised depiction of knighthood on the frontier, certainly a far cry from the reality with which Caravaggio had to come to terms during his stay in Malta. It is indeed difficult to relate the contemplative religious ideals expressed by Caravaggio in Martelli's presumed portrait. Martelli, the Order's representative at the Sicilian port of Messina, had been *Consigliere di Guerra* at the service of Grand Duke Ferdinand I Medici and artillery commander at the service of the Grand Duchy in late 1617. He also served the Order of St John as admiral of the fleet meaning that he was intermittently at the service of a regional power and the military Order in which he had professed. Wignacourt's French nationality is an even bigger dichotomy. France had been an open ally of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century and continued to have strong links to it in the seventeenth yet Wignacourt's crusading activity is decidedly anti-ottoman. It is perhaps the frontier that had shaped them into a diverse breed of military men showing '*coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and Inquisitiveness ... that restless nervous energy*' which is the hallmark of Turner's frontiersmen³³.

4. Symbols and Allegiances

The seventeenth-century frontier was a place where allegiances and status were clearly and prominently manifested through heraldic devices³⁴. Symbols and commemorative inscriptions were a necessary requirement in Malta, to clearly distinguish from the Ottoman enemy, and their use was pursued and promoted by all three religious and political authorities. Wignacourt's military achievements were clearly displayed on the sides of a fountain constructed in the vicinity of the main gates of the city leading visitors from their landing place within Grand Harbour through the fortifications and into the city of Valletta. Coat-of-arms were prominently displayed on property, fortification lines and constructions. Surviving visuals of the fleet of the Order of St John also suggest a colourful display of symbols and heraldry. It must have been a sight to remember when catho-

33 Macendrick P. L. (1965). Roman Colonisation and the Frontier Hypothesis. In W.D. Wyman and C.F. Kroeber (Ed.). *The Frontier in Perspective*. p. 3–20. The University of Wisconsin Press; Brogini A. (2006). *Malte, Frontiere de Chretiente (1530–1675)*. Rome – Ecole Francaise de Rome.

34 Stone D. M. (2012). Signature Killer: Caravaggio and the Poetics of Blood. *The Art Bulletin*. Vol. XCIV no 4. p. 576.

lic galleys berthed at Grand Harbour as might have been the case in July 1605 shortly before Caravaggio's stay in Malta³⁵.

Catholic symbols take pride of place in Malaspina's *St Jerome* (fig. 3) a personally profound depiction of the saint painted for a seemingly pious and conservative knight. Malaspina was a veteran of the 1565 Great Siege of Malta, captain general of the fleet of the Order of St John and later captain of the Papal fleet prior to dismissal on his specific request in 1605 when he retired to Malta until his death in 1625. Malaspina's military career certainly made him conversant with symbols and heraldry with which he must have related to on a regular basis almost subconsciously. His piety, which may have led him to renounce his military career, required symbols for the correct and proper practice of catholic rites. This included the crucifix which was also the image featured on the battle standard leading the catholic fleet at the battle of Lepanto.

Caravaggio's Malta *St Jerome* is a powerful image of the saint as he concentrates on spilling his thoughts and writings into a small book. Caravaggio depicts him sitting at his bed with his table close by and on which various objects that stand for symbolic representations of catholic belief are strewn. The saint's attributes, including the skull and stone, are featured alongside a candle and a crucifix. This is indeed atypical for Caravaggio's depictions of this saint and catholic iconographic devices are by and large missing from Caravaggio's *St Jerome* (fig. 4). The use of distinguishing catholic symbols, emphatically promoted on the frontier, is also taken up by Caravaggio in this painting, highlighting their use and function in due course. This is also the case with Malaspina's coat-of-arms prominently displayed in the lower right hand corner³⁶.

It is unclear whether this unusual addition of symbols was dictated by Malaspina or spontaneously adopted by Caravaggio. The relation between patron and artist remains elusive although the *St Jerome* was in all probability painted to hang within a domestic setting. Decorum in private collections was oftentimes not so stringent as in the case of public commissions for churches, which is probably why some of Caravaggio's rejects found their way into private collections³⁷. Caravaggio nonetheless comes across as complacent with the indicative demand for symbols and heraldic devices which the frontier required and which his patron could easily recognise. This is probably what a military man, whose career had mostly concerned anti-ottoman crusading activity, would have been on the look-

35 Scicluna H.P. (1925). p. 12.

36 Stone D. M. (2012). p. 576–577.

37 Van Rosen V. (2011). Implicit Decontextualisation – Visual discourse of religious paintings in roman collections circa 1600. G. Feigenbaum & S. Ebert-Schifferer (Eds.), *Sacred Possessions: Collecting Italian Religious Art, 1500–1900* (p. 45). Getty Publications.

out for. Caravaggio was probably aware of Malaspina's values and willingly takes them on board on the frontier.

5. Violence, Martyrdom and Crusading Activity

Caravaggio's *Beheading of St John the Baptist* (fig. 5) is the painting which sums up catholic belief on the frontier and presents the evidence of institutional violence perpetrated on Salome's personal agenda. The head of the Baptist is soon to be completely severed from the body to which it belongs and become a trophy to present to the demanding Salome. The happening is displaced to the side as a group of onlookers, including a jailer dressed in a fine silk garb, huddles around the decapitated body of the Baptist. Two prisoners behind bars bend forward to check on what goes on right outside their cell where they can get a glimpse the lifeless body of the Baptist as the executioner bends over to complete his task. What Caravaggio clearly depicts is the evidence of violence rather than the violent act of martyrdom, this in stark contrast to his earlier works in Rome in which he occasionally depicts himself as the passive onlooker. The *Martyrdom of St Matthew* in the Contarelli chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome, shows the act about to be perpetrated; that latent violence about to be unleashed onto the victim. Sheer violence is featured in his *Judith and Holophernes* (fig. 6), where the young and beautiful widow chops off the tyrant's head as blood gushes out onto the bed linen.

Caravaggio's *Beheading* is a meditative tool juxtaposing a perceived happening with a real presence. The ultimate goal of the painting is to make Christian mysteries tangible and consequently empower audiences to become active participants in the scene as set out before them³⁸. This model, which the Council of Trent canonised and universalised albeit already in existence before, defines the laity as spectators, rather than participants, set to meditate on the event portrayed. The painting is intended to elicit responses from its audiences also thanks to its well chosen height which corresponds to the audience's viewpoint which would have originally related to a barren and austere hall devoid of the decorative schemes that survive to date, completed in the 1680s. Indeed, this is the case of other Caravaggio altarpieces but the space for which the *Beheading* was purposely painted was not used exclusively for the practice of religious rituals. This was well known to Caravaggio and his painting responds to a broader remit of requirements which he was also well conversant with.

³⁸ Chorpenning J.F. (1987). Another Look at Caravaggio and Religion. *Artibus et historiae*. Vol. 8, No. 16, (pp 149–158).

The Oratory of the *Decollatio*, as recent historiography describes the space, was built around 1602 to cater for the spiritual and temporal needs of the knights, the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and the instruction of the novices of the Order of St John.³⁹ The land was adjacent to a cemetery where the knights in residence who died in Malta were buried and to where the Order also transferred the remains of the martyred knights who died during the Great Siege of 1565. Caravaggio's key patron, Grandmaster Aloph de Wignacourt, also planned to have his remains interred there as those whose remains were laid to rest within this footprint were, indeed, worthy of emulation. Their deeds were narrated to the novices aspiring to join the Order of St John who had to prepare themselves for this important rite of passage within this Oratory. The mortal remains of the Order's heroes buried close were the evidence of the supreme act of martyrdom of which their patron saint was the role model par excellence. Indeed, St John the Baptist can be considered as the 'first fallen knight' of the Order of St John and a fundamental link between the fallen martyrs, recognised as heroes of the Order of St John, and the biblical narrative of their patron saint⁴⁰. This complex iconographical infrastructure which Caravaggio's *Beheading* stood for ensured that the qualities needed to keep the frontier safe and hold it against the 'other' were fostered and promoted.

Caravaggio's painting is a well-meditated altarpiece in response to this layered frontier context. As one of the audience-to-be, Caravaggio would have injected the teachings of his mentors into the one painting that was later to hang within the Oratory as the main and only altar painting. Both message and significance might have been subtle and perhaps beyond the grasp of many. The lunette painted around 1615 by Bartolomeo Garagona (1584–1641), a minor artist known for his fiery temper⁴¹, to hang right over Caravaggio's *Beheading* clarifies and articulates the Oratory's chosen iconographic programme. It also sets it clearly within the remit of frontier politics and ensuing crusading activity promoted by the Order of St John. The lunette shows the martyred knights of fort St Elmo, a small fort at the tip of the Valletta peninsula which sustained a heavy Ottoman onslaught during the Great siege of 1565 and subsequently fell into the hands of the enemy with all its defenders dead or martyred. The lunette features a row of dead knights in the foreground and others in the middle ground, being subjected to torture or extreme violence, and whose heroic deeds are recognised by descending angels offering palm fronds. These military martyrs

39 Sciberras K. (2007). Caravaggio, the Confraternita Della Misericordia and the Original Context of the Oratory of the Decollatio in Valletta. *The Burlington Magazine* (pp. 759–766), Vol. 149, No. 1256.

40 Stone D. M. (2012). p. 580.

41 Borg Millo D. (2008). Bartolomeo Garagona. In Mizzi (Ed.) *The 1565 Siege of the Knights of Malta at Fort St Elmo*. p. 34. Malta: Caravaggio Foundation.

are set above the main altar painting as examples to follow and emulate, endorsed by the patron Saint John the Baptist, the first fallen knight, who kneels in the presence of the Virgin Mary and Christ child. The lunette presents the visual evidence of frontier violence as St John, depicted dead in Caravaggio's *Beheading*, is now interceding on behalf of the martyred brethren rewarded with palm fronds sent from heaven. The very mortal remains of these brethren who are symbolically depicted in the lunette lie buried close by in the adjacent cemetery.

As in the case of Caravaggio's other works discussed in this paper, the *Beheading* is much more than a religious painting akin to his altarpieces in Rome, Naples and Sicily. This is the icon of religio-political belief on the frontier where frontiersmen, some of whom are also depicted by Caravaggio in his paintings, were trained and instructed into Catholic religious fundamentalism and the absolute defence of the frontier. The defence of Fort St Elmo during the Great Siege of 1565, when knights was expected to live up to their obligations and ideals whatever the cost, was a case in point⁴². Religion and politics intermingle and the pamphlets commemorating sea battles known as *Relazione* (a report) or an *Avviso* (a notice) ended with the words *Laus Deo* (Praise be to God) and could be read like prayers⁴³. Even the free-spirited Caravaggio could not avoid this direct interface with the frontier, albeit a significant variant to Frederick Jackson's Turner original model, which shaped the likes of Wignacourt and his brethren.

This review of Caravaggio's Maltese period underpins the importance of the frontier context in the study of Maltese art history, Caravaggio's Maltese period in particular. Beyond the dialectic between mentor and painter, Caravaggio's paintings hold the evidence of the frontier to be deciphered and interpreted within the broader context and intended meanings of his paintings akin to primary and archival sources.

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⁴² Cassar C. (2010). p. 90.

⁴³ Buttigieg, E. (2007). p. 211, 212.



Fig 1. Caravaggio, *Aloph de Wignacourt*, 1608, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: Wikipedia.



Fig 2. Caravaggio, *Antonio Martelli*, 1608, Palazzo Pitti, Florence. Photo: Beniculturali.it



Fig 3. Caravaggio, *St Jerome*, 1608, St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, Malta. Photo: Wikipedia.



Fig 4. Caravaggio, *St Jerome*, 1599, Galleria Borghese, Rome. Photo: Wikipedia.



Fig 5. Caravaggio, *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1608, St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, Malta. Photo: Wikipedia.



Fig 6. *Judith and Holofernes*, 1598, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome. Photo: Wikipedia.