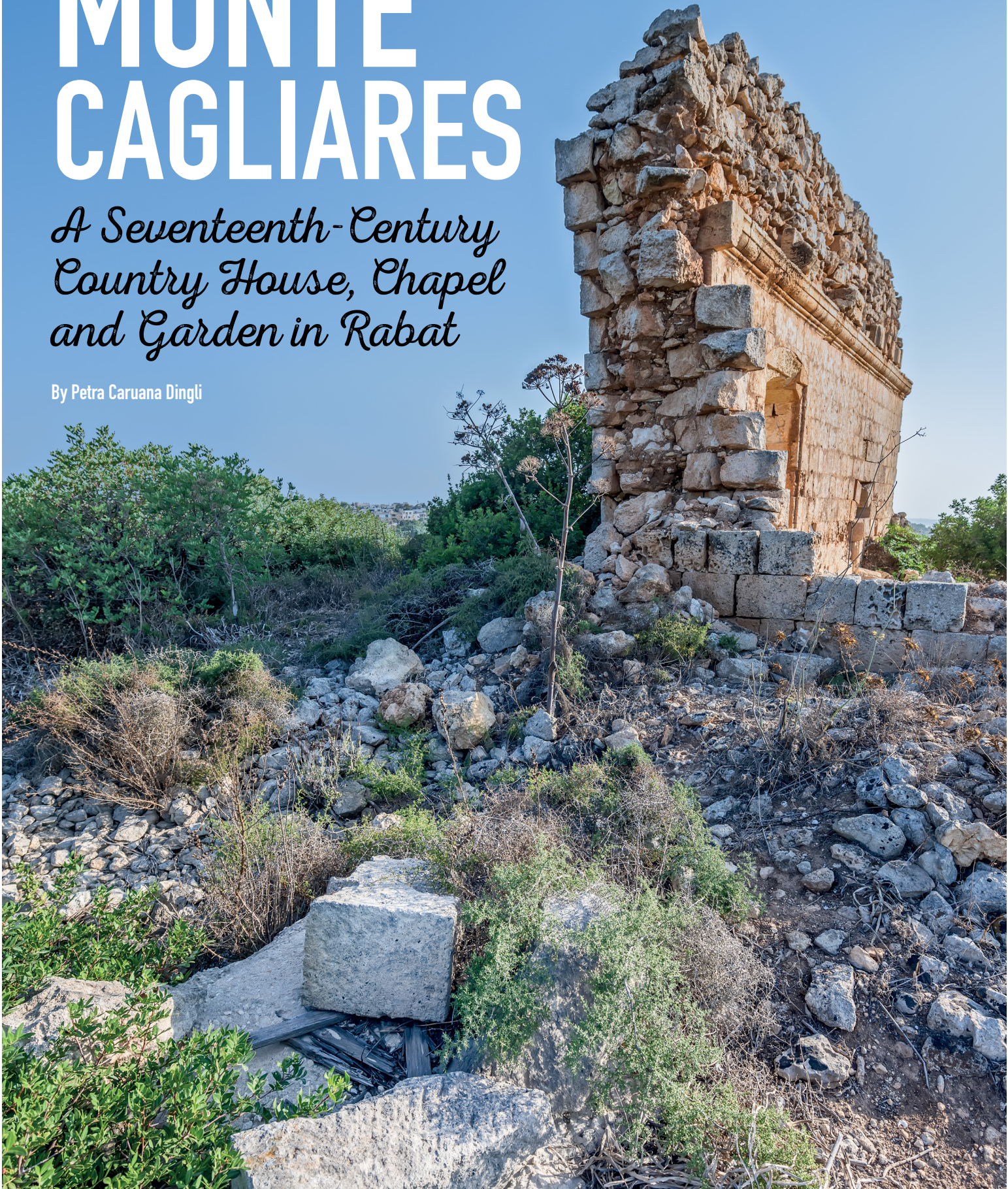


MONTE CAGLIARES

*A Seventeenth-Century
Country House, Chapel
and Garden in Rabat*

By Petra Caruana Dingli





Left: 'Il-*ħajt tal-knisja*',
Monte Cagliares.
The well is in the
foreground. Photo
by Daniel Cilia

Top left: Portrait of
Bishop Baldassare
Cagliares. Photo
by Joe P. Borg.

Top right: View of
tal-Virtu from Monte
Cagliares. Photo
by Daniel Cilia.

Below: The Piccolo
Giardino

A rapid transformation of the Maltese landscape has taken place from the 1960s onwards, and it continues relentlessly. The rural landscape is fast disappearing. The world of country houses and retreats of past centuries is increasingly distant and lost. We can revisit it in the imagination, or perhaps by viewing architectural remains, choked by new development or broken into fragments. But that vanishing world can also be traced and re-created through the written historical record. Malta's archives have rich holdings, and they record, reveal and explain the past.

One such rural retreat was the early seventeenth-century country house of Bishop Baldassare Cagliares outside Rabat, close to Buskett. This is where he died in 1633. Suffering from some form of dementia, he is said to have fallen into a well nearby. This essay maps the history and decline of his seventeenth-century country house and chapel. They no longer exist, but we can follow their trail and imagine the past.



Bishop Baldassare Cagliares

Bishop Cagliares was keen on building projects, and he engaged in the construction of several significant buildings. Foremost among these is the bishop's palace in Valletta, constructed between 1622 and 1631, which he funded himself. He constructed another episcopal residence, on a smaller scale, in the Cittadella in Gozo in c.1620. His family built a country retreat in the village of Zejtun. He was instrumental in rebuilding the chapel and monastery of St Peter in Mdina in the 1620s. And he personally supported the founding of the Discalced Carmelite convent of Santa Teresa in Bormla, also in the 1620s.

On 18 May 1615, Baldassare Cagliares was appointed Bishop of Malta. He was then around forty years old, and he was to remain bishop for eighteen years until his death in 1633.

His first building project after being elevated to the rank of bishop, was a chapel and country house near Buskett outside Rabat. The bishopric owned large areas of land—the *mensa vescovile*—in the area between tal-Virtu and Buskett. Some thirty years earlier, the grand master of the Order of St John, Hugues Loubenx de Verdalle, had purchased some of this land at Buskett, where the knights enjoyed recreational hunting. Here on the high ground above the valley, in 1586 Verdalle constructed an imposing country villa with a fortified appearance—today Verdala Palace.

A Latin inscription above the main entrance of the palace refers to the site as Monte Verdala, and Gio. Francesco Abela referred to it as 'la



rocca di Monte Verdala' (Monte Verdala fort) in his *Della descrizione di Malta* of 1647. This fertile area had abundant water with plenty of natural springs.

The recently appointed Bishop Cagliares soon embarked on building a country house outside Rabat for himself. He selected a scenic spot in the *mensa vescovile*, very close to 'Monte Verdala', on high ground above Wied l-Isqof. It had a wide view of this fertile valley next to Buskett and beyond, as far as Valletta and the sea. This house was built on a very much smaller scale, however like 'Monte Verdala', the site also took on the name of its distinguished patron and became known as 'Monte Cagliares'.

The fertile slopes below the site were known as the garden (*giardino*) of the *mensa vescovile* in that valley. Part of this, close to Monte Cagliares, became known as the '*piccolo giardino di Monsignor Cagliares*'—the 'small garden'—indicating that he took a special interest in cultivating this section of the larger *giardino* area, creating a small *boschetto*, or wooded area, for his own retreat and pleasure. Like Buskett valley nearby, the area was well irrigated with natural springs.

Monte Cagliares benefice

Cagliares constructed the house at his personal expense, with an adjoining chapel endowed with a benefice (*giuspatronato*) and dedicated to the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. The chapel was located on the ground floor of the house, with its door facing north-east. Its rector was tasked

with providing religious services and teaching catechism to people living in the surrounding countryside and working in the fields.

Unlike the bishop's palace in Valletta, Cagliares did not leave his house at Monte Cagliares to be used by future bishops. During his lifetime, the house was to be retained solely for his own use. After that, he left the use of the house and the income of the benefice to future rectors, nominated by the patrons of the benefice who were his nephew and nieces and their descendants. While elder sons often inherited the bulk of the family assets, lay benefices could provide an income for younger male relatives who took Holy Orders.



Top left: Fig. A. AAM, detail of a plan of the *mensa vescovile*, 1733. Thanks are due to Canon Dr Nicholas Doublet and Mario Gauci.

Top Centre: The surviving wall. Photo by Daniel Cilia.

Top right: This vernacular building lies above the *piccolo giardino*, however it was not Bishop Cagliares' palazzo.

Below: Remains of the chapel at Monte Cagliares. Photo by Daniel Cilia.



The benefice was established on 27 November 1615, in a deed enacted by notary Pietro Paolo Vincella. On his first pastoral visit, Cagliares was dismayed at the poor state of many countryside chapels. He quickly set about building one himself. The deed confirms that the adjoining house was constructed at the same time. It also reveals that Cagliares had a special devotion to the chapel of the Madonna tal-Virtu (Our Lady of Virtue) in Rabat. Tal-Virtu was visible from Monte Cagliares, at the top of the ridge on the other side of the valley. In the deed, the site is described as ‘located above the garden and feudal episcopal territory near Buskett, and the city of Notabile, bordered on all sides by the lands of the episcopate’.

Initially the income for the rector of the Monte Cagliares benefice was 5% of 500 scudi invested in apostolic *bullae*, that is an annual income of 25 scudi. Of this sum, 400 scudi were given by Bishop Cagliares and another 100 scudi were added by his nephew, the lawyer Melchiorre Vella Cagliares who was the first patron of the benefice. Only two days before the Monte Cagliares benefice was set up by his uncle Bishop Cagliares, on 25 November 1615 Melchiorre had married the young Cosmana Cumbo Navarra, later the benefactor of St Paul’s church in Rabat. On the same day in Mdina, his widowed sister Ursola married Cosmana’s brother Ugolino Cumbo.

The first rector of the chapel was Cagliares’ domestic servant the priest Domenico Bonnici, but by April 1617 his nephew the cleric Gio. Batta Vella Cagliares—later a canon—was

appointed as rector, and he held this title until his death in 1656. After the early death of Melchiorre Vella Cagliares in 1624, the right of patronage first went to Melchiorre’s sister Ursola Cumbo, and after her death in 1669 to another sister, Antonia Xara and her descendants. Ursola’s third husband Gio. Maria Abela (m.1625) was a physician and features during Cagliares’ final illness.

Cagliares’ illness

By 1631, Bishop Cagliares had fallen seriously ill. His condition affected his ability to speak, and was described as a form of dementia. He became unable to fulfil his duties as bishop.

It was initially believed that his illness was caused by sorcery. A trial began in May 1631, at the tribunal of the inquisitor in Vittoriosa.¹ It was suspected that the bishop was the victim of a spell, or that he had been poisoned by the oil used to dress his salad. The culprit was his cook, Gio. Batta, a Turk from Constantinople who had converted to Christianity. Gio. Batta then attempted a cure using magic. For this he obtained a damascene knife and a concave mirror, which he placed under the bishop’s mattress or pillow. The mirror helped to stop the bishop’s fits of rage and trembling. He used the knife to draw a circle in the ground and perfumed the place with incense, while Cagliares lay weakly on the ground. Gio. Batta then performed and repeated a ritual involving a piece of lead and a bowl of water.

Having waited for a new moon, one night



Gio. Batta took the ailing bishop from Monte Cagliares to the chapel at tal-Virtu on the other side of the valley, in what must have been pitch darkness. He took along a black dog and a white ram. Inside the tal-Virtu chapel, the bishop was laid down on blankets on the floor. Gio. Batta killed the ram and spread its blood on the bishop's temples, hands and knees. The black dog was there to capture the evil spirits, and he cut off a piece of its ear. The medic Gio. Maria Abela spied through a crack in the chapel door and reported what he had seen to the inquisitor's tribunal, as did Canon Fabrizio Pontremoli.

The nature of the bishop's malaise and dementia is unclear, however his illness persisted and he died two years later on 4 August 1633 at Monte Cagliares, supposedly falling into a garden well.

Palazzo Monte Cagliares

No detailed description of the 'Monte Cagliares' house is known to exist, however in pastoral visits and the sorcery court case it is repeatedly described as a *'palazzo'* — a palace. It was also described as a *'casino'*, meaning a house for recreation. These documents also confirm that it had more than one storey, and that the chapel lay underneath the palace. The description accompanying a plan of the *mensa vescovile* in the 1730s confirms that there was a deep well (*un profondo pozzo d'acqua*) next to the house. Due to the danger of being in the open countryside, it is probable that any windows on the ground floor would have been high and narrow, enough to let in light but hard to penetrate if the house was attacked. The threat of Ottoman invasion was still very real.



In the early eighteenth-century plan, the house at Monte Cagliares (see blue arrow in Fig. A on p. 20) is depicted as a square-shaped building with the footprint divided into four rooms, one of which was the chapel. My conjecture is that the structure had two rooms on each floor, not four, however this would need further investigation. In any case, the square shape suggests the look of a narrow high building or small tower, along the ridge. The Cagliares country house in Zejtun dates to the same period and was originally also square-shaped with eight slit windows on the ground floor, and built on two floors with two sizeable rooms on each floor². Another private country house built on high ground in the late 1500s, Bubaqra tower in Zurrieq, is also square-shaped.

A rural building not far from Monte Cagliares, has sometimes been mistaken as the countryside retreat of Bishop Cagliares (see pink arrow in Fig. A on p. 20, and photo on p. 21). To distinguish it from the bishop's house, here I will call it the 'lodge'. It is very dilapidated, built in a vernacular style, surrounded by trees and overlooking Wied l-Isqof above the *piccolo giardino*. In the 1730s plan it is described as follows: *'Nel giardino piccolo chiamato di Monsignor Cagliares con alberi, viti, ed orto insieme con diverse terre lavorative sino al vallone del giardino grande, confinate da levante, mezzodi, ponente, e tramontana con beni spettanti all mensa vescovale. In questo giardino vi sono sei stanze, alcune de' quali per servizio degl'animali, ed altre abitabili, due grotte, due fontane d'acqua, che sgorga da due mine sotterranee, e due gebie'*³

It is not confirmed whether this lodge already existed during the lifetime of Bishop

Top left: The chapel at tal-Virtu was rebuilt, however the entrance to the medieval crypt inside the chapel survives. Photo by Daniel Cilia.

Above: Wide stone steps in ground leading to chapel and house at Monte Cagliares. Photo by Daniel Cilia.

Right: Diagram of the *piccolo giardino*, valuing it for a lease. AAM, Acta Civilia, vol. 152 (1784)



Cagliares. It was certainly there by the time of Bishop Cocco Palmieri (d.1711) as his coat-of-arms are on the façade, possibly to confirm ownership by the bishopric since it was leased out. As was customary, a plaque denoting the lease of the *piccolo giardino* is affixed to the façade. In 1792 it was leased for 99 years to the brothers Gaetano and Giovanni Caruana. The Monte Cagliares house could not be leased out as it was part of the 1615 lay benefice established by Cagliares—which corroborates that it was not this lodge.

The chapel

The chapel was evidently in use during the time of Bishop Cagliares. In one recorded instance, in September 1620 the scholar-priest Domenico Magri, then only sixteen years old, later the author of the encyclopedia *Notitia de vocaboli ecclesiastici* (1644), had his first Holy Orders conferred upon him by the bishop at Monte Cagliares.⁴

Successive pastoral visits of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries provide some details of the chapel. It had a cross, a grated window and carved stonework above its door. In its early years it had a portable altar and an altarpiece depicting the Virgin Mary and angels.

In the 1670s, Bishop Lorenzo Astiria funded a new titular altarpiece of the Assumption, surrounded by stone mouldings on the wall, and his coat-of-arms were carved on the side pedestal of a stone altar that was raised by one step. In 1678 Bishop Molina noted that there was a bronze lamp in front of the altar, which was lit through the devotion of field workers nearby. In 1758 Bishop Rull wrote that the chapel door faced the view, and in front of it there was an enclosed yard—an ‘atrium’ or ‘cæmeterium’ (Maltese: *zuntier*). He also recorded that there were two graves (*duas tumbas seu sepulturas*) in the centre of the chapel. He described the ceiling as old, with arches and slabs. In a corner there was the coat of arms of Cagliares, as well as a ledger stone with an inscription commemorating Cagliares as the founder of the chapel and its benefice.

Over the years, various bishops complained that the rectors of the church were not fulfilling their religious obligations tied to the benefice.

Neglect and ruin

After the death of Canon Gio. Batta Cagliares in 1656, the next rector of the Monte Cagliares benefice was Alfonso Cassar, appointed by Cagliares’ niece Ursola Abela as patron of the benefice. Alfonso was the great-nephew of her third husband, the medic Gio. Maria Abela mentioned above. In 1661, the priest Gio. Batta Grixti became the rector (d.1698).

In 1706, the co-patrons of the benefice were the cousins Gio. Vincenzo Castelletti and Paolo Testaferrata, Antonio Xara’s grandsons. As the benefice currently had no rector, Gio. Vincenzo petitioned the Curia for permission to temporarily use its capital of 500 scudi, against 4% annual interest, to pay the religious dowry of his two daughters Flavia and Aurelia Castelletti.⁵ They were novices at St Peter’s monastery in Mdina and about to profess as nuns. In this unusual arrangement, female relatives who took religious vows would benefit from a lay benefice intended for male descendants.

Gio. Vincenzo’s son, Antonio Castelletti then became the rector, and in 1710 he petitioned the Vatican for permission to reduce the obligations for masses to be held at Monte Cagliares.⁶ According to the deed of 1615, the rector had to celebrate two weekly masses, one

on Saturdays and another on Sundays, and first vespers and mass on feast days. He also had to give catechism instruction to the country people of the area, and provide candles, oil and other necessities for the chapel.

Castelletti complained that the income provided by the benefice was no longer adequate to cover the costs. Moreover, it was hard to fulfil the pious obligations, due to the distant location of Monte Cagliares and a road that was rough and very difficult (*via est aspera et perdifficilis*). For this reason, he claimed, nobody had accepted to be the rector for around twenty years. This suggests that by 1710 the place had been neglected for quite some time. In the 1730s, the house was described as a ruin (*le vestigia di un palazzo*).

Castelletti was succeeded by Clemente Belan in 1746, followed by the priest Francesco Xerri. Pasquale Sceberras Trigona and Pietro Paolo Testaferrata Abela were now joint patrons of the benefice, and after Xerri died in 1824 they transferred their right to nominate the rector to notary Cristoforo Frendo.⁷ The descendants of the family had lost interest, the benefice had little value, and the house and chapel were abandoned. Eventually the entire building collapsed or was demolished, and most of the stones were carried off.

Monte Cagliares today

Monte Cagliares was first described to me by Dun Gwann Azzopardi, who had a keen interest in Bishop Cagliares. He had jokingly related that, when he visited it with his good friend the historian Alain Blondy, he nearly tripped and fell into the well where Cagliares is said to have met his sad end. I had then visited the site with my husband Gordon, some time ago. Access is not straightforward. Originally, Monte Cagliares was perhaps reached by turning off the road leading from Rabat to Buskett, but this is no longer possible. The site can only be accessed, with considerable difficulty, through overgrown, thorny vegetation, by a different, longer route.

Only one wall still stands. When I returned there recently with Daniel Cilia and Mario Gauci, someone in the area referred to it as '*il-ħajt tal-knisja*' (the wall of the church).

The remains of the two graves in the centre of the chapel and some paving were visible, making it possible to confirm the position of the chapel next to the surviving wall. The dimensions of the chapel were around 4 m x 9 m. That was probably one half (or perhaps one quarter) of the footprint of the building,

with another floor above. Underneath the overgrowth, the remains of the altar step could be identified, as well as the wall niche mentioned in pastoral visits. The walls of the chapel were smooth, and similar stones appear in nearby fields, possibly recycled. Small broken bits of roof arches and cornices were evident. A couple of eroded carved stones lay scattered on the ground. Outside some wide stone steps led to lower ground.

These scanty remains are enough, however, to show that it was not a vernacular rural structure like the *piccolo giardino* lodge, but an edifice aspiring for a higher status. It was not a large building, so the repeated description of it as a '*palazzo*' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries may have been prompted by the quality of its architectural features, before it collapsed and disappeared.



Niche or doorway in the other side of the wall.



The well at Monte Cagliares, today covered and closed.

Right: An eroded carved stone on the ground.
Photo by Daniel Cilia.

Far right and below left:
Wall details at Monte
Cagliares. Photos
by Daniel Cilia.

Below right: The two
graves in the floor
of the chapel. Photo
by Daniel Cilia.



Thanks are due to Victor Bonnici for his help with the Latin texts.
Thanks also to Professor Alain Blondy for directions.

NOTES (1) MCM, AIM, Proc. 130, Case 36, ff. 325–355. Also see Roger Ellul-Micallef, ‘Devils, Demons and Dementia: The Undoing of a Maltese Bishop’, in *Scientia et Religio: Studies in Memory of Fr George Aquilina OFM (1939–2012)*, Scholar, Archivist and Franciscan Friar, ed. John Azzopardi (Wignacourt Museum: 2014), 103–114; (2) Ray Gatt, ‘The Country Villa of Bishop Baldassare Cagliares in Zejtun’, *Vigilo* 59 (2021), 24–27; (3) ... in the ‘small garden’ called ‘of Monsignor Cagliares’ with trees, vines, and vegetables together with various arable fields up to the large valley of the ‘big garden’, bordered on the east, south, west and north by the bishop’s territories. In this garden there are six rooms, some of which are for animals, and others that are habitable, two caves, two fountains of water that spring from two underground holes, and two reservoirs’ (Author’s translation); (4) Giovanni Bonello, *Histories of Malta, Volume One: Deceptions and Perceptions (Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2000)*, p. 59; (5) NAV, Notary Giuseppe Callus, R28, 28 September 1706, ff. 30r–33v; (6) Archivio Apostolico Vaticano, Congr. Concilio, Positiones 394; (7) AAM, *Suppliche* 17, ff. 379–380.

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