

THE NAUTICAL EX-VOTOS OF THE MALTESE ISLANDS

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The historical, cultural and economic development of the Maltese Islands has been mainly determined by two geographical factors, viz., (a) their situation in the centre of the main traffic routes of the Mediterranean Sea, and (b) their sheltered natural harbours and creeks. These features have also made the Islands the refuge of the storm-tossed navigator from the earliest times when man first ventured out to sea with oars and sails, until the advent of the steamship in the 19th century.

Instances of shipwreck were quite common in the days of sail when the crafts that criss-crossed the Mediterranean were of a small size and of a fragile construction. Loss of life at sea must have been heavy but survival and narrow escapes were not unknown. The earliest evidence we possess of such rescues from shipwreck in the vicinity of the Maltese Islands occur in the form of "graffiti" of ships scratched on two orthostats of the Third Temple (Bronze Age) of the Tarxien Group situated about a mile inland from the Grand Harbour.

Some of the "graffiti" are badly weathered so that only parts of ships, such as prows, can now be traced with certainty but in other instances the outline of the vessel can be identified. One can recognise hulls, bows, partly furled sails, rowing and steering oars and plume-like stern ornaments. There are about three dozen of these roughly scraped figures. One is an Egyptian wooden ship that recalls the tomb models; another is suggestive of the profile of ships in the 'Iliad' while others have affinities with those shown on early Cycladic pottery; a few vessels are in the style of the Greek merchantmen seen on Greek vases¹.

It appears that one of the deities worshipped at the Tarxien Temple was a patron of distressed sailors; in fact these representations of ships are regarded as being "ex-votos" offered by mariners to the deity in thanksgiving for deliverance from drowning and shipwreck about 1500 B.C. Judging from the different nationalities of the ships, we may presume that the reputation enjoyed by this deity was not a purely local one but an extra-insular one extending as far as the Eastern Mediterranean.

There follows a gap of 3000 years before one again comes across the counterparts of these nautical votive offerings in times nearer to us. It is conceivable, however, that the breach in continuity is more apparent than real and due more to a deficiency of documentary evidence rather than to an interruption of the "ex-voto" tradition itself². In fact, lack of adequate records, both written and otherwise, is a striking feature of Maltese history until the advent to the Islands of the Order of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem in 1530. During this long silent period the inhabitants of the Maltese archipelago

1. Woolner, D., *Graffiti of Ships at Tarxien, Malta*, in 'Antiquity', Vol. XXXI, 1957, pp. 60-67.
2. Cassar, P., *Medical Votive Offerings of the Maltese Islands*. In 'Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute', Vol. 94, Part 1, 1963, p. 23.

went through many vicissitudes, one of the most far-reaching being their conversion to Christianity in A.D. 60. We, therefore, find that when the "ex-voto" makes its reappearance at the beginning of the sixteenth century, it has assumed an entirely Catholic colouring. Executively it takes three forms:— (a) the "graffito", (b) the oil painting on wood or canvas, and (c) nautical and other objects.

The dominant ship of the Mediterranean of those days was the galley, the descendent of the Roman warship. Although the galley was provided with masts and lateen sails, it relied on oars for its motive power. The hull was long and narrow and designed primarily for the grappling and boarding manouvres then in vogue. Its company varied, consisting at times of some thirty-five knights and two hundred soldiers, besides the crew. The oarsmen were slaves or mercenaries³. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the galley began to be replaced by the frigate or sailing man-of-war.

Crudely scratched "graffiti" of galleys and frigates have survived on the external walls of several chapels and churches in Malta. In places they are barely visible as they have become effaced by the action of the weather and by the growth of lichens. Some of them have become so blurred that only parts of masts and oars can be distinguished while in other cases the grooves are so shallow that they show up only when the rays of the sun strike upon them at certain angles. It is probable that other figures of ships lie hidden beneath the layers of whitewash and lime that skirt the external walls of rural churches and chapels like a dado for a variable height.

The small rural church of the Immaculate Conception at Kuncizjoni (in the area of Wied Gerżuma not far from Rabat, Malta) bears a few "graffiti" of sailing ships, two of which can still be clearly seen (January 1961). They are on the extreme right of the facade one above the other at about 4 and 6 feet, respectively, from the ground. They are about 20 inches in length and in height and appear to be two-masted galleys. The higher "graffito" displays lateen sails; the lower one is incomplete and shows only some of the rigging. Farmers of sixty to seventy years of age who live in the vicinity of this church have heard from their ancestors that the "graffiti" were 'very old indeed' but could not assign an approximate date or give information as to the people who carved them. However, these particular "graffiti" cannot be much older than two hundred twenty years as the church was erected in the 18th century during the time of Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736).

On the posterior wall of the chapel of St. George in the bay of the same name near Birżebbuġa, the outlines of a few galleys are still extant. Over the hulls of two galleys there are the years 16... and 1791 respectively; as the present edifice was rebuilt in 1683, the missing figures of the date 16.. must extend from 1684 to the end of the century. One can decipher also the year 1686 with a cross engraved between the 16 and the 86, while a sailing boat marked with the year 1878 is easily recognizable. On the retaining wall of the redoubt over which the chapel rises, there are the dates 1729 and 1721 but no trace of a ship can be seen (1960). The church was held in great veneration

3. Rossi, E., *Storia della marina dell'Ordine di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme*, Rome, 1926, p. 65.

by the Knights who used to hear mass there before embarking on their cruises for the Levant⁴.

On the facade and left wall of the the church of St. Paul Shipwrecked at Wied il-Qliegħa, near Mosta, masses of galleys and boats with lateen sails recall misadventures at sea from the year 1690 (when the church was erected) to the close of the 18th century. Fourteen "graffiti" of ships were counted on the facade and seventeen on the left wall (1962).

A few are to be seen on the church of the Assumption (16th century) at Saliini (1962) and of San Gaetano on the road to St. Thomas Bay (1960). Others exist in the Island of Gozo on the church of the Immaculate Conception at Qala and of the Cathedral Church on the wall facing Strada Zanqa⁵.

The content and the technique of these ship "graffiti" inevitably call to mind the Tarxien ones from which, however, they differ in three respects:— (a) their naval architecture belongs to the 16th-18th centuries; (b) they are of Christian origin, and (c) they are the offerings of poor mariners who, not having enough funds to commission a painted "ex-voto", were driven to express their thanksgiving for rescue by the simpler and cheaper means of carving the figure of their ship on the bare stone walls of the church dedicated to the Madonna or saint whose intercession they had sought. In spite of these differences, the point of contact between them and the Tarxien group is so striking that the more one contemplates them, the more one finds it difficult to bear in mind that over 3000 years separate the two groups. Indeed the time gap seems to shrink in the realization that the two groups have the same significance and both spring from the same fundamental psychological source, i.e. the helplessness of man in the face of the overwhelming power of the forces of nature and his reliance for aid on the supernatural.

The second type of "ex-voto" are the oil paintings. They consist of pictorial representations of ships foundering in stormy seas amid flashes of lightning and engulfing waves; or else frigates and barques on fire or breaking up on reefs and rocks. They are painted on oblong wooden boards, canvasses and sackcloth. They are usually of a small size, common dimensions being 12 inches by 18 inches and 6 inches by 14 inches, although larger ones are sometimes met with. They are typical examples of folk art but some of them are not devoid of artistic merits. Their charm lies in their unpolished simplicity and in the documentary evidence they provide regarding the naval constructions of the past. They show ships of various shapes, epochs and nationalities. There are galleys, frigates, schooners, men-of-war, merchantmen, paddle steamers, steam vessels, fishing craft and lateen rigged boats. The drama of shipwreck is vividly conveyed in the scenes of destruction and panic — the masts shattered and splintered, the sails battered or bellowed by the winds, hulls broken asunder, decks swept by flames, sterns and bows plunging into the depths at all sorts of angles; passengers and crews clinging to rigging or flinging themselves overboard or clambering on to rafts in a raging sea.

Above these scenes of tragedy, in one of the upper corners or in the centre of the top of the picture, is depicted a small effigy of Our Lady or of Christ or of the saint whose help the distressed mariner has invoked. The sacred

4. Vella, E.B., *Storja taż-Zejtun u Marsaxlokk*, Malta, 1927, p. 68.

5. Mr. John Bezzina, Gozo. Personal communication, 16th February 1962.

image is usually shown issuing from the sky over a bank of white clouds supported by the heads and wings of a few cherubs. The bottom part of the picture is sometimes occupied by an inscription usually in Italian and occasionally in Latin or in Maltese⁶. It bears the date, a short account of the incident, the name of the donor and the letters in big capitals V.F.G.A. which is an abbreviation of the Latin "Votum fecit gratiam accepit" ("a vow was made and a favour received"). Here is a specimen of one of these inscriptions:—
 "Voto di Salvatore Rosso con il brigantino Capitan Emanuele Sterico naufraga-



Photo by Mr. Joseph Spiteri, Qormi.

An "ex-voto" dated 1841 preserved in the Tal-Hlas Church, Qormi.
 By courtesy of the Rev. Canon Jos. Zammit, Administrator of the church.

gato in fra Capo Emina e Niada proveniente d'Odessa nel Mar Negro. Sono salvati persone 7 e negati 4. 13 Novembre 1822". In English it may be rendered thus:— "A vow made by Salvatore Rosso during a voyage from Odessa on the brigantine of Captain Emanuel Sterico. The vessel was shipwrecked between Cape Emina and Niada in the Black Sea. Seven persons were rescued and four were drowned. The 13th November 1822"⁷.

6. At Mellieha Sanctuary there is one in Slav characters.

The oil paintings donated by members of the Order of St. John show the Knight clad in armour or in a red tunic and his coat-of-arms⁷. Marine votive paintings were still being offered as late as a few years ago. In the museum attached to the Church of Our Lady of Graces at Zabbar, there is an "ex-voto" dated 1951 offered by a seaman who escaped from drowning when the tanker 'Janco' broke amidship and sunk in the Bay of Biscay. At "Tal Herba" Sanctuary of Birkirkara there is another recent one dated 1958 showing a number of men in a boat after abandoning their burning ship.

Alongside with the theme of mishaps and storms at sea, two other subjects for "ex-votos" enter the field from 1530 to 1798, i.e., the deliverance from piratical capture and the commemoration of naval victories over the Moslems. This epoch covers the period of the rule of the Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem over the Maltese Islands.

The freedom of the sea is to-day so much a matter of course that we are apt to forget that until relatively recent times the Mediterranean was still infested with pirates and that ships traversing that sea had to be constantly on the alert against these marauders and prepared to engage in a sea-duel at any moment. The Moslem pirates had earned the reputation of being the sea wolves of the Mediterranean. The Maltese privateers were no less daring but they operated on a smaller scale and in accordance with official rules and regulations laid down by an apposite tribunal — the Magistracy of Armaments — set up in 1605 during the time of Grand Master Alofius de Wignacourt⁸. These intrepid men ventured as far as the Levant and even penetrated to the straits of the Dardanelles to brave the Ottoman power in its own waters¹⁰. Maltese corsairing reached its zenith in the 17th century and had not yet been officially abolished by the end of the 18th. The fact, however, that the Maltese corsairs were as troublesome as their Moslem counterparts, should not make us forget that many Maltese mariners, who were peacefully engaged in the transportation of merchandise, became helpless pawns in this perilous game. The same applies to those travellers who were compelled to leave Malta and embark for the continent because of business and family affairs. The price they paid, when captured, was either slavery in the Bagnos of North Africa or Constantinople or death. It is understandable, therefore, why their safe arrival at their destination was a cause of rejoicing, thanksgiving and vow-making.

Apart from sea-robbers, there was another peril which merchantmen and passengers had to contend with, i.e. the mutual hostility between Christian and Moslem on purely religious grounds which persisted without respite from the time of the Crusades to the end of the 18th century. This enmity rendered a sea voyage in the Mediterranean an extremely dangerous venture because the risk of falling into the hands of the enemy was a very real one. As the Eastern Mediterranean and the whole of the North African shore were under the control of Moslem potentates, the naval squadrons of the Knights of St. John patrolled this sea in an effort to protect Christian shipping from Moslem attacks. Many a sea battle was fought to the bitter end by these rivals. Their forces were not

7. Oil Painting at Mellieha Sanctuary.

8. Oil painting dated 1675 at Mellieha Sanctuary.

9. Cassar, P., *The Maltese Corsairs and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem* in "The Catholic Historical Review", Vol. XLVI, July 1960, No. 2, p. 137-156.

10. THE MALTA OBSERVER of 27th July 1860, p. 3.

always equally balanced and whenever the Knights found themselves in a desperate situation, when reliance on material help was hopeless, they solicited Divine aid through prayers and the making of vows. Reminders of narrow escapes from a more powerful enemy or of an unexpected victory over him abound in several of the sanctuaries of Malta and Gozo in the form of paintings offered by the crew in fulfilment of vows made during encounters with the enemy. Some of those "ex-votos" were collective offerings. In such cases the painting was carried to the church in a pilgrimage in which the captain, knights, soldiers, sailors and oarsmen walked barefoot reciting the litany of the saints and other prayers¹¹.

Apart from these paintings there are others recording major naval encounters that have passed into world history. The Sanctuary of Zabbar, for instance, possesses "ex-votos" recalling episodes connected with the Great Siege of 1565 and with the Battle of Lepanto of 1571¹².

The third class of offerings consists of (a) nautical items such as ship models, banners, lengths of ropes, oars, lanterns, iron spurs and weapons. The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Graces of Zabbar was especially rich in these donations but most of them perished during Moslem raids on Zabbar, restoration work on the church or through mere neglect¹³; (b) war medals; (c) cult objects such as candles, decorated torches, flasks of oil for lighting, vestments, silver lamps, calyces, etc, and (d) the embellishing of altars and shrines and the offering of votive Masses, this practice going back almost to the origin of the liturgy of the Western Church.

A very intriguing and rare symbol is the representation of the human hand with extended fingers which is to be seen as a "graffito" among those of the ships already mentioned on the facade of the church of St. Paul Shipwrecked at Wied il-Qliegħa. It is of interest to recall that the upraised open hand was used as a protective amulet in Phoenician times. It is seen on stelae excavated at Carthage where in one instance it is associated with the figure of a boat¹⁴. It is still regarded as an emblem of good luck in certain parts of North Africa where it is known as the hand of Fatima¹⁵. It is, however, difficult to account for the presence of this pagan symbol on a Christian church. One is tempted to suggest that it may be an offering of thanksgiving from some Moslem slave who, while on a storm tossed ship, was persuaded by his Christian owners to ensure his safety by offering an "ex-voto" to St. Paul Shipwrecked. There is also the possibility that the hand "graffito" is a medical "ex-voto" carved by a Christian devotee for the cure of some disease or injury in his hand. Similar silver 'hands' are to be seen in our churches¹⁶.

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11. Vella, E.B., *Haż-Zabbar bil-ġrajja tiegħu*, Malta, 1926, p. 40.
12. Zarb, J., *Zabbar Sanctuary of Our Lady of Graces*, no date, no place of publication, pp. 13 and 18.
13. *Ibidem*, pp. 10 and 41. Lengths of ropes and chains and pieces of sail still hung at Tal-Ħerba Church at Birkirkara, at Mellicha Sanctuary and at Tal-Kunċizzjoni Church at Salini Bay.
14. Harden, D., *The Phoenicians*, London, 1962, pp. 88, 99, 171 and Plate 29.
15. Williams, M.O., *Time's Footprints in Tunisian Sands* in "The National Geographical Magazine", Vol. LXXI, No. 3, March 1937, p. 374.
16. Cassar, P., *Medical Votive Offerings in the Maltese Islands*. In 'Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute', Vol. 94, Part 1, 1963, p. 23.