



The Journal of Baroque Studies

Department of History of Architecture
Faculty for the Built Environment
University of Malta



L-Università
ta' Malta

Number 04
Volume 03

2024



The forgotten early eighteenth-century Passion Tableaux set of Senglea

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Until recent years the only source shedding some light on the origin of the Passion procession in Senglea was the Statute of the Confraternity of the Holy Crucifix coming from 1718. In chapter 9 it is clearly stated that one of the processions which had to be organized by the Confraternity was to be held on Maundy Thursday and it had to include *'tutti li Misterj della Sacrosancta Passione di Gesù Cristo'*.¹ No sources, however, were available regarding the origin of the effigies carried in the streets of the city during the procession, and thus the details published till 2019 were purely conjectural. Fr Alexander Bonnici claimed, but without citing any sources, that the first statue to be created for this procession was that of the Holy Redeemer, locally known as *Ir-Redentur*, and stated that it was already in existence by 1710.² As for the rest, he hypothesised that by 1735 there were at least five more, which were the statues of Christ in the garden, Christ scourged at the pillar, Christ crowned with thorns, the Crucifixion and the dead Christ. Some of these, according to him, are still used in the procession nowadays, therefore according to his theory these formed part of the original set.

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- 1 Senglea Parish Archive (SPA), untitled manuscript of the Confraternity of the Holy Crucifix, chapter 9.
 - 2 Alexander Bonnici, *L-Isla fi grajjiet il-Bażilka-Santwarju ta' Marija Bambina*, vol. 2 (Malta: Parroċċa tal-Isla, 1986), 179.

However, the discovery of a sealed box of manuscripts made in late 2017 changed all this. It turned out that due to lack of primary sources Bonnici and other authors not only got the years wrong, but were also completely unaware of another set of passion tableaux that predates the one thought to have been created by 1735.³ This is the forgotten set which will be presented in this study.

The earliest documentary references (1716-1719)

Among the manuscripts discovered in 2017 some are of exceptional importance for the history of the passion procession in Senglea. The earliest of these are the *Esiti* register wherein the expenses of the Confraternity were logged from 1715 till 1740, and the *Libro Mastro A* which presents the earliest inventories of the Confraternity recorded every year when the Procurator handed over the leadership of the Confraternity to his successor, usually in January.

According to the *Esiti* register payments for two effigies were made between November 1715 and March 1716; these are referred to as *la vara grande et insieme con la sua Croce* and *la Baiulazione*;⁴ they costed 4 scudi and 8 tari. The details include that the cross of the *vara grande* was attached to its *monte* by 4 screws and 4 *ciappetti*, whereas the cross of the other effigy was firmly kept in place on a

3 Many of the details that re-wrote the correct history of the Confraternity of the Holy Crucifix and its statues were published in the award-winning book *Ir-Redentur. History, art and cult of the miraculous effigy of Christ the Redeemer at Senglea, Malta*, edited by me and published conjointly by the Senglea Collegiate Chapter and Midsea Books in 2019.

4 The first of these two must have been simply an effigy of the cross standing on a small mount without any human figures; the records reveal that this was not used only in the passion procession but also in the titular procession of the Confraternity, celebrated at the beginning of May with the name of *Inventio Crucis* or *Santa Croce*. The second effigy, called *la Baiulazione*, represented Christ carrying the cross, which eventually came to be known as *ir-Redentur*. “*Baiulo*” in archaic Italian refers to ‘someone who carries’ or ‘holds up’ something; since the payment record speaks of a cross, then the thing held up or carried was the cross. A more precise name for this effigy in Maltese would be *l-Imghobbi* rather than *ir-Redentur*.

platform by some screws and a hook.⁵ Keeping to the details found in this manuscript it seems that the first time these effigies were set up was for the passion procession of 1716 and the labourer who did the work was paid 7 scudi.⁶ Seeing that the mounting of these images cost almost the double of their production it is probable that they had been created by local artisans who asked for a very reasonable price.

Keeping to the chronological order of the documentation available, the next details come from the handing over report made in January 1717 by Antonio Seichel and Giorgio Psaila as recorded in the *Libro Mastro A*. Here we read that there existed more effigies:

La croce con li misteri per le processioni. Il Fazzoletto, nel quale vi è dipinto il volto di N.S.

*Cinque bradelle per li misteri et un monte, insieme con le loro aste
Quattro misteri, due corpi sani, l'altri due teste, mani e piedi, li due corpi di paglia*

*Due croci una per la vara della Madonna, e l'altra per la baulazione
Cinque tilari per mettere di sopra li cinque misteri nel Giovedì Santo
Viti di ferro per li misteri n.o 10, cinque diademi per li misteri, li corone in argento.*⁷

Thus, by the beginning of 1717 there must have been at least five effigies of sorts with an assortment of objects related to them: five *bradelle* on which the effigies were carried, a *monte* to keep the cross upright, *aste* used to carry the effigies shoulder-high, *tilari* on which to place the effigies when they were displayed in the oratory of the church on Maundy Thursday, crosses, diadems, silver crowns and screws. The list gives also some important details on the constitution of these effigies: two were *corpi sani*, therefore they were for all intents and purposes solid statues, and two others made up of heads, hands and feet with straw bodies, so these must have been mannequins, as

5 SPA, *Esito (1715–1740)*, f. 3r.

6 *Ibid.*, f. 4r.

7 SPA, *Libro Mastro A*, f. 2.

was customary to make effigies⁸ before wood and *cartapesta* took over later in the eighteenth century. The manuscript does not give a name to all of these effigies: the ones that can be identified without difficulty are the cross, Christ carrying the cross (*la baiulazione*) and an effigy of the virgin Mary (*la vara della Madonna*). The latter, since it needed a cross to be complete, must have represented the figure of Mary standing or sitting at the foot of the cross, an imagery that is commonly known locally as *id-Duhuri* or *id-Deżolata*. It is understood that the two heads, hands and feet were used to set up these two *misteri*. The two solid statues are not identified but at this stage it is safe to presume that since they were necessarily whole bodies, then they must have depicted Christ without clothing, therefore they could have been any two among Christ scourged at the pillar, Christ crowned with thorns or the dead Christ. The mention of five diadems and silver crowns raises a difficulty because only four heads can be identified; the fifth one, therefore, might have been either hung to the empty cross as a reference to Christ who died on it, or else it could have been stuck to the textile referred to as “*il Fazzoletto, nel quale vi è dipinto il volto di N.S.*” My hypothesis is that this *fazzoletto* with the face of Christ painted on it must have been used in the procession as a prelude to what later became the Veronica;⁹ the diadem could have been stuck or sewn to this cloth around the painted face.

8 There are various instances where mannequins are mentioned as being used for processions in the 17th and 18th century. Some that are still in existence include the mannequin of St Nicholas manufactured in 1657 for Siġġiewi, the mannequin of Our Lady of the Rosary made in 1615 for the Dominican church in Valletta and a number of the passion effigies found in Birgu. See Simon Mercieca, ‘L-użu u l-kult tal-istatwi proċessjonali ġewwa Malta’, *L-Immara* 10, no.1 (2012), 2-11.

9 The so-called Veronica is not a biblical figure; the only case in the gospels where there is contact between Christ and a woman through a piece of garment is Lk 8:43-48, where a woman suffering from bleeding was healed by touching the hem of Christ’s clothing. Extra-biblical texts name this woman Βερενίκη (Berenike); the name Veronica is a Latinization of this. By the 11th century the story of this healed woman included an addendum saying that Christ gave her a portrait of himself on a cloth. In the Middle Ages the church of St Peter on the Vatican Hill acquired a towel with Christ’s face imprinted on it which was presumably not made by human hands, and this came to be known as the *Vera icona vultu Domini* (the true image of the face of the Lord). By the late 14th century, particularly thanks to the book *Meditationes Vitae Christi*, Βερενίκη and the *Vera icona* were linked and somehow associated to the passion narrative in the form of the woman who allegedly wiped Christ’s face and who, in turn, left an image of his face on her towel.

Around the same time when this handing over was carried out, the *Esiti* register records several expenses made on 14 January 1717 related to the *vestimenti delli misteri* when several lengths of *sangallo* textile were purchased for 5 scudi, 2 tari and 15 grani, together with six crowns and some other sewing materials. A week later a payment is registered for the purchase of a *fazzoletto* and its painting (10 tari), as well as some lengths of blue textile (3 scudi and 5 tari) for a new effigy: that of Christ in the garden.¹⁰ In April more hooks and screws were bought,¹¹ while in November a tailor was paid for sewing the clothes for the effigies.¹² Thus by Maundy Thursday of 1717 a new effigy of Christ in the garden, probably without an angel, had been created, and this is mentioned in the inventory coming from January 1718.

More work was carried out on this effigy during 1718 because according to the payment records *balavostri di legno* were purchased for it on 5 February.¹³ Early in May the acquisition of more textiles was made, shedding light on some of the effigies: *mostascia* was bought for the *monumento*, crimson *tarzanello* was bought to make a mantle for the statue of Christ crowned with thorns, turquoise *bucasi* and purple *sangallo* for St Veronica, turquoise *tarzanello* for Our Lady's mantle and purple *tarzanello di ciccio* for her tunic, green *bucasi* for St John's tunic and red *bucasi* for his mantle, *bucasi color d'oglio* for the tunic of St Mary Magdalene, *bellavila* for the undergarments of the mannequins, turbans to be used around the heads of the female figures as well as ribbons and green tape to fasten the tunics. In the same period there are references for the payments of the sewing of three mantles and four tunics used to dress the Virgin, St John, St Mary Magdalene and St Veronica, the mantle of Christ crowned with thorns and five under-tunics.¹⁴ The same pages contain other payments related to these effigies: the purchase of six half-beams for the bases of the effigies, several screws and nuts for the *balcone* of Christ crowned with thorns and the painting of a *piaga*

¹⁰ *Esito* (1715-1740) f. 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, f. 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, f. 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, f. 16.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 17-19.

on the same statue, the setting up of a *monumento*, more screws and nuts for the cross, the painting of the *bradelle* of three effigies (Christ carrying the cross, Christ scourged at the pillar, and Christ crowned with thorns) and the manufacture of three figures.¹⁵ Hence by Maundy Thursday 1719 the set had grown some more because it had new figures representing St Veronica with her painted veil and the figures of St Mary Magdalene and St John. The details found in the expenses made during 1718 solves the mystery of which were the two *corpi sani* mentioned in 1717: these were Christ crowned with thorns and Christ scourged at the pillar. There is also mention of a *monumento*, but this could have been an urn representing the grave of Christ without necessarily having a statue in it. Since here we find reference to a newly purchased *fazzoletto* which was then painted with the face of Christ it is probable that the older *fazzoletto* was carried in the procession as a banner and was not used for the newly manufactured St Veronica which replaced it.

The handing-over inventory made in January 1719¹⁶ still mentions five *bradelle*, so it should be understood that even though new figures were manufactured, these must have been included in the episodes that already existed: thus St Veronica was most probably added to the effigy of Christ carrying the cross, while St John and St Mary Magdalene were presumably placed at the foot of the cross which does not seem to have had a crucifix.

There are, sadly, also some inconsistencies. The 1719 inventory makes no mention of the effigy of Christ in the garden which was made during 1717 and 1718 according to the expenditure records. Apart from the usual details, the inventory mentions *corpi di paglia per le Marie No. 3*, indicating that there were three figures of “Mary”; one of these must be St Mary Magdalene, another might be St Veronica (since a “*tonica di Sangallo pavonazzo per S.ta Veronica*” is mentioned a couple of lines further down but no reference is made to her straw body), while the third one could be another mannequin representing the Virgin which would have found its place at the foot of the cross with St John and

15 *Idem.*

16 *Libro Mastro A*, f. 9.

St Mary Magdalene, but which for some reason is not enlisted in the book of expenses. Strangely enough, though, despite the fact that three new straw bodies are mentioned, and the mention by name of St Mary Magdalene, St John and St Veronica, there is no mention whatsoever of any new heads or body parts. Another inconsistency is related to the number of straw bodies and the total number of mannequins, which do not add up. According to the inventory there were five straw bodies, two mentioned in 1717 and three more mentioned in 1719; however there were, it seems, at least six, maybe seven, figures. The original two were Christ carrying the cross and the so-called *vara della Madonna*; the newly made three were female figures (called *le tre Marie* in the inventory), so Christ in the garden and St John – whose existence is attested from the payments – do not seem to have possessed a body. The riddle could be solved assuming that some figures needed a straw body probably because of their posture, while others had no need for them, presumably because they were standing or kneeling figures without implying any movement.

New acquisitions (1722-1725)

New details coming from the expenses made in 1722 shed some more light. In April 2 tari and 10 grani were paid to cover with silver the dagger piercing Mary's heart.¹⁷ Till this point we find no reference to any luxurious ornament apart from the silver crowns that were used by several effigies; this silver-covered dagger might prove that the image of Our Lady of Sorrows – probably the one referred to as '*la vara della Madonna*' – enjoyed more devotion than the others. That same year the silver crown of the dead Christ needed some *accomodamento*,¹⁸ so by that year a third solid statue must have been ordered.

The handing-over inventory of 1723 mentions acquisitions "*procurati ultimamente*" and these include three new heads with relevant body parts for the mannequins of St John, St Mary Magdalene

17 *Esito (1715–1740)*, f. 58r.

18 *Ibid.*, f. 62r.

and St Veronica, a new head for *la Madonna di sette dolori* and a newly acquired statue of Christ.¹⁹ The latter could be the dead Christ mentioned above, and the *accomodamento* which the crown needed mentioned in the *Esito* register might actually refer to the alternations an older crown had to undergo in order to fit the head of a new statue. The heads and body parts are clearly defined as ‘*nuovi*’, so the list must have been referring to new acquisitions rather than simply being updated with the heads and body parts acquired between 1717 and 1719. I believe that making new heads and body parts after just four to six years is a bit far-fetched, so maybe the effigies of the three ‘Marys’ (i.e. St Veronica, St Mary Magdalene and the Virgin) and of St John were simply clothes mounted on straw bodies with round objects for heads, carefully wrapped up in mantles and turbans in order to hide the lack of facial features. Presumably, these makeshift mannequins were then endowed with proper heads and body parts sometime during 1722.

According to the payment records of 1723 it transpires that particular attention was given to the effigy of St Veronica. For some reason the outfit made of turquoise and purple textile that had been manufactured in 1718 was no longer considered appropriate, and so a new outfit was made, this time made of ‘*una pezza e palmi due di bucati colore di canella per il manto*’, ‘*sei palmi di tarzanello di capicciola e palmi sei di ganza per la tonica*’²⁰ and a new undergarment made of silk. The head was adorned with a new wig with *scufia e gallone*.²¹ A new platform was also commissioned,²² so most probably at this point St Veronica became an independent effigy and was no longer set up on the same platform as Christ carrying the cross. It is hinted that new vestments were made also for St John and St Mary Magdalene, but

19 ‘*Di più tre Testi procurati ultimamente nuovi con le lor mani l’una di s. Gioan. Evangelista, l’altra di S. Veronica e l’altra di S. Maria Maddalena procurati da Gioanne Rizzo. Più una testa della Madonna di sette dolori, quale fu data alla compagnia per elemosina dalla Sig.ra Madalena Salvaloco. L’effige di N.S. quale fu procurata ultimamente dal istesso Gioanne Rizzo, noto per il nostro cataletto quale si sta facendo per la processione del Giovedì Santo.*’ *Libro Mastro A*, f. 27r.

20 *Esito (1715–1740)*, f. 67.

21 *Ibid.*, f. 68.

22 *Ibid.*, f. 69.

no details are given apart from the payment given to the same tailor who manufactured St Veronica's outfit. During the same year more silk *mosascia* was bought for the urn carrying the dead Christ.²³

Records of more tailoring come from April 1724, when a new tunic of *bucasi color d'oglio* was sewn for the mannequin of St John.²⁴ The *monumento* underwent more work which included gilding since a payment to an *indoratore* is registered.²⁵ It seems that the persons who worked on this monumento completed their work by January 1724 and were paid four months later, because a description of it, which includes the gilding, was made in the handing-over inventory written in January: '*Un monumento di N.S. nuovo fatto di legno indorato, vestito di mostascia bianca, con quattro angeli che lo sorreggono parimenti di legno dipinti et indorati messi per ogni angolo con sette teste di serafini di legno dipinti et indorati con il suo pedestallo di legno dipinto e profilato con oro, con otto bastoni per alzarlo, e dei traversi. Di più l'effigie di N.S. morto, fatto di stucco ultimamente procurata*'.²⁶ This description fits the urn that is still carried in the streets nowadays on Good Friday.

An enigmatic note coming from June 1724 states that a box was made for the heads of the mannequins in order to have them sent to Messina;²⁷ there are no details as to which heads these were and why they were sent to Sicily. It could either be referring to the newly made heads which were presumably sent there for treatment or painting to make them look similar to the effigies used in Southern Italy, or else, if the new heads actually replaced older ones, it could be referring to the older ones which might have been sold to someone in Messina. In December 1724 a new tunic was made for St John;²⁸ this is strange because another tunic had been made only a year before. The commission for a new tunic might indicate that a new mannequin of St

23 *Idem.*

24 *Ibid.*, f. 77.

25 *Idem.*

26 *Libro Mastro A*, f. 32r.

27 *Esito (1715-1740)*, f. 79r.

28 *Ibid.*, f. 83r.

John was being considered, maybe to be placed on the same platform with Our Lady of Sorrows. The following year new crowns were made for the diadems and these were covered in silver.²⁹

The final period (1732-1737)

No expenses were made on the effigies till 1732, probably due to the building of the new oratory (1725-1730) which must have used up most of the Confraternity's funds. In February 1732 a payment was recorded for the re-painting of the figures (probably the heads, body parts and the solid statues) and the beams used to carry them, and a month later some *pastasi* were paid to transport the *vari* from the store where they were kept to the new oratory for Lent.³⁰ According to the inventory of January 1732 the number of *bradelle* increased from five to six,³¹ so probably a new *bradella* was made for St Veronica or for Christ in the garden. The following year a wig was bought for the mannequin of St Mary Magdalene, along with more *mustascia* and *zagarello* for the urn carrying the dead Christ.³²

The final details presenting novelties come from the hand-over report made on 23 January 1737.³³ In this we find that the *corpi sani* were those of Christ scourged at the pillar (*la Colonna*) and Christ crowned with thorns (*la Coronazione*); the straw bodies with heads, hands and feet made of stucco belonged to the effigies of Christ in garden (*l'orto*) and Christ carrying the cross (*la baiulatione*); another straw body with stucco body parts belonged to an effigy of *la Madonna* (presumably Our Lady of Sorrows); three *corpi di legno nudo* with wooden heads, hands and feet belonged to St John and the two Marys (presumably St Mary Magdalene and the Virgin beneath the cross). Some details here refer to the clothing of the two mannequins of Christ: the one representing him praying in the garden

29 *Ibid.*, f. 86r.

30 *Ibid.*, f. 149r.

31 *Libro Mastro A*, f. 56r.

32 *Esito (1715-1740)*, f. 163r.

33 *Libro Mastro A*, ff. 64r-35r.

was dressed with a purple gown and a blue mantle, while the one of him carrying the cross had only the purple gown. St Veronica is not mentioned this time.

The transition that becomes slowly apparent from 1716 till 1737 moving from mannequins with *copri di paglia* to ones of *corpi di legno nudo* can be considered as a prelude to what had to happen from 1742 onwards. Interest seems to have increased in having effigies which had some kind of solid constitution rather than one made up of straw. In fact in 1742 a new set of effigies started to appear, made of *cartapesta* by Saverio Laferla, and these replaced the mannequins within an arc of three years. Three years after the completion of the new set, in 1747, the old mannequins were sold to a group of people identified only as “*i Bonaciogli*”³⁴ and no mention is made of them again in the inventories.

Artisans and benefactors

Some final details linked to the original set that may be of interest concern the names of people intertwined with the history of these mannequins provided by the documents that have been analysed. None of the artisans involved in the production and maintenance of these effigies were remembered in posterity among the names of great artists of the same period, however a tribute in their honour for their work would be appropriate here.

Girolamo *di Tommaso il Pittore* was the first person known to have setup the mannequins in 1716.³⁵ During 1717 Filippo Russo, who was the procurator of the Confraternity at the time, purchased the textiles for the vestments of the mannequins that were in production and the screws necessary to keep them in place.³⁶ A year later, the new procurator Gregorio Psaila paid for more textiles, bought from Mro Giovanni Paulo,³⁷ and for the *balavostri* needed

34 *Esito (1741–1776)*, f. 56r. The income is registered in the book of expenses because it was used to pay about two thirds of the price for the new set.

35 *Ibid.*, f. 4r.

36 *Ibid.*, ff. 6r, 8r, 12r.

37 *Ibid.*, ff. 17r–19r.

for the effigy of Christ in the garden³⁸ as well more screws and nuts. Agostino Randun did some painting work, while Giuseppe Muscat manufactured platforms, *bradelle*, the *balcone* for the effigy of Christ crowned with thorns, set up the *monumento* and manufactured three mannequins.³⁹ A year later he even set up the new St Veronica.⁴⁰ Maddalena Pons and Anna Bizzina donated money for the purchase of textiles for the two figures of the Virgin.⁴¹ Giovanni Rizzo provided the new heads and body parts and the stucco statue of the dead Christ in 1722 and recorded for the first time in January 1723.⁴² Giuseppe Celestri sewed the silk undergarment and created the wig for St Veronica in 1723,⁴³ while Simone Borg stitched the new vestments made for the same mannequin and those of St John and St Mary Magdalene,⁴⁴ while the new tunic for St John was made in 1724 by Honorato Psaila.⁴⁵ In 1723 Mro Rasmio *l'indoratore* gilded the *monumento*.⁴⁶ Finally, in 1747 Don Antonio di Giovanni sold the old mannequins to the *Bonaciogli* and gave the money to Filippo Delia who used it to pay Saverio Laferla for part of the sum required for the new *misteri*.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The study of the history of these mannequins sheds more light on the traditions related to the celebration of the passion of Christ in early eighteenth century Senglea. It is unknown why all the documentation

38 *Ibid.*, f. 16r.

39 *Ibid.*, ff. 17r-19r.

40 *Ibid.* f. 69r.

41 *Libro Mastro A.*, f. 9r.

42 *Ibid.*, f. 27r.

43 *Esito (1715-1740)*, f. 68r.

44 *Ibid.*, f. 69r.

45 *Ibid.*, f. 83r.

46 *Ibid.*, f. 77r.

47 *Ibid.*, f. 56r.

concerning these effigies was hidden away⁴⁸ in such a way that absolutely no records of their existence were available till 2017. The analysis of the discovered documentation has brought to light the existence of this forgotten set and helps to fill in some dark corners of the history of this town with its traditions.

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48 The documents were found in a sealed box hidden beneath a wooden platform that had a closet on top of it.