

# THE BUILDING OF A NEW CHURCH DEDICATED TO SAINT JULIAN IN 1682

Eugene F. Montanaro

When Achille Ferres wrote his *Descrizione Storica Delle Chiese Di Malta E Gozo* (1866), he recorded of the village of Saint Julians, somewhat summarily: *La sua primitiva chiesuola è antichissima, fabbricata verso il 1580. Essa però venne riedificata nel 1682.*<sup>1</sup> Though quite remarkably accurate, Ferres's account does not provide specific source notes, and cannot therefore be regarded as authoritative.

In this short study I shall attempt to place on record for the first time, archival material concerning the building of a new church at Saint Julians in 1682. The relevant documentation tends to confirm Achille Ferres's unequivocal assertion that this new church was in fact built on the site of a humble chapel.

## THE SUPPLICA

The licence (called a faculty) to demolish the existing chapel dedicated to St. Julian and to rebuild a larger church, was obtained from the competent ecclesiastical authorities on 2 March 1682. The necessary permit was granted in answer to a *supplica*, or petition, submitted to the Bishop of Malta by Don Mario Haxixa and Domenico Gat, *procuratori della Ven. Chiesa sotto titolo di S. Giuliano, posta nei limiti della Chiesa Parochiale e Collegiata di Birchircara.*<sup>2</sup> The petition, though perhaps laconic in style and content, is nonetheless revealing and, to a certain extent, anecdotal.

The special aim of the petitioners Haxixa and Gat was the consolidation of the ever increasing veneration which the faithful in these islands were manifesting towards the existing chapel dedicated to St. Julian: *per maggior culto divino et aumento della devotione che tiene verso detta Chiesa il popolo di questa Isola di*

## ABBREVIATIONS

- A A M Archiepiscopal Archives, Malta.
- N A V Notarial Archives, Valletta.
- N A G Notarial Archives, Gozo.
- N L M National Library of Malta.

<sup>1</sup> A. Ferres, *Descrizione Storica Delle Chiese Di Malta E Gozo*, (Malta 1866), pp. 326 - 327.

<sup>2</sup> N A V, R30/24, f.240r. A copy of the *Supplica* is appended to Notary Pietrò Attard's contract of 6 March 1682.

*Malta*.<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of achieving this goal, the petitioners proposed the demolition of the existing chapel and the building of a larger and more decent church in its stead.

In formal petitions of this nature, applicants were required to furnish the authorities with a clear indication of the *source* of the funds to be expended in the construction of the proposed building. In this respect, Haxixa and Gat hastened to inform the Bishop that a benefactor, a certain Magnifico Baltassare Ciantar, had offered to defray the greater part of the expenses to be incurred in the building of the new church.

Moreover, it would seem that the petitioners had taken the liberty to instruct an architect to draw up a plan for the proposed new building. Indeed, from the *supplica* it transpires that the master mason and building contractor Bartholomeo Camilleri had agreed to charge 120 *scudi* for building the new church. And he could hardly have committed himself to such figure without having some *a priori* acquaintance with the physical appearance of the proposed edifice!

Be that as it may, the petitioners sought the necessary licence to help raise the sum of 120 *scudi* by applying thereto the interests accruing on moneys administered by them, as well as small offerings donated for the purpose by the faithful. There were of course no local residents to help fund the building of the new church. In 1682, the village of Saint Julians had not yet come into being! But it is fairly evident from the *supplica*, and from the report following the pastoral visitation by Bishop Gargallo in 1601, that the existing church had assumed the role of a minor shrine, and that it had been enriched with the votive offerings of pilgrims who flocked to it from various parts of the island.<sup>4</sup> And it is therefore not unreasonable to assume that the petitioners hoped to draw upon the random offerings effected by visiting pilgrims and devotees to add to their building fund.

The ecclesiastical authorities responded favourably to the requests of the procurators, Haxixa and Gat. The Curia's fiat is expressed in the customary terse Latin formula: *Facultatem petitam oratoribus concedimus, datum in Palatio Episcopale Valletta die 11 Martii 1682. L. Famucellus Vic. Gen.*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> See J.E. Storace, *The Old Parish Church*, in Stanley Fiorini ed. *The Centenary of a Parish: St. Julian's 1891-1991*, Malta 1992, 119-131.

<sup>5</sup> N A V, R30/4, f.240v. A copy of this Decree is appended to Notary Pietro Attard's contract of 6 March 1682.

Two fundamental points emerge from the *supplica*. The petitioners did not attempt to render a rough or approximate estimate of the *total* cost of the whole project. It is, however, necessary to bear in mind that the project would inevitably involve ancillary costs, such as transport expenses, the wages of stone polishers and carpenters, the purchase of new furnishings more appropriate for a larger structure, and so on. Presumably, therefore, at this preliminary stage, the petitioners were in no position to draw up a meticulously detailed *stima* of the overall scheme.

The second point concerns the *titulus* of the church which is the subject of this article. Throughout the nineteenth century and indeed up to the present times, the church is often referred to as *Ta Lapsi* (Church of the Ascension).<sup>6</sup> But it is apparent from the *supplica*, and from the tenor of contemporary documents which we shall consider in due course, that in 1682, the church was officially and unequivocally dedicated to St. Julian the Hospitaller.

## THE FIRST CONTRACT

The available evidence concerning the construction of a new church in 1682 derives primarily from notarial deeds and a rudimentary ledger of expenses submitted to the Bishop's Curia by the procurators of the existing chapel, Don Mario Haxixa and Domenico Gat.

The relative contract of works was drawn up in Latin by Notary Pietro Attard, in Valletta, on 6 March 1682.<sup>7</sup> The parties to this agreement were the procurators of the existing chapel dedicated to St. Julian, Don Mario Haxixa *praesbitero* and Domenico Gat, both hailing from Birkirkara, and the master mason and building contractor Magister Bartolomeo Camilleri, who resided in Gudja. Also present on the deed was the benefactor Magnifico Baltassar Ciantar, son of Battista, hailing from Valletta. Ciantar was indeed a pivotal figure in the agreement since he contracted to disburse a substantial sum of money for the building of the new church.

On the contract, the master mason Bartolomeo Camilleri promised and agreed by a solemn undertaking with the aforementioned procurators to demolish the existing church dedicated to St. Julian in the parochial limits of Birkirkara, and to rebuild a larger and more decent church on its site. In building the new church, Bartolomeo Camilleri was to conform with the design prepared by the architect,

<sup>6</sup> See A. Ferres, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

<sup>7</sup> N A V, R30/24, f.237r. The deed was witnessed by the Deacon Don Laurentius Dimegh, residing at Birkirkara, and Don Giovanni Sammut, residing at Casal Balzano.

Magister Vincenzo Casanova. The contract makes specific mention of the fact that Vincenzo Casanova's architectural design for the new church had been carefully examined and approved by the parties to the deed, and that the same design was in the custody of the master mason Bartolomeo Camilleri. Clauses such as this were indeed not uncommon in contemporary deeds regulating the construction of urban and ecclesiastical edifices. Perhaps a more interesting piece of information in this regard, is that which derives from the ledger of expenses drawn up by the procurators of the church, recording the fee paid to Vincenzo Casanova for his plan for the new church. The relative entry, which is undated, reads as follows: *Più di scudo uno et tari otto dati a Maestro Censo Casanova per il suo travaglio nel designare la suddetta Chiesa, sive 1 - 8 - 0.*<sup>8</sup>

The second significant clause in the contract concerns the measurements of the new church and the time-limit for the completion of the works. In terms of the agreement, the new church was to have an internal width of 26 *palmi* and a running length of 52 *palmi*; moreover, its height, measured from the pavement to the roof, was to be one of 45 *palmi*. The contract also stipulated an optimistic completion date of six months to be reckoned from the date of the relative deed, that is, from 6 March 1682. However, the deed provides no penalty clause for breach of contract.

Next come the clauses that regulate the quantum of the building contractor's fee, and the mode of payment. Inevitably, these clauses link up with Baltassare Ciantar's undertaking to furnish funds for the building of the new church. And it would seem that the architectural components of the proposed edifice had a direct bearing on the contractual obligations of the parties in regard to all these matters in the manner I shall attempt to explain below.

Unfortunately, Vincenzo Casanova's plan for the new church was not appended to the initial contract. Moreover, I must admit that I have not been able to trace a copy of this plan. It may be recalled, however, that the practice of appending plans to notarial deeds did not emerge as a widespread local custom until well into the 19th century. Be that as it may, this lacuna necessitates a careful scrutiny of the words of the contract.

<sup>8</sup> A A M, *Conti*, Vol.5, No.8. *Esito fatto dalli Medesimi Procuratori in Servizio della Fabrica della Ven. Chiesa di San Giuliano* appended to the *Conto che rendono il Sacerdote Don Mario Haxixa e Domenico Gat della Procura della Ven. Chiesa di San Giuliano sita nelli limiti della Parocchiale di Birchircara per essi amministrata dalli 16 maggio 1681 sino al primo febraro 1703*, p. 53. This document reveals that the architect Vincenzo Casanova was paid his fee for drawing up the plan for the new church, after that the work of construction had been completed.

In terms of the contract, the new church was to have two chapels, one on each side of the main aisle, and this in conformity with Vincenzo Casanova's design: *'et duas cappellas scilicet unam ex utroque latere ipsius Ecclesiae faciendae iuxta dictum designum ...'*<sup>9</sup> Moreover, each of the chapels was to have its own little 'roof': *'partis tecti supra easdem cappellas'*.<sup>10</sup> And finally each chapel was to have a width of 17 *palmi*. It may be noted that the contract invariably speaks of two 'chapels', not altars. On the other hand, no mention is made of the location of these two chapels in relation to the main aisle of the new church. Hence we are unable to determine whether the new church was to have the physical appearance of a Latin cross.

The initial contract does not seem to make provision for the construction of a dome, however primitive. Moreover, it seems hazardous to speculate on the physical appearance of the roof of the new church. On the other hand, we do know from the initial contract that the master mason Bartolomeo Camilleri was to build the roof of the new church *'cum tecto balatis co-operto cum eorum inculmatura ...'*<sup>11</sup>

The foregoing information enables us to get a clearer picture in regard to the manner in which the parties to the contract sought to apportion the building contractor's fee between the procurators of the church and the benefactor Baltassar Ciantar.

From the wording of the contract it transpires that the procurators Haxixa and Gat bound themselves to pay the master mason Bartolomeo Camilleri a fee of 120 *scudi* for his job of demolishing the existing chapel and rebuilding on its site the aisle of a new church from the foundations to the roof. On the initial contract, the procurators paid Bartolomeo Camilleri a deposit of 25 *scudi* on account of the agreed fee of 120 *scudi*. Haxixa and Gat also bound themselves to pay Bartolomeo Camilleri the remaining balance of 95 *scudi* by means of instalments of unspecified amounts, always having regard to the cost of the work in progress (*travagliando pagando*). However, Bartolomeo Camilleri was not to receive his final instalment from Haxixa and Gat until the construction of the new church had been completed. What is significant here, however, is that the initial contract specifically limits the liability of the procurators in regard to the building contractor's fee up to a sum of 120 *scudi*.

On the other hand, in terms of the initial contract, Baltassar Ciantar's liability in the matter of the building contractor's fee is certainly more involved, and

<sup>9</sup> N A V, R30/24, f.237v.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

somewhat open-ended. Broadly speaking, Ciantar bound himself to pay the expenses to be incurred in the construction of the two lateral chapels, as well as any outstanding expenses in regard to construction of the new church in its totality, that is, any outstanding expense not covered by the procurators' contribution of 120 *scudi*. More important still, these works were to be appraised and valued by two architects. Indeed, each of the parties, that is to say Baltassar Ciantar and the building contractor Bartolomeo Camilleri, was granted the liberty of appointing an architect of his choice for this purpose. And in fact we read in the initial contract that Baltassar Ciantar elected and deputed the architect Giovanni Barbara to make the requisite valuation of the works. On his part, Bartolomeo Camilleri nominated the architect Vincenzo Casanova to see, judge and price the same work of construction: '*... inter se ex nunc et pro ut ex tunc sponte elegerunt, et eligunt, ac nominaverunt et nominant in eorum communes peritos Magistrum Joannem Barbara et dominum Magistrum Vincentium Casanova absentes etc. scilicet Dominum de Barbara ex parte dicti de Ciantar, Dominum vero de Casanova ex parte dicti de Camilleri ...*'<sup>12</sup> It will be noticed from the foregoing extract that Giovanni Barbara and Vincenzo Casanova were not present on the deed drawn up by Notary Pietro Attrad on 6 March 1682. The two architects did however appraise and price the construction work carried out by the master mason Bartolomeo Camilleri, as evidenced by a further deed drawn up by the same Notary on 21 April 1683, which we shall consider in due course.

Moreover, the benefactor Baltassar Ciantar and the master mason Bartolomeo Camilleri bound themselves to abide by the valuation that was to be made by the two architects Giovanni Barbara and Vincenzo Casanova as aforesaid, and not to lodge any appeal against it under any circumstance whatsoever. By means of this crucial clause in the initial contract, the parties no doubt sought to minimize the prospect of future litigation in the courts in regard to the matter of the building contractor's fee.

We know from the initial contract that prior to 6 March 1682, Baltassar Ciantar had already paid Bartolomeo Camilleri the sum of 15 *scudi* on account of the latter's eventual fee for the construction of the new church. This payment, we are told, was effected by means of a private agreement between the parties (*iuxta conventionem inter eos factam*), possibly a private writing. We seem to have here an indication that the parties were bent on the realization of the whole project some time before the signing of the initial contract.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, f.238r.

Following the example of the procurators, Baltassar Ciantar undertook to pay to Bartolomeo Camilleri by means of instalments, certain unspecified sums of money to cover the cost of the work in progress. Once again, however, the last instalment was to be paid solely on the completion of the construction of the new church in its entirety. The last instalment, of course, was to cover any outstanding expense comprised in the valuation or *stima* drawn up by the architects Giovanni Barbara and Vincenzo Casanova.

Finally, the initial contract lists certain terms and conditions that the master mason Bartolomeo Camilleri was to follow in building the new church. Curiously enough, these conditions are set out in Italian. It seems natural to assume that the contracting parties all spoke Maltese in their daily lives; Maltese, however, had neither a standard orthography nor a literature. Latin was still the language of court and cloister, and, more often than not, notarial deeds were published in Latin. However, those few tradesmen and craftsmen who could read and write, probably did so in Italian. Be that as it may, it would seem that the clauses we are about to consider, were drawn up in Italian for the sole purpose of making them more intelligible to all concerned. We may thus summarize these terms:

- 1 In building the new church, Bartolomeo Camilleri was entitled to utilize all the material of the existing chapel, following its demolition; he was also entitled to utilize the material that made up the room adjoining the existing chapel. The price of this material was not to be deducted from the fees due to Camilleri, with the exception of the price of the stones and *balate* that formed the arches of the said room.
- 2 Bartolomeo Camilleri was to demolish the sacristy adjoining the existing chapel at his own expense; the stones and all material of the demolished sacristy were to be reserved for the procurators of the church.
- 3 Bartolomeo Camilleri was to pave the floor of the new church at his expense, with flag-stones commonly known as *ciangature*.
- 4 The works for the foundations of that wall of the new church that faced northwards, at the site where could be found a cistern, were to be commenced from the bottom of the said cistern, and, moreover, on solid rock.

Although conventional in its format and essential language, the first contract is none the less remarkable in that it records the early stages of a commission for the building of a church in an uninhabited locality. As we have already had occasion to remark, the existing chapel was frequented by pilgrims. This notwithstanding, the strenuous and headstrong efforts of the procurators to set the project in motion might perhaps be interpreted as nothing more than an ambitious and ostentatious exercise conceived in an agony of competitive emulation. But there are other factors to be

considered. Not least of these, is the sincere piety of the patron, Baltassar Ciantar, who, *ex sua devotione*, was willing to disburse substantial funds for the project. We also get a glimpse of the working practice of a building contractor in these islands at the close of the 17th century, and of the exigencies of technique and costs. This interplay of patron, price and piety enables us to re-experience the human reality of creative work in a particular society, however insular in outlook.

In addition, the original contract brings us in contact with the professional activities of the architects Giovanni Barbara and Vincenzo Casanova. It may be recalled that in January 1693, Giovanni Barbara and Vincenzo Casanova, together with Lorenzo Gafà and Giovanni Ulderico Blondel, were called upon to submit their views in regard to the structural safety of the Cathedral at Mdina, which had been badly shaken by an earthquake.<sup>13</sup> And it is also known that later in that same year, the authorities decided to rebuild the Cathedral at Mdina on the plan that had been prepared by Lorenzo Gafà, and approved by the three *periti* Giovanni Barbara, Vincenzo Casanova and Giovanni Ulderico Blondel.<sup>14</sup> Hence it would seem that by the close of the 17th century, Barbara and Casanova were accepted by all thoughtful people as two of the impregnable figures in the field of Maltese architecture. And it is significant that a foretaste of their close collaboration as arbiters and surveyors of architectural design and construction, is already to be found in the 1682 contract for the building of a new church at Saint Julians.

With his appointment on 7 August 1681 as *Capo Maestro delle Opere* of the Order of St. John,<sup>15</sup> Giovanni Barbara was no doubt recognised as the chief establishment architect in these islands. References to Barbara in writings of the past century have not been based on archival materials and have indeed relied heavily on anecdotal and circumstantial details. In recent times, Monsignor Vincent Borg has published documented biographical information concerning Giovanni Barbara and his father, the master mason Giovanni Pietro Barbara.<sup>16</sup> Monsignor Borg's research and the writings of Leonard Mahoney have inevitably stripped away some of the varnish and inaccurate overpainting that have disguised from us the portrait of a very remarkable man.

<sup>13</sup> See Dominic Cutajar, *Lorenzo Gafà And His Family Background in The Architect*, (February 1981, Malta), p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> See Leonard Mahoney, *A History Of Maltese Architecture From Ancient Times Up To 1800*, (Malta 1988), p. 262, footnote 22.

<sup>15</sup> See Mons. Vincent Borg, *Il-Knisja Parrokkjali Ta' Hal Lija*, (Malta 1982), p. 83.

<sup>16</sup> See Mons. Vincent Borg, *op. cit.*, pp. 77 - 83.



Giovanni Barbara (1642-1728) is best known today as the architect of Lija Parish Church, ‘a charming and, in spite of its size, impressively monumental’ building.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Leonard Mahoney has argued convincingly, on stylistic and other grounds, that the Church of St. James in Valletta and the Archbishop’s Seminary at Mdina may no longer be attributed to Barbara.<sup>18</sup> It may be recalled that Barbara was also a military engineer and that he was employed in this role upon the Floriana Fortifications. He also built the skew arch at Sa Maison, ‘a marvel of constructional engineering even by modern standards’;<sup>19</sup> the construction is in fact still known as the Barbara Arch.

By contrast, local art historians have tended to reduce the architect Vincenzo Casanova to no more than a footnote. This is a great pity since Vincenzo Casanova, not unlike Giovanni Barbara, rose from humble origins to a position of some power and influence. Indeed, in a contemporary document that is crucial for the proper identification of his true professional role in his mature years, Vincenzo Casanova is unequivocally titled ‘*Architectus Magister Officii Domorum*’. This means in fact that he sat on that committee or body – the *Officio delle Case* – that had power and jurisdiction to determine all matters concerning the purchase and sale of immovables in Valletta, the construction of buildings and shops, the eligibility and accommodation of tenants, as well as the demolition of buildings and the eviction of tenants in those instances where the law was breached.<sup>20</sup>

The document that records Vincenzo Casanova’s administrative office, is dated 8 April 1695, and contains the following highly significant passage: ‘*Magnificus Vincentius Casanova Architectus Magister Officii Domorum huius Insulae Melitae, aetatis annorum quinquaginta circiter, ut dicta testis productus solemniter iuratus prout iuravit tactis etc., et examinatus super dictis capitulis producentis ...*’<sup>21</sup>

The document in question records Vincenzo Casanova’s sworn evidence concerning the special attributes and artistic patrimony of the Jesuits’ Church and College at Valletta. This evidence was in fact recorded at the Bishop’s Curia on 8 April 1695, at the instance of the Promotoris Fiscalis Generalis, Don Giovanni Luca

<sup>17</sup> See Leonard Mahoney, *op. cit.*, p., 297.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 248-249, and p. 297.

<sup>19</sup> See Michael Ellul, *Heritage Of An Island – Malta* (Malta 1975), p. 67.

<sup>20</sup> See Edward Sammut, *L’Officio Delle Case Ed I Regolamenti Per La Fabbrica Della Valletta (1556 - 1629)* in *Atti Del XV Congresso Di Storia Dell’ Architettura*, (Roma 1970), pp. 387-397.

<sup>21</sup> A A M, *Rubrica*, Vol. 3, No. 79, p. 3.

Mifsud. In his testimony, Casanova gives a brief account of the architectural components of the Jesuits' Church and of the adjoining College. He describes the whole complex as a magnificent building that accommodated halls, dormitories, lecture rooms, offices and loggias, as well as an internal garden. He goes on to state that the Church is very spacious and that it comprises, among other things, a high cupola, a large sacristy and two Oratories, and that it is also embellished with ornamental sculpture. And he then testifies that according to his estimation, the cost of construction of the whole complex could not have been less than approximately 80,000 *scudi*. Above all, however, Casanova is at pains to show that he is especially qualified to make this declaration: *'e ciò lo sò perchè sono Architetto, e versato in tali materie e pratico nel medesimo Collegio, ed in esso ho travagliato come anco nelli detti Oratorii, ed il tutto è pubblico e notorio'*.<sup>22</sup>

The last paragraph in the document recording Casanova's testimony, contains a list of valuable furnishings that went up to make the patrimony of the Jesuits' Church: silver vessels, candlesticks, censers, chalices, statues, tapestries, two church organs, two church bells, sun-dials, *orologii a campane*, and the like. Vincenzo Casanova concludes his testimony by stating that the Jesuits' Church was considered by everybody to be the richest of Maltese churches, and that it was surpassed in opulence solely by the Cathedral and by the Conventual Church of St. John. Once again, Casanova rounds up his testimony by affirming that he is very knowledgeable in matters appertaining to this Church, and he explains why: *'et io ne stò inteso perchè pratico in detto Collegio e Chiesa come ho detto di sopra, e frequento la detta Chiesa per mie devotioni, et è cosa pubblica e notoria in Malta'*.<sup>23</sup>

Vincenzo Casanova just about managed to scribble his signature in childlike fashion on the document recording his testimony. This fact perhaps bears its own relative significance, the more so since Monsignor Borg has recently shown that, in 1685, Giovanni Barbara affixed his mark on a document recording his evidence in regards to matters appertaining to Lija parish church. In this instance, Barbara's mark was qualified by the phrase, *'signum testis scribere nescientis'*.<sup>24</sup>

The veracity of Vincenzo Casanova's sworn testimony cannot really be put in doubt. He was, after all, affirming matters that were the common knowledge of

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> See Mons Vincent Borg, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

all and sundry. On the other hand, the document we have just considered does raise serious problems of interpretation.<sup>25</sup> Casanova states, among other things, that he was employed to work (*'ho travagliato'*) in the Jesuits' College and in the Oratories adjoining the Jesuits' Church. But what was the exact nature of his employment? Was he employed in the role of an ornamental sculptor? Or was he the architect in charge of effecting structural alternations in the existing complex? Equally unhelpful and vague are his words *'perchè pratico in detto Collegio e Chiesa'*. The answers to these questions must await the discovery of further archival material concerning the architectural history of the Jesuits' Church at Valletta.

It also transpires from the aforementioned document that, in 1695, Vincenzo Casanova was about 50 years old. This means in effect that Casanova was approximately three years younger than Giovanni Barbara. Lorenzo Gafà (1639-1703), the leading architect of the day in these islands, was almost the exact contemporary of Barbara, and it was indeed being suggested that Giovanni Barbara's western towers on Lija's parish church were in fact inspired by Gafa's model for the facade of the new Cathedral at Mdina.<sup>26</sup> Both Barbara and Casanova appear to have worked in Lorenzo Gafa's shadow. This image results largely from the nature of the extant sources. But we know so little of their active careers as architects that it is as yet impossible to establish whether they did in fact carve out personal styles.

It has been noted that both Barbara and Casanova held high and responsible establishment posts in their professional roles as architects. Official government business must have brought the two men together on many an occasion, though it remains difficult to establish whether this personal contact ever developed into something like close friendship.

Vincenzo Casanova sprang from a family of sculptors based in Senglea. He started life by following his father's craft as a sculptor, but worked his way up to become an architect. He would not, of course, have been a sculptor, as we should use the term, that is to say a creative artist, but a highly skilled stone-carver, the type of craftsman who was habitually employed on the carving of architectural mouldings and capitals which were the staple of the *scarpellino's* or *intagliatore's* trade, and the decoration of balconies and church windows. Documentation recently brought to light by Father George Aquilina O.F.M., is particularly enlightening in this regard. Indeed, on a contract published by notary Pasquale De Lucca on 3 May 1669,

<sup>25</sup> These problems are further compounded by our present limited knowledge of the architectural history of the Jesuits' Church and College in Valletta during the course of the first half of the 17th century – see Leonard Mahoney, *op. cit.*, pp. 202-203.

<sup>26</sup> See Leonard Mahoney, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

Vincenzo Casanova and his brother Antonio are unequivocally titled ‘maestri scarpellini’: ‘*Constituiti in presenza di me Notaro e testimonii sottoscritti Antonio Casanova e Vincenzo Casanova fratelli, figli del quondam maestro Michele, maestri scarpellini della citta Senglea ...*’<sup>27</sup> In this instance, Vincenzo Casanova and his brother Antonio had contracted to demolish and rebuild the corner Chapel dedicated to the Holy Crucifix, at the Church of the Franciscan Friars (*Ta Ġiezu*), in Valletta, as well as to embellish with sculpture, the rebuilt Chapel. A further clause in the contract is highly indicative of Vincenzo Casanova’s early training and profession in a society still organized by the apprenticeship and guild system: ‘*Fare l’Altare di detto SS.mo Crocefisso con ornarlo di colonne et ornamenta, intagliare li pilastri, arco, coppola, e tutta la detta Cappella*’.<sup>28</sup> Vincenzo Casanova could not have been very much older than 24 years, when he contracted to carry out these works.

Their exist further sources which reveal that from a relatively young age, Vincenzo Casanova was also working as a stone carver. In June 1669, for example, Vincenzo Casanova had commenced executing sculptural work on the capitals and the immediate surroundings of the windows at the Church of the Dominicans, in Valletta.<sup>29</sup> And between the years 1677 - 1679, Vincenzo Casanova and his brother Antonio executed a largely sculptural decorative programme for the Chapel dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, at the Church of the Franciscan Friars Minor in Valletta. This job, for which the brothers Casanova were paid a fee of 230 *scudi*, was exactly similar in nature to the one carried out by them in the Chapel dedicated to the Holy Crucifix at the same Church.<sup>30</sup>

The diversity of Vincenzo Casanova’s professional life does not seem to have been extraordinary for an active and well-known architect. Indeed, Tommaso Dingli (1591 - 1666) and Lorenzo Gafà, to quote but two significant examples, are known to have started life working as sculptors, or, better still, *maestri scarpellini*.

I must admit that I have not been able to establish the date of Vincenzo Casanova’s appointment to the office of *architectus magister officii domorum*. However, Casanova was certainly active as architect in 1682 when, aged about 37 years, he prepared the plan for the construction of the new church at Saint Julians.

<sup>27</sup> N A G, No. 39, f. 31r.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> See Father Philip Mallia, O.P., *Il-Fratellanza Tas-SS.MU Sagriment Fil-Parroċċa Ta’ S.M. Tal-Porto Salvu Il-Belt, 1575-1975*, (Malta 1975), p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> See Father George Aquilina, O.F.M., *Il-Ġimgha l-Kbira Tal-Belt*, (Malta 1986), p. 19, footnote 27.

Vincenzo Casanova's lineage may be traced back to his grandfather Giorgio Casanova, who married Andreana Burlò in Cospicua on 24 November 1590.<sup>31</sup> But the first of his name to rise to any prominence, appears to have been his father, the builder and sculptor, Maestro Michele Casanova. The earliest archival mention of Michele Casanova that I have been able to trace, is the entry recording his marriage to Maria Gatt in the registers of the Church of St. Paul Shipwrecked, in Valletta; the relative entry is dated 25 April 1621. Michele and Maria Casanova evidently had five children, Vincenzo being born around the year 1645.

Throughout the 17th century, Senglea was never without builders and *scarpellini*. These men evidently admired Michele Casanova's talents, and they manifested their respect not merely by according him trifling personal civilities, but also by entrusting to him offices of trust. This may perhaps be best illustrated by recalling the job assigned to Michele Casanova on a deed published by Notary Tommaso Marano Decandia on 28 November 1646. This document reveals that the builders, master masons and *scarpellini* at Senglea had contracted to construct '*una guaranitione con quattro colonne a tutta perfettione come il disegno del Fra Bonamici e secondo richiederà l' opera in esecution di detto disegno per la facciata et Altare della loro Cappella e Congregatione di detta Senglea.*'<sup>32</sup> The work was to be carried out free of charge: '*e ciò gratis et amore Dei per mero affetto di Charità senza mercede alcuna*'. The contract furnishes an invaluable roll of the professional men who were to carry out the work: Mro. Michele Casanova, Mr. Domenico Tonna, Mro. Pietro Burlò, Mro. Giovanni Farrugia, Mro. Michele Angelo Ferrara, Mro. Simone Xara, Mro. Michele Uzzino, Mro. Demetrio Gambino, Mro. Augustino Parnis, Mro. Salvo Azzupard, Mro. Giorgio Grima, Mro. Mattheo Felici, Mro. Gioseppe Vella, Mro. Carlo Vella and Mro. Pasquale Vella.<sup>33</sup> But what really concerns us here, is the penalty clause in the contract. Those of the contracting parties who, on the appointed day, failed to turn up for work on the project in accordance with the agreed schedule, became liable to a fine of two *tari*. And the parties to the contract elected Mro. Michele Casanova to be the final arbiter in this matter, and authorised him to collect the fines from the transgressors and to accept the apologies of defaulters: '*hanno dichiarato fra loro che amancando alcun d' essi d' intervenire al detto travaglio quando s' haveran da congregare, di pagar tari doi in subsidio di detta opera per ogni volta che si mancherà, in mano di Mro. Michele Casanova, et*

<sup>31</sup> For Vincenzo Casanova's lineage and descendants, see Eugene F. Montanaro, *Materials For The Life Of Francesco Vincenzo Zahra in Francesco Zahra – 1710 - 1773*, (Canon John Azzopardi, Editor), (Malta 1986), p. 3, and *ibid.*, Genealogical Table, p. 29.

<sup>32</sup> N A V, 6/768, f. 85r.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

*havendo legitima causa e non potendo venire quale tale sarà tenuto far la scusa al detto de Casanova*'.<sup>34</sup> Evidently, Michele Casanova was endowed not only with sculptural talent, but also with sound, ordinary administrative abilities.

It is also worthwhile to recall that during the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, the name *Casanuova* was vaguely associated with certain identifiable pieces of sculpture in these islands. Thus the original compiler of the manuscript *Uomini illustri di Malta dal 1495 ed altre notizie*, records that a certain Casanuova carved in stone the two statues representing St. John the Evangelist and St. Luke, and lodged in the *prospettiva* of the choir at Attard parish church.<sup>35</sup> Count Saverio Marchese notes that certain other pieces of sculpture, stylistically similar to the statues just mentioned, and to be found in a number of our village churches, may perhaps also be attributed to this same carver.<sup>36</sup> There is indeed a great possibility that the author of these carvings is none other than Mro. Michele Casanova. But the solution to this problem must await the discovery of more appropriate sources. So much for Vincenzo Casanova's father.

Vincenzo Casanova married Giovanna Grech in Senglea on 8 November 1676. A daughter, Augustina, was born to the couple on 21 May 1687; the godfather at her baptism was the sculptor, Gioacchino Fabri.<sup>37</sup> Augustina Casanova in turn married the Senglean builder and sculptor, Mro. Pietro Paolo Zahra. In a milieu so self-sufficient and so governed by guild thinking and professional regulations, intermarriage between families of sculptors was frequent. Moreover, common social standing and professional interdependence were significant factors that served to engender a certain measure of solidarity amongst the island's *scarpellini*. But Augustina's son, Francesco Vincenzo Zahra (1710-1773), was destined to become one of Malta's greatest painters. At his baptism, the child was in fact named Vincenzo Francesco Zahra – in that order.<sup>38</sup> In this regard, I am inclined to interpret the choice of the first name as a commemorative gesture of respectful deference by the parents towards the child's maternal grandfather, Vincenzo Casanova. For Vincenzo Casanova had passed away a short while before 22 June 1706, the day on

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 85v.

<sup>35</sup> N L M, *Libr. Ms.* 1123, f. 93. This manuscript was written by Count Saverio Marchese (1757 - 1833) from notes originally compiled by a *Religioso Cappuccino*, possibly the Capuchin Friar, Padre Pelagio (1708 - 1781).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Senglea Parish Archives, *Liber Bapt.*, III, 21 May 1687.

<sup>38</sup> Senglea Parish Archives, *Liber Bapt.*, III, f. 146r.

which his daughter Augustina had entered into a marriage settlement with her future husband, Pietro Paolo Zahra.<sup>39</sup>

I have tried to set the architects Vincenzo Casanova and Giovanni Barbara against their background in time. This has led to a somewhat lengthy and unorthodox digression, but it seems to me that without some such setting of the stage, the building of the new church at Saint Julians in 1682 is apt to appear in a vacuum, and only makes sense for the specialist or the professional.

## DEEDS OF PAYMENT

Further secure knowledge concerning the construction of a new church at Saint Julians in 1682, derives from two deeds of payment and receipt, drawn up in Valletta by Notary Pietro Attard. Curiously enough, the two deeds are written in telegraphic style on the side margins of the first folio of the original contract published by Notary Pietro Attard on 6 March 1682.

The first deed, dated 7 July 1682, merely records the payment of 16 *scudi* and 6 *tari* made by the procurators Don Mario Haxixa and Domenico Gat to the master mason Bartolomeo Camilleri.<sup>40</sup> It may be recalled that on the original contract, the procurators had bound themselves in a somewhat vague manner to effect periodical payments that were meant to cover part of the cost of the construction work in progress. The dates on which these instalments were to be paid by the procurators receive no express mention in the original contract. On the other hand, the original contract makes it quite clear that the quantum of each instalment was to be in a large measure proportionate to the cost of the work being carried out by the building contractor as at the date of payment. On his part, Bartolomeo Camilleri had contracted to complete the construction of the church by 6 September 1682. The meagre instalment of 16 *scudi* and 6 *tari* disbursed by the procurators on 7 July 1682 perhaps signifies that the work of construction had not progressed far enough for the eventual completion of the whole project within the time-limit stipulated in the original contract. Alternatively, on 7 July 1682, the procurators may not as yet have been possessed of sufficient funds to disburse a larger sum than the modest instalment recorded in the contract in question. Be that as it may, Bartolomeo Camilleri would not seem to have received payments on account from the procurators

<sup>39</sup> N A V, R992/6, f.245r. In 1726, Augustina, wife of the sculptor Pietro Paolo Zahra and daughter of the architect Vincenzo Casanova, was still residing at Senglea, '*prope Turrim S. Michaeli*' – see A A M, *Status Animarum Senglea 1726*, f. 29v.

<sup>40</sup> N A V, R30/24, f. 237r.

prior to the instalment recorded on the deed of 7 July 1682. It was indeed customary for contracting parties to instruct notaries to draw up formal receipts for payments effected by means of private writings. But the deed of 7 July 1682 makes no express mention of prior payments effected by the procurators by means of private writings.

A further deed of payment reveals that the new church at Saint Julians had been completed, or largely so, by 21 April 1683. In spite of its brevity and lacunae, the deed in question is a highly informative document drawn up by Notary Pietro Attard on 21 April 1683,<sup>41</sup> and records the payment made by the patron Baltassare Ciantar in final settlement of the obligations assumed by him on the original contract of 6 March 1682.

From this second deed of payment we learn that the architects Giovanni Barbara and Vincenzo Casanova had duly valued and priced the work of construction of the new church at Saint Julians. Moreover, the contract also reveals that on 9 February 1683, the two architects had deposited a report of their findings and assessments in the Castellaniae Curia, one of the tribunals set up in the island by the Knights of the Order of St. John. But the filing of this report in the Castellaniae Curia does not necessarily imply that the contracting parties had resorted to litigation in the courts. In following this procedure, Barbara and Casanova probably sought to obtain from the court a formal assessment of the fees due to them for their labours in drawing up the detailed *stima* of the cost of the whole project.

On the deed under review, Bartolomeo Camilleri received an instalment of 20 *scudi* from the patron Baltassare Ciantar in full and final settlement of the global sum of 244 *scudi* due to him in accordance with the final *stima* drawn up by the architects Barbara and Casanova: '*Et sunt dicta Sc. 20 per complimentum scutorum ducentorum et quadraginta quatuor ... pro constructione partis fabricae Ecclesiae Sancti Juliani in dicto proximi contractu mentionatum, ad quem partem se obligavit dictus de Ciantar et hoc iuxta aestimationem Magistorum Joannis Barbara et Vincentii Casanova peritorum in dicto proximo instrumento electorum, et eorum relationem factam ut dicitur in Actis magnae Curiae Castellaniae sub die nono mensis february proximo praeterito ...*'<sup>42</sup> We have already noted that Giovanni Barbara was not exactly literate, and it would appear that he certainly needed a prime mover in the shape of Vincenzo Casanova in order to promote his contribution to the collaborative report or *stima* that was eventually filed in the Castellaniae Curia.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 237r. I have been unable to establish with certainty the true identity of the patron, Baltassar Ciantar. The contracts for the commission under review are not very helpful in this respect; they merely



Notary Pietro Attard's contract of 21 April 1683 also makes nebulous mention of another document that relates directly to the construction of the church dedicated to St. Julian. Indeed, Notary Attard's contract records the fact that on a prior deed published by Notary Paolo Zerafa, the patron Baltassare Ciantar had paid the builder Bartolomeo Camilleri an instalment on account of the latter's fee for building the new church. Unfortunately, we are not told the publication date of Notary Zerafa's contract, nor are we informed about the quantum of this instalment. It is very likely, however, that Baltassare Ciantar disbursed the greater part of his promised contribution towards the building costs of the church on the deed published by Notary Paolo Zerafa, the more so since the final instalment paid on Notary Attard's deed amounted to no more than 20 *scudi*. There is hope that Notary Zerafa's contract will reappear, but it had not done so by the time this article was committed to press. Meanwhile, Notary Pietro Attard's economical approach perforce leaves many fascinating alleys signposted but unexplained.

On the other hand, Notary Attard's second deed of payment furnishes conclusive and unmistakable evidence that the benefactor Baltassare Ciantar disbursed no less than 244 *scudi* of the total cost of the whole project. It will be seen in due course that the procurators Haxixa and Gat eventually disbursed a sum of 199 *scudi* towards the cost of construction of the new church. The fee of 244 *scudi* paid by Baltassare Ciantar possibly reflected the enthusiastic appraisal of the architects Giovanni Barbara and Vincenzo Casanova. Be that as it may, the procurators certainly believed in divine providence, and found it in the lavish patronage of Baltassare Ciantar.

## LEDGER OF EXPENSES

If some final 'evidence' is needed to strengthen our statement that the construction of the church at Saint Julians was completed in the year 1683, it is surely given by the *Esito fatto dalli Medesimi Procuratori in servizio della Fabrica della Ven.*

tell us that the patron's father was Battista Ciantar, and that the patron himself resided in Valletta. On the contracts, Baltassar Ciantar is sometimes titled *Magnificus*, but this qualification was not reserved solely for notaries public, and, in any case, a Baltassar Ciantar does not figure in the official list of notaries exercising their profession in these islands. In 1678, a Baltassar Ciantar, a merchant carrying on business in Valletta, was an active member of the Confraternity of Saint Michael that had its seat (*sede*) at the Church of St. Paul Shipwrecked in Valletta – see St. Paul Shipwrecked Parish Archives, *Libro Consulte della Ven. Confraternità di S. Michele Arcangelo Dal 1660 al 1771*, f. 9r. In 1673, a certain Baltassar Ciantar was paid three *scudi* by the Confraternity of the Holy Cross for his work on the statues for the Holy Week procession at the Church of St. Mary of Jesus (Ta Giezu) in Valletta – see Father George Aquilina, *Il-Gimgha l-Kbira Tal-Belt*, (Malta 1986), p. 32 and p. 39. In these instances, however, the primary sources do not reveal the paternity of the Baltassar Ciantar in question.

*Chiesa di San Giuliano*, a ledger of expenses appended to the accounts (*Conto*) of the Church for the years 1681 - 1703.<sup>43</sup>

This document, filed in the Bishop's Curia by the procurators Haxixa and Gat, classifies the expenses incurred in the building of the new church under three main headings, viz.: (a) the fees paid to the builder Bartolomeo Camilleri and his employees; (b) additional expenses paid to a wide range of craftsmen for ancillary works; (c) payments effected in connection with works for the opening of three windows (*finestroni*) in the new church.

The disbursements listed in the procurators' ledger of expenses reach a grand total of 199 *scudi* 10 *tari* and 3 *grani*. However, the very first entry in the ledger reveals that no less than 145 *scudi* were swallowed up by the fees paid to the builder Bartolomeo Camilleri and the master mason Michele Gaffan and his assistants, for their task of demolishing the existing church and building a larger one on its site. The entry recording this payment of 145 *scudi* is undated, yet it immediately precedes a series of small payments for ancillary works, all entered in the ledger under the date, 6 October 1683. Hence it is fairly evident that, by 1683, the construction of the main structure of the church had been completed.

The procurators had certainly managed to bring their plan to fruition. Indeed, the very first entry in the building accounts states unequivocally that the church was built in accordance with those terms and conditions stipulated in Notary Pietro Attard's deed of 6 March 1680, and hence it appears certain that Vincenzo Casanova's proposed plan for the new church was actually carried out: *Si fanno esito detti Procuratori Don Mario Haxixa et Domenico Gat di scudi cento quarantacinque per loro pagati a Mro. Bartolomeo Camilleri e Mro. Michele Gaffan Muratore e lavoranti, et altri a nome di detto Mro. Bartolomeo per haver sfabricato la Chiesa di S. Giuliano e poi di nuovo fabricata in forma più ampia et decente con espressa licenza dell' Ordinario nella conformità dell' obligatione fatta per l' effetto suddetto come per gl' atti del fù Notaro Pietro Attardo sotto li 6 marzo 1680 sive 145 --*.<sup>44</sup> This single entry, even if read in complete isolation, truly constitutes sufficient proof of the concrete materialization of the whole project, and indeed invests the ledger with the radiant glow of historical reality. On the other hand, it is sad to learn of the demise of Notary Pietro Attard; it appears that the man who drew up the formal documents that gave legal expression to the wishes and reciprocal obligations of the protagonists in a seemingly impossible venture, did not live long enough to see the

<sup>43</sup> A A M, *Conti*, Vol. 5, No. 8, pp. 51-54.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51

church in its finished state! The entry does have one minor flaw in that it gives a wrong date for the contract of works drawn up by Notary Pietro Attard; the contract was in fact published on 6 March 1682.

It may be recalled that the builder Bartolomeo Camilleri had estimated the procurators' share of the total cost of the whole project at 120 *scudi*, before work on the building had commenced. Yet it seems hardly fair to assume that Camilleri had deliberately understated the expense. Decorative work and statuary may perhaps be evaluated with a certain measure of accuracy in advance, but a more unpredictable project such as the building of a church may only be judged and valued upon completion.

Under the general heading '*Segue altra spesa fatta dalli Procuratori*', the ledger gives a series of paltry payments effected under the dates 6 October 1683 and 7 October 1683. The entries recorded under this nebulous heading relate primarily to the expenses incurred in the formation of a terrace fronting the church, as well as in the interior finishes and decoration of the new church. The entry recording the payment of a modest fee to the architect Vincenzo Casanova '*per il suo travaglio nel designare la suddetta Chiesa*', is also to be found under this vague heading in the ledger.

The building accounts reveal that the procurators once again sought the services of the builder Bartolomeo Camilleri for the purpose of constructing a terrace (*terrazza*) in front of the new church. On this occasion, Bartolomeo Camilleri was assisted by an obscure master mason, a certain Maestro Bastiano. The erection of the terrace necessitated the employment of a team of workmen with special skills. The entries in the ledger do not give their names but rather indicate the specific work which they undertook and their rates of pay. They are indeed variously described as *lavoranti, giovani, travagliatori, manuali, huomini* and *figlioli*, no doubt in strict conformity with their appropriate status in terms of the prevailing guild regulations. Most were employed in dampening and flattening the gravel or broken earth that was used in the formation of the terrace, viz.: '*per haver zappato et adacquato la torba per la terrazza*'.<sup>45</sup> The water used in this work had to be transported to the site from its source and thus the procurators incurred expenses '*per carreggiare l'acqua per la torba per l'altra parte della terrazza*'.<sup>46</sup> Finally, the procurators employed an unnamed master mason to oversee the construction of the balusters surrounding part of the terrace.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Curiously enough, the ledger contains very few entries that relate directly to expenses incurred in the decoration and furnishing of the new church. In this regard, however, it is worthwhile to bear in mind that the carcass of the demolished building served as a useful quarry for the new church and, presumably, the procurators managed to salvage as much of the furnishings of the old church as they possibly could. Be that as it may, on 7 October 1683, the procurators paid an unnamed master mason 4 tari '*per il finimento della fabrica di detta Chiesa*'.<sup>47</sup> Stone cutters—somewhat unusually qualified as *pertori*—were employed to hew the small steps leading to the Altar: *Più di tari otto pagati alli pertori et lavorante per li scaloni dell' Altare sive - 8 -*.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the procurators purchased a quantity of plaster flake (*calcina*), and employed no less than three *biancheggianti* to whitewash the new church.

The building of the new church had occasioned the demolition of a retaining wall; the procurators took care to have this wall rebuilt: *Più di scudi due et tari sette et grani dodici spesi per haver fabricato la muraglia di pietra secca ch' era battuta per cagione della fabrica di detta Chiesa sive 2 - 7 - 12*.<sup>49</sup> The procurators also laid out a small garden very near to the new church, and a stone cutter was employed to hew the stones required to build the gate for this garden: *Più di tari tre et grani dieci pagati per pertore che ha tagliato pietre per la porta del giardinetto contiguo con detta Chiesa sive - 3 - 10*.<sup>50</sup> Finally, an obscure yet highly interesting entry relates to the expense incurred in the rebuilding of a loggia, but unfortunately the ledger does not specify its precise location: *Più di tari nove et grani dieci spesi per accomodamento et ruffamento dell' Arco sive Loggia sive - 9 - 10*.<sup>51</sup>

The final list of expenses in the procurators' ledger comes under the heading '*Spesa fatta per le Tre Finestroni*'. The opening of these three windows in the new church occasioned the employment of the master carpenters, Mro. Pasquale Borg and Mro. Battista Borg. For some unknown reason, the ledger is more informative in regard to the tasks carried out by these two carpenters than in the case of the jobs undertaken in the new church by the other craftsmen. Indeed, the ledger goes as far as to specify the number of days that Mro. Pasquale Borg and Mro. Battista Borg spent working on the windows.

In a recently published article, Monsignor Vincent Borg gives a brief but probing analysis of the characteristically simple architecture of our churches, till the

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

last decades of the 16th century, and also enlightens us in regard to the traditional location of windows in these churches: ‘A very small window was inserted in the facade. At a later stage additional windows were incorporated in the semi-circular ceiling’.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, the ledger under review provides very few clues, if at all, in regard to the location of the three windows opened up in the new church at Saint Julians. A rare exception is the entry that seems to speak about the glass panes intended for a window in the ceiling immediately above the Altar, or, possibly, for a window in the wall behind the Altar: *Più di scudi tre et tari otto pagati a Maestro Pasquale falegname per il travaglio d’undici giorni, tanto nelli finestroni come anche nelle vitriate dell’Oggio di suddetto Altare sive 3 - 8* -.<sup>53</sup> However, as can be seen from the wording of this entry, the matter concerning the precise location of this window is far from clear.

Work on the windows constrained the procurators to purchase the requisite structural items and materials, and the ledger of expenses is particularly exhaustive in this regard. A surprisingly large quantity of nails was purchased by weight, expressed in *rotoli*. Expenses were also incurred in the purchase of glass-panes (*vitriate*), gum-material (*colla*), metal window-sockets and iron bars (*ciappetti et ferrogliotti*). The last entry in the ledger seems to indicate that the procurators also employed a tinsmith to work on the windows: *Più di scudo uno et tari nove et grani quattro per stagno et manifattura di detto stagno in detta vitriata sive 1 - 9 - 4*.<sup>54</sup>

A final, homely detail in the procurators’ ledger is the record that the master carpenter Pasquale Borg worked on a wooden grating for five consecutive days: *Più di scudo uno et tari otto pagati per cinque giorni a detto Mro. Pasquale Borg per haver fatto la grada sive 1 - 8* -.<sup>55</sup> The grating was provided with a lock: *Più di tari sette spesi per una serratura fatta in detta grada sive - 7* -.<sup>56</sup> Once again, however, the ledger is silent in regard to the location of the grating.

## EPILOGUE

The first chapel dedicated to Saint Julian, within the limits of the parish of Birkirkara, was built in 1580. In 1593, this chapel was pulled down and reconstructed

<sup>52</sup> See Mons. Vincent Borg, *Maltese Churches in Maltese Baroque* (Edited by Giovanni Mangion), (Malta 1989), p. 64.

<sup>53</sup> A A M, *Conti*, Vol. 5, No. 8, p. 53.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

anew.<sup>57</sup> I have attempted to show that work on the construction of Vincenzo Casanova's church – the third built on the site – commenced in March 1682, and was certainly completed by October 1683. One of the fascinations of the history of this commission is perhaps the limited and self-contained nature of the evidence.

Vincenzo Casanova's church at Saint Julians was built during the grandmastership of Gregorio Caraffa (1680 - 1690). But the decade immediately preceding the completion of the construction of this third church at Saint Julians, was far from a felicitous one for the inhabitants of these islands. In December 1675, Malta had been visited by plague; the deadly pestilence raged for about nine months, and it has been estimated that out of a population of 50,000 souls, no less than 8,000 fell victim to the plague. This epidemic in turn brought about the real threat of starvation, for Malta was utterly dependent on Sicily for provisions, especially food. And as soon as news of the outbreak of plague in Malta reached Sicily, vessels from these islands were absolutely forbidden to approach the coast of Sicily.

But there was more to the islands' misfortunes. Grandmaster Nicholas Cotoner (1663 - 1680) had been bent on improving the fortifications on the southern side of the Grand Harbour, and on strengthening the outer defences of Valletta, in accordance with the plans drawn up by Count Antonio Maurizio Valperga, the famous military engineer to the Duke of Savoy. The first stone of the fortifications on the southern side of the harbour – those works that came to be called after the grandmaster, 'the Cottonera Lines' – was laid on 28 August 1670. To meet the exorbitant expenses entailed by these undertakings, Nicholas Cotoner levied a tax upon landed property, including also ecclesiastical property. By an edict published on 12 October 1673, this tax was replaced by special duties levied on tobacco, soap, leather, playing cards, paper, coffee, and other articles. These duties were still operative on 31 May 1680. Yet this great outlay of money from public and private sources impoverished both the Treasury of the Order and the population. On the other hand, it has been pointed out that the building of these fortifications not only gave Malta further security, 'but also provided constant employment to the inhabitants, many of whom were relatives and dependants of men who had died fighting in the service of the Order, and who would otherwise have lived in a state of utter destitution!'<sup>58</sup>

On 2 May 1680, Gregorio Caraffa, a Neapolitan by birth, was proclaimed grandmaster by the General Assembly of Knights. The Order's Treasury was

<sup>57</sup> See J.E. Storace, *The Old Church*, *op.cit.*

<sup>58</sup> See Winston Zammit, *Malta Under The Cotoners (1660 - 1680)*, (Malta 1980), p. 14.

practically depleted, and Caraffa suspended all further works on the Cottonera fortifications. In commemoration of the election of an Italian Grandmaster, the Auberge d'Italie was reconstructed by the Italian Knights and its facade lavishly decorated with Caraffa's bust as the principal ornament. Clearly, however, Vincenzo Casanova's church at Saint Julians was a relatively modest building in comparison with the sumptuous churches and auberges of Valletta.

Although the majority of Valletta's churches were constructed between the foundation of the city and about 1620, many were later enlarged and refurbished. Nearly every early church in Valletta and elsewhere in the island's towns and villages, was subsequently adorned with a baroque facade and interior decoration. But it is important to note that our parish churches were paid for much more by the offerings of parishioners than the benefactions of Knights. In 1682, however, the immediate surroundings of Vincenzo Casanova's church were simply uninhabited. The early chapel at Saint Julians fell under the jurisdiction of the parish church of Birkirkara, a town that in 1680 counted some 2,000 parishioners.<sup>59</sup> The alms of these parishioners were never enough to meet the expenses of the building of the new church at Saint Julians, and therefore the procurators persuaded a patron, Baltassar Ciantar, to help out with more funds.

There are of course no final answers to historical questions. However much we know we cannot know enough for that. It would of course be absurd to claim that we now know all about Vincenzo Casanova's church that survives to be known; further documentation may still be discovered. Nevertheless it is the case that we have to make up our minds about this church and its character on the basis of the available documentation.

The contracts and building accounts for Vincenzo Casanova's church at Saint Julians reveal that the edifice was modest in size and that its cost was not swollen by elaborate interior finishes and decoration. In the relevant documents, the building costs are indeed reckoned in hundreds rather than thousands of *scudi*. Nonetheless, given the difficult political and social circumstances prevailing on the island as well as Malta's limited wealth, we cannot but conclude that the procurators who saw the project through to its completion within the relatively short span of eighteen months, performed something in the nature of 'a little miracle'.

<sup>59</sup> N.L.M., *Ruolo delle anime della Diocesi di Malta e Gozo fatta l'anno 1678; finito in Febbraio 1680*, f. 135v.

In January 1693, a violent earthquake shook both Sicily and Malta. The Cathedral Church at Mdina was severely damaged by the earthquake, and so, it would appear, was Vincenzo Casanova's church at Saint Julians. Be that as it may, we learn from the reports of Bishop Giacomo Cannaves' pastoral visitations that by the second decade of the 18th century, the building was no longer safe enough for worshippers. Hence, in 1716, the Bishop instructed Giuseppe Ciantar to rebuild the church from the foundations.<sup>60</sup> The construction of the fourth church on the site was evidently completed by the time of Bishop Paolo Alpheran de Bussan's pastoral visit at Birkirkara in 1730.

Vincenzo Casanova's church at Saint Julians was thus pulled down in turn to make way for a safer place of worship. It is therefore all the more unfortunate that his design for the 1682 church is still hidden away in one of the island's archives. The lack of this design makes it difficult to approach the question of the physical appearance of the 1682 church with any degree of certainty. The available documentation seems to imply that Casanova's plan was not very different from those of the traditional rectangular churches already in existence on the island, albeit with the adaptation of two very small side chapels. Tucked away in unexpected valleys, perched gaily on hillocks, sprawled in the middle of villages, with their amalgam of landscape, rustic architecture and soft golden ochre colour, these country churches form almost an art form in themselves. Yet the final solution to the problem of the structural appearance of Vincenzo Casanova's church at Saint Julians must await the discovery of more appropriate sources.

Lorenzo Gafa's work on the Mdina Cathedral and his architectural activities elsewhere on the island, was to make of this period one of the seminal moments of Maltese church-building history. Vincenzo Casanova was Lorenzo Gafa's contemporary, and we now know that he was not only a sculptor but also a fully fledged architect who was knowledgeable in matters pertaining to the architectural vicinities of our finer churches. The documents we have considered here raise questions as to the role, if any, Vincenzo Casanova may have assumed in the development of Maltese church baroque architecture.

#### NOTE

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<sup>60</sup> See J.E. Storace, *The Old Church*, *op.cit.*