



THE NADUR BASILICA IN GOZO
Art · Architecture · Decoration

Edited by
MARK SAGONA





CHAPTER 2



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ROMA - PARENTEV'S SARENTRISQVE' CENTVM



Architecture – from Giuseppe Bonnici to Francesco Saverio Sciortino

CONRAD THAKE

The Nadur parish church, following the major physical interventions it underwent at the beginning of the twentieth century, ranks as one of the most monumental works of ecclesiastical architecture not only in Gozo but also in Malta (fig. 2.1). This narrative is based on the remodelling of what was originally a rather mundane and modest church that through the vision of an enlightened clergyman, Dun Martin Camilleri and a talented sculptor and architect, Francesco Saverio Sciortino, was transformed into an ornate and imposing parish church that fulfilled the aspirations of the local community.

Early days

On 4th May 1687, during a pastoral visit to the villages of Nadur and Qala in Gozo, Bishop Davide Cocco Palmieri (1632-1711) announced the construction of a new parish church to be constructed in the locality known as *Ta' Nadur*. Soon after, he set in motion the process to reorganise the status of the existing churches within the parish. The new parish in the eastern sector of Gozo comprised the villages of Nadur, Qala, Għajnsielem and Comino. On 28 April 1688, the bishop decreed that the new parish church would be dedicated to the apostles SS Peter and Paul. The new parish church was built on the hill of *Ta' Nadur*, on land that was donated by grand master Gregorio Carafa (r. 1680-1690). Information on this first parish church is very sparse although it is recorded that it took fifteen years for construction works to be completed.



During the first half of the eighteenth century the population of Nadur grew considerably to such an extent that the first parish church became inadequate. Its modest physical size could no longer accommodate the spiritual needs of the community. On 7 December 1760, the Nadur parish priest Don Salvatore Galea presided over the laying of the foundation stone for a new and larger parish church. The church was designed by the Order's architect and military engineer Giuseppe Bonnici (1707-1779) (fig. 2.2) and its construction lasted forty-four years. The eighteenth-century historian Padre Pelagio claims that Bonnici derived his plan from a similar church plan designed by Fra Giuseppe Grech, a lay brother of the Capuchin Convent situated outside the Cottonera Lines.¹

Opposite page: Fig. 2.1
General view of the Basilica of SS Peter and Paul

Above: Fig. 2.2
Unknown artist, *Portrait of military engineer and architect Giuseppe Bonnici*, oil on canvas, MUZA, Heritage Malta



The rather lengthy duration of construction could be justified on the basis that the parish was totally dependent on the limited financial contributions and voluntary work of its parishioners. It would be officially inaugurated on the 24th June 1804, at the time when the archpriest was Don Francesco Sapiano.

Bonnici's church was built to a Latin cross plan with a single nave and transepts. According to Achille Ferres, it accommodated lateral chapels within the transept arms and had a total of ten altars.² A plan of the original church as built to Bonnici's design with the proposed addition of side-aisles and narthex, provides us with an accurate record of the physical form of the building. The wide nave was composed of a semicircular exedra followed by three successive rectangular bays set in between the thick external walls so constructed that they could contain the lateral thrusts exerted by the vaulted nave-roof. There were three doorways on both sides of the nave. From the square central crossing, the projecting transepts comprised a rectangular bay and terminated with a semicircular apse which accommodated the lateral altars.

The church facade was rather bland and spartan in appearance (fig. 2.3). It had a temple-front facade with superimposed Tuscan pilasters at the lower level and Ionic pilasters on the upper tier. Coupled pilasters framed the central bay with the main doorway superimposed by an arch at the upper level. The facade was totally

devoid of any architectural decoration or ornamentation. Bonnici's church facade exuded an uncompromising aura of austerity befitting the work of a military engineer who was at full maturity of his career when the High Baroque was being eclipsed by Neo-Classicism. Bonnici had occupied the post of *Capomastro delle Opera della Religione*, as the principal architect of the Order, from 1761 until his death in 1779. Although his architectural *magnum opus* is undoubtedly the Customs House in Valletta (1774), he was also engaged in various ecclesiastical projects such as St Publius parish church in Floriana (1734), the completion of St Barbara church in Valletta built in accordance with Romano Carapeccchia's original design (1737) and the enlargement and remodeling of Lorenzo Gafà's St Catherine parish church in Żejtun (c.1760s). Although the facade of the Nadur parish church did reflect a disciplined sense of rational composition, one may speculate that the lack of explicit ornamentation and sculpture would probably have irked the artistic sensibilities of the local parishioners.

Over time as the Nadur community aspired for greater recognition and esteem, the local parishioners yearned for a more monumental and ostentatious parish church that would reflect their newly acquired status. As from 19th December 1893, the parish of Nadur would be led by an archpriest and a year later, on the 19th September 1894, the church was elevated to the status of a Collegiate with Nadur now acting as a *Matrice* for the newly-established nearby parishes of the Virgin of Loreto in Għajnsielem and St Joseph in Qala. A natural corollary to this advancement in terms of ecclesiastical prestige was the desire of remodelling the existing parish church on a grander scale.

An architectural vision conceived in Rome

The impetus for of the architectural transformations of Bonnici's church can be traced to the close friendship that flourished between a young Gozitan priest, Dun Martin Camilleri and the Maltese sculptor Francesco Saverio Sciortino, both of whom were in 1900 pursuing studies in Rome. Sciortino recalls how he came into contact with Dun Martin:

Fig. 2.3
Photograph of old Nadur parish church prior to remodelling by Francesco Saverio Sciortino



*"I was in Rome, studying at the Regio Istituto di Belli Arti. Around the year 1900, Dun Martin, Canon of the Nadur parish church, came to Rome to study at the Gregorian University. He found lodging in a room adjoining mine in the Prati di Castelli quarters. During our free time our conversations always gravitated to the fine arts and arts-related matters. Together, we used to visit various architectural and sculptural monuments. I would have to explain and act as if I was a guide. I believe that Dun Martin went back to Nadur in 1901, and I went to Milan for one year at the Accademia di Belli Arti in Palazzo Brera."*³

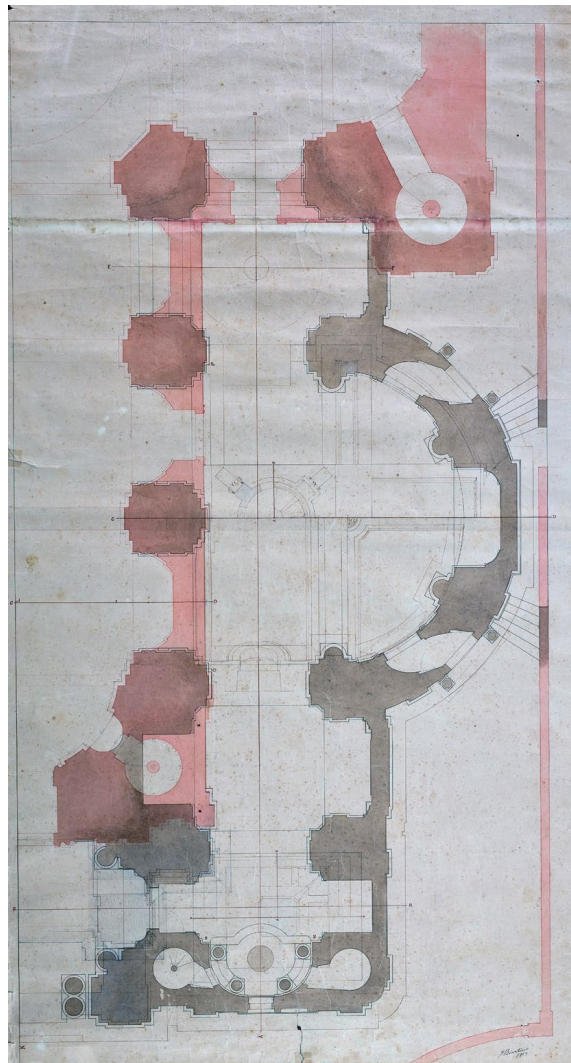
In 1903 after completion of his studies in Italy, Sciortino returned to Malta. After his Roman sojourn, Dun Martin was back in Nadur. His exposure to architecture and the arts in Rome had motivated him to pursue an ambitious project which would entail the comprehensive remodelling and

enlargement of the parish church. In Sciortino's own words:

*"Being aware of the studies I had pursued and of my capabilities, he wanted to discuss the matter with me before approaching someone else. I went to Nadur and after a thorough inspection of the church I accepted to undertake the commission. Dun Martin requested me to draw up architectural plans that would be different from those of other churches in Malta. He was feeling inspired from the churches that both of us had visited together while in Rome."*⁴

This was the beginning of a long and enduring friendship between the young priest and artist, which partnership would eventually culminate in the architectural transformation of the parish church (fig. 2.4). In spite of the lack of funds and scepticism demonstrated within certain quarters of the local community, Dun Martin was determined to pursue his vision.

Fig. 2.4
Photograph showing Dun Anton Camilleri, Archpriest Dun Martin Camilleri, Francesco Saverio Sciortino holding plan and Dun Ġużepp Haber



within an entirely new facade and the construction of a dome that would give iconic status to the remodelled church. Sciortino worked tirelessly producing different design alternatives. In spite of the artist's genuine intentions, some cynics within the community even went so far as to infer that the artist's motivation in producing different design alternatives was that of personal financial gain. Sciortino was quite scathing in his appraisal of Bonnici's parish church. In his statement he explicitly outlines his main objections:

*"The old church was I believe constructed in the eighteenth century and architecturally speaking was not outstanding although the quality of its exterior was better than that of the interior. It is certainly the case, that in Malta after architect [Lorenzo] Gafà and a few of his followers, most architects mimicked Vignola and even then on many occasions doing it badly. The interior of the church is ugly and disproportionate, the order of the capitals are of the composite order but the pilasters were excessively short and with sculptural decoration that was oversized and in bad taste."*⁶

Certainly, in his design Sciortino felt constrained to undertake the necessary architectural 'corrections' particularly within the church's interior. Within the Nadur parish archives there is an extensive corpus of original architectural drawings relating to the project as drawn by Sciortino. Two specific drawings relate to a plan and longitudinal section which delineated one of the side aisles additions. Initially, Sciortino proposed that each side aisle would incorporate a semi-elliptical apse at its centre. This apse would project beyond the alignment of the external walls and would incorporate within its wall thickness two doorways and in between a recessed space to accommodate a lateral altar (fig. 2.5). From the sectional drawing it is clear that Sciortino had intended to place a shallow oval dome with a lantern over the side aisle with two smaller and much shallower saucer domes on the adjoining bays (figs. 2.6, 2.7). In a handwritten and signed note on the sectional drawing, Sciortino stated that *"the vault of the large side chapels could not be extended vertically due to the lateral windows which are useful so as to permit light within the interior."*⁷ (fig. 2.8)

He assured Sciortino that he would be remunerated for drawing up the architectural plans prior to proceeding with the actual construction works whilst confessing total reliance on divine providence in the light of the absence of funds. Entrusting such an ambitious and technically challenging project to Sciortino was also an act of blind faith for in the artist's words *"at the time I was 27 years of age. After my studies in Italy, this was the first work of its kind. I was determined to succeed. I proceeded to study the project with enthusiasm."*⁵

Crystallization of the project

Dun Martin's main objectives were to enlarge the existing church with the addition of side aisles, the construction of a narthex that would be incorporated

Above: Fig. 2.5

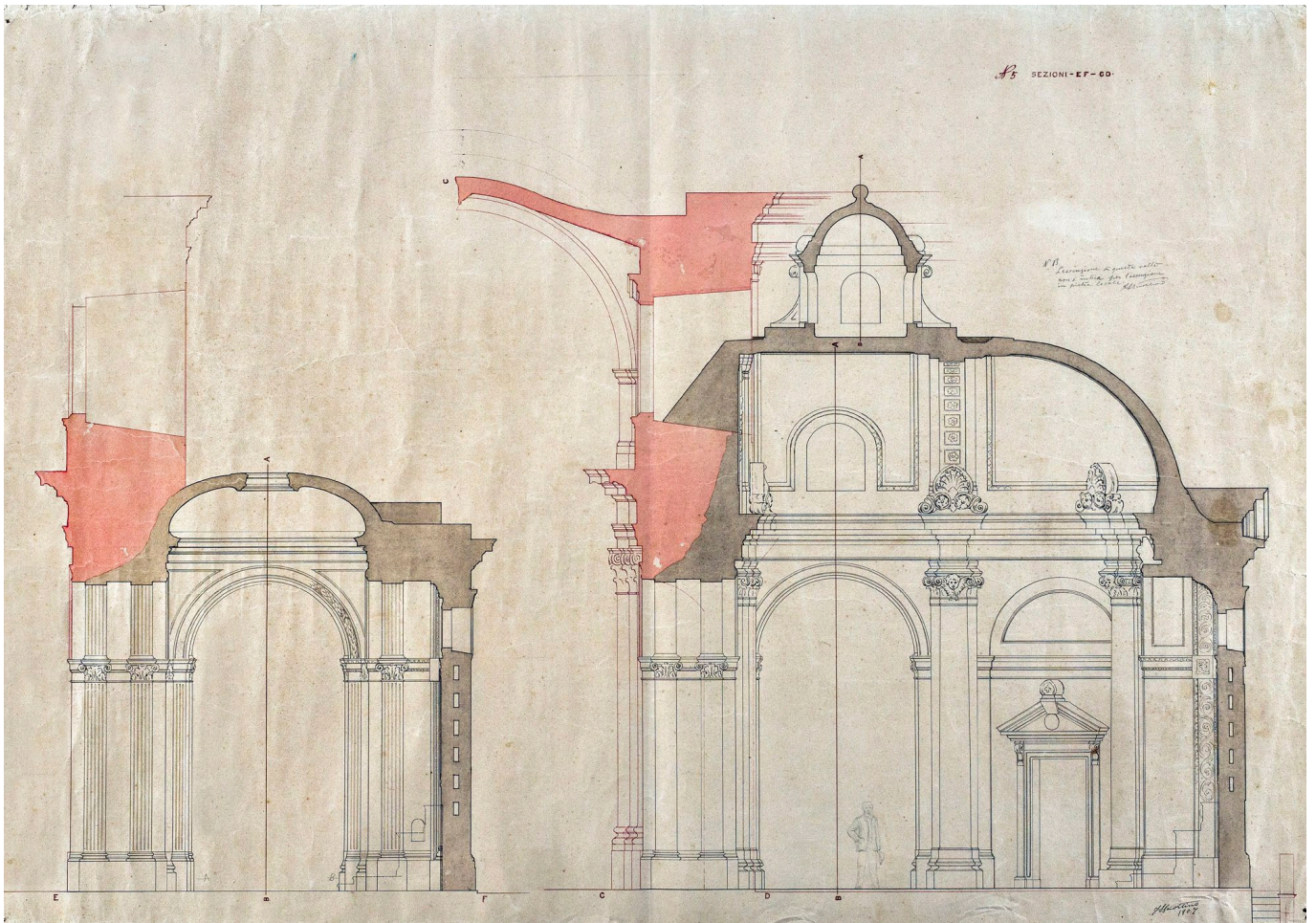
Francesco Saverio Sciortino, *Drawing of part plan showing addition of side-aisle with projecting apse*, 1907, coloured ink and watercolour on paper. This plan was partially realised

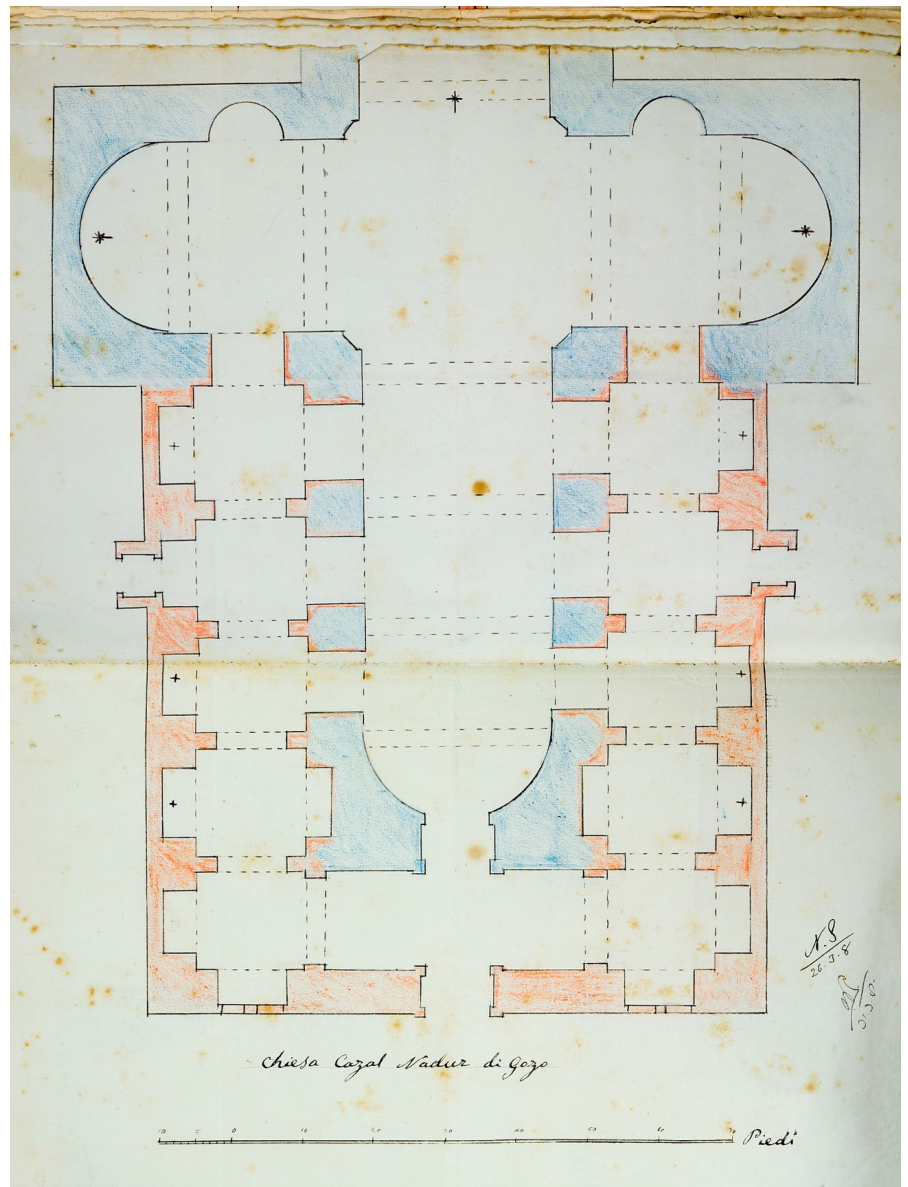
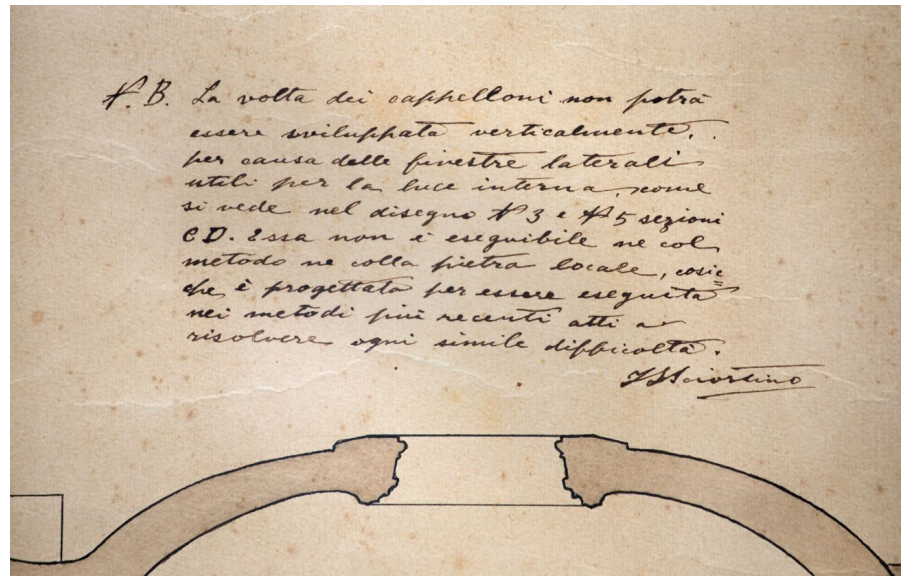
Opposite page top: Fig. 2.6

Francesco Saverio Sciortino, *Drawing of longitudinal section showing proposed construction of side-aisle*, 1907, coloured ink and watercolour on paper. It includes a handwritten note by Sciortino

Opposite page bottom: Fig. 2.7

Francesco Saverio Sciortino, *Drawing of sectional details of proposed side-aisle*, 1907, pencil, coloured ink and watercolour on paper





Top: Fig. 2.8
 Handwritten note by Francesco Saverio Sciortino on longitudinal sectional drawing relating to proposed side-aisle (detail of fig. 2.6)

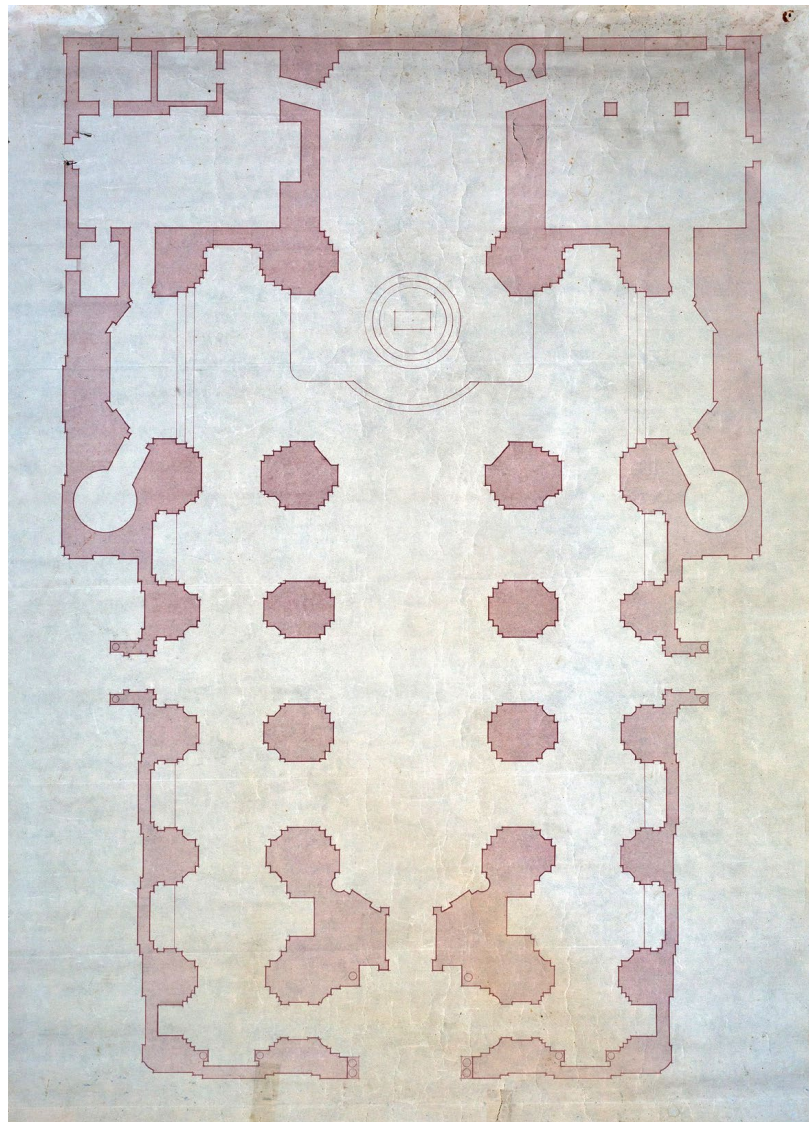
Bottom: Fig. 2.9
 Plan of Nadur parish church submitted with application to the Sanitary Authorities (Gozo) in March 1908. The parts shaded in blue colour represent the original church while the parts shaded in pink represent the proposed additions © NAG - National Archives Gozo

Sciortino is here referring to the high level clerestory windows along the external side walls of the nave. It is evident from this note that Sciortino had to operate within the constraints of the existing church, and any proposed interventions would have to be considered in relation to the physical fabric of the building.

It appears that this initial scheme with the projecting semi-elliptical apse on the side aisles was rejected by Dun Martin and his fellow clergy. The reasons are not clear, possibly it was deemed to be too audacious and costly to construct. The final scheme as submitted for the approval of the authorities was a simplified version to that originally proposed. The proposed side aisles comprised four square bays with three of them accommodating a side altar and one a doorway. Each of these bays would be roofed over with shallow saucer domes. The existing front facade would be replaced by a more monumental and imposing facade that would be added on to a narthex that run the entire width of the nave and the side aisles. On 23rd March 1908, an application signed by Giovanni Cauchi on behalf of the parish committee responsible for the construction of the church, was officially submitted to the Sanitary authorities in Gozo.⁸ Attached to the application was a hand-drawn plan of the church with the walls of the existing church being shaded in a blue-colour wash and that of the proposed additions highlighted in pink colour (fig. 2.9). It appears that the plan as initially submitted underwent various minor amendments and refinements (fig. 2.10). Soon after the approval of the application construction works started in earnest.

Realising the vision – on the building site

The two major impediments in realizing the project were the acute shortage of funds and the limited availability of labour resources. Dun Martin was heavily dependent on donations and voluntary work from local parishioners. In 1907, around the time when construction works commenced, the population of Nadur stood at 3,558 persons. The number of able-bodied men who could undertake manual work on the church's construction



would have been considerably less. A priest from Xewkija donated a field to serve as a quarry for the extraction of stone to be used in the construction. Even then, there was still the arduous task of transporting the stone in carriages all the way up the Nadur hill to the building site. Sciortino gives us an insight as to spirit of collegiality that thrived within the community:

“The people of Nadur encouraged by Dun Martin who was tireless in his efforts, and gave body and soul to ensure that the church would be completed in its entirety...Men and women were as if in competition with one another, to carry stone to Nadur. For them, it was as if it was a form of recreation. Work carried out on Sundays and on feast days was their gift to the church of St Peter and St Paul.”⁹

Fig. 2.10
Plan of Nadur parish church as built



Several master masons were involved in the building process. The first master mason entrusted to work on the construction of the aisle on the right hand side was the well-respected Mastru Wigi Vella known by the family nickname of *tal-Qanfuda* from Żebbuġ, Gozo. However, he was soon after dismissed as apparently he was not adhering to Sciortino's instructions. His replacement, a certain Salvu Caruana and a village local, soon followed suite as he insisted on using old stone for the foundations contrary to the orders of his superiors. It was only with the appointment of another master mason Pawlu Buhagjar from Ħamrun, that construction works gained momentum and works on right-hand side-aisle were completed by 1910 (fig. 2.11). However, Buhagjar then decided to return to his work in Malta and another mason had to be found to continue with the project.

The last master mason to be engaged was Mastru Ċikk (Francesco Farrugia) from Xewkija. He was reliable and steadfast in his work, overseeing during the period 1910-1915 the completion of the left side-aisle, the church facade and the construction of the dome. Subsequently, Dun Martin would write him a glowing testimonial in the form of a certificate.¹⁰

Various old photographs dating to the period 1907-1913 record the different stages of the construction of the new church facade. In fig. 2.11, dating to around 1910, the right-hand side-aisle was complete and is shown in relation to the facade of the old church. In the foreground, there are several rough stone boulders from which the individual stone blocks were then cut and dressed. In fig. 2.12, dating to 1913, both side aisles and the lower

Top: Fig. 2.11

Photograph dating to c.1907 showing the original church with the partial construction of the new facade for the side-aisle on the right. Note the rough-hewn boulders of stone in the foreground

Bottom: Fig. 2.12

Photograph dating to c.1912 showing the new facade for the church at an advanced-stage including the construction of the dome still missing its pinnacle



tier of the new facade were complete. By this time the construction of the dome was also at an advanced stage. One group photograph (fig. 2.13), shows Archpriest Dun Martin Camilleri and two other members of the parish clergy together with Francesco Saverio Sciortino pointing at an architectural plan and Mastru Ċikku with a square in hand, in the presence of other masons and workmen engaged on the project.

Throughout Sciortino's account of the church's construction one comes across various anecdotes. A specific reference is made to Mastru Pawlu Buhagiar who had purposely left the plinths of the pilasters on the side-aisle bare to be decorated on site. Mastru Pawlu brought over to Nadur for one day, his good friend Salvu Schembri to undertake the decorative stone-carving of one of these plinths. Apparently, Salvu was well-esteemed as a

stone carver and sculptor, having worked for several years in Constantinople (Istanbul) under the direction of various French and Italian architects. During his one-day stint on decorating the plinth, Salvu's work was closely followed by two local stone carvers who then proceeded to decorate the other pilaster plinths with mixed results.

An added complication arose when Francesco Saverio Sciortino decided to emigrate to Canada in 1913/14. Before his departure, the new church facade was only complete to the level of the cornice above the main arch. Sciortino left over twelve architectural drawings comprising detailed sections and enlargements of various architectural details. Some of these were specifically hand-drawn directly onto the walls of the nearby Oratory building so that the masons would be able to follow and faithfully implement his design.

Fig. 2.13
Photograph showing standing at the back, from left to right, Master mason Cikku Farrugia wearing a hat and with square in hand, Dun Anton Camilleri holding architectural plan, Dun Guzepp Haber, Archpriest Dun Martin Camilleri and Francesco Saverio Sciortino pointing to the plan. Other construction workers hold various building construction tools

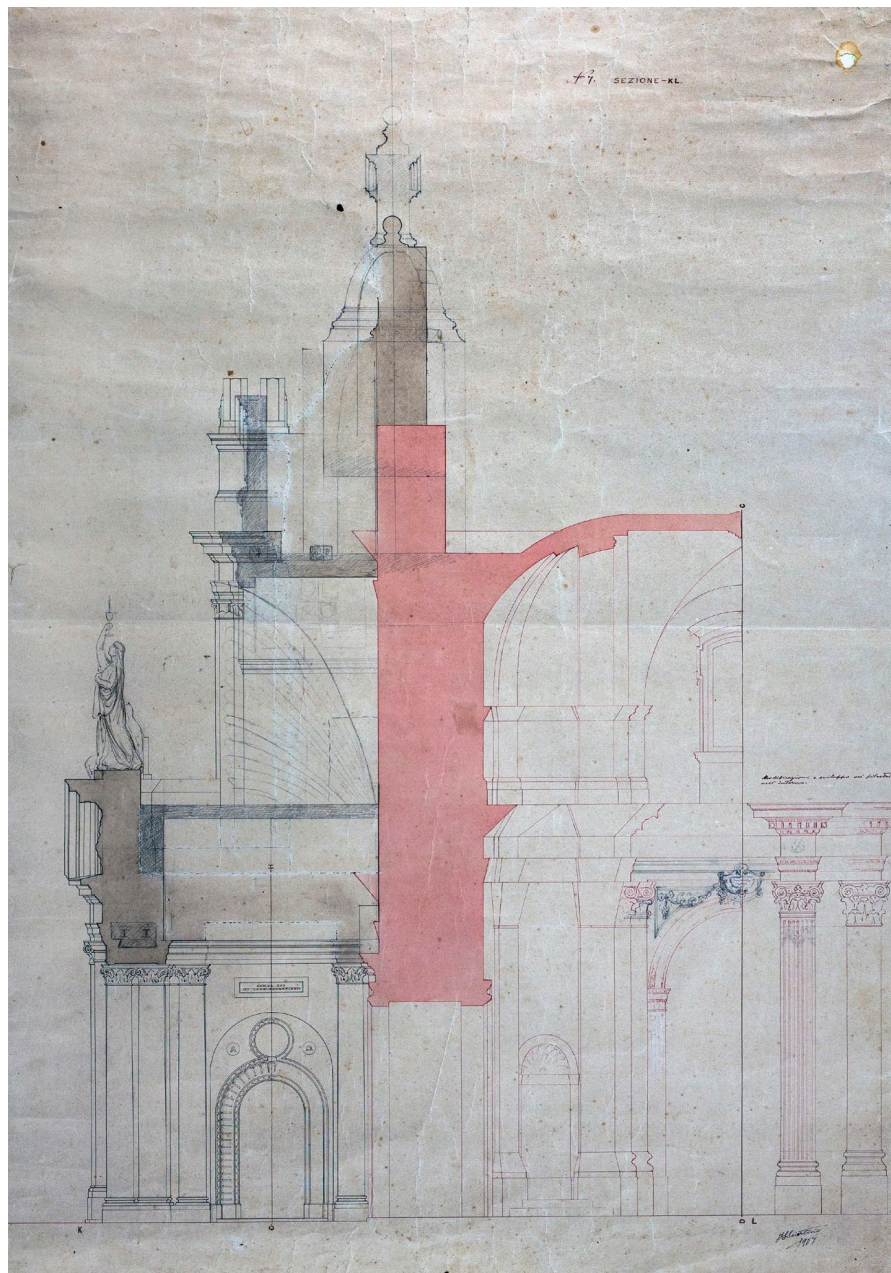


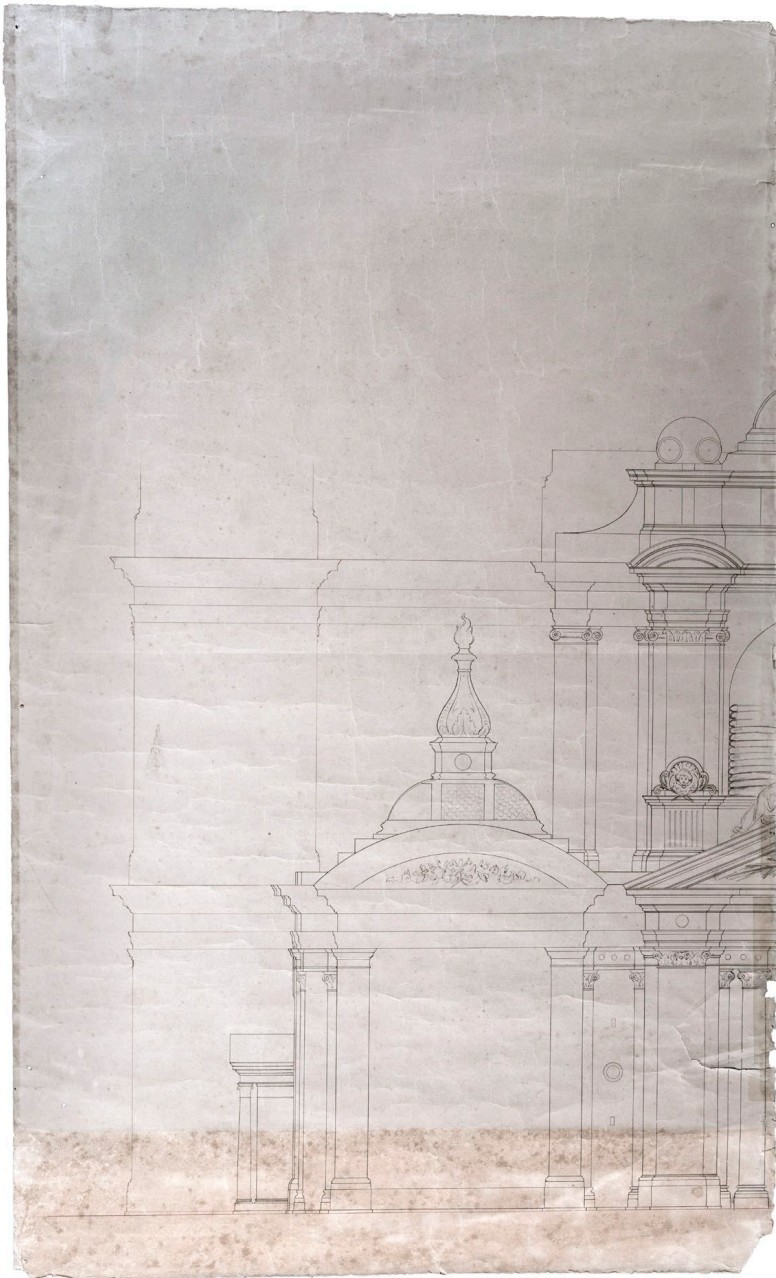
Fig. 2.14

Francesco Saverio Sciortino, *Drawing showing detailed section through proposed new facade, old facade (shaded in pink colour) and part of the nave*, 1907, pencil, coloured ink and watercolour on paper

One of the architectural drawings drawn by Sciortino (fig. 2.14) is a detailed section illustrating the relationship between the new facade, the original facade now embedded within the structure and a part of the nave with pilasters along the projected side-aisle. Another drawing (fig. 2.15) represents part of what was originally a larger drawing that delineated Sciortino's new facade. The part drawing shows the portal of one of the side-aisles and part of the central bay. It is clear from these drawings that Sciortino was an impeccable draughtsman who went to great lengths in recording every minute architectural detail.

In his absence, Sciortino appointed the sculptor Paolo Falzon as director in charge of works. The latter was an accomplished sculptor and he oversaw all the architectural decoration of the facade, the inside of the dome and the column capitals.

However, once the main facade was completed in 1914, Falzon then in his late-twenties decided to seek his fortunes overseas and emigrated to the United States. Sciortino now based in Montreal still maintained contact as to the progress of works. Dun Martin forwarded him with various photographs of the works in progress



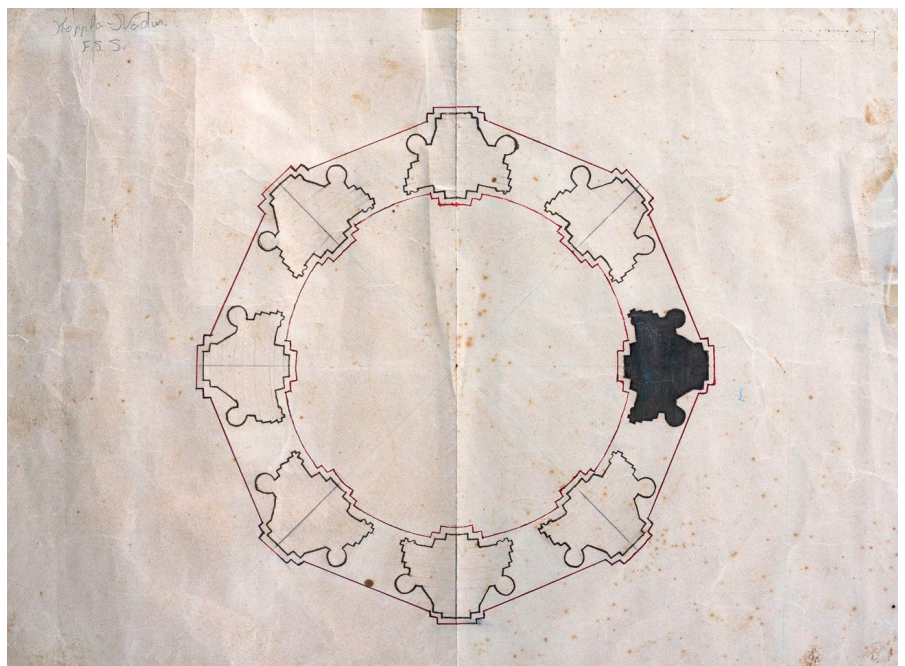
and he in turn responded with letters that occasionally included sketches of various decorative details.¹¹ In his statement, Sciortino claimed that such was the level of detail in the drawings that he left, that his absence did not in any way compromise the implementation of the project.

The construction of the dome and other works

The main architectural highlight of the project was the construction of the dome that would become an iconic landmark

within Gozo's skyline, giving visual preeminence to the parish of Nadur as one approached Mġarr harbour. Construction works on the dome commenced in 1910 and it was inaugurated five years later (fig. 2.16). Sciortino and Dun Martin were keen to construct a dome that would be unlike anything else that had previously been built in Gozo or for that matter in Malta. Sciortino proposed a ribbed pointed dome rather than a structurally more conservative hemispherical dome. His design would not only be innovative within the local context but would also have a greater presence within the village skyline.

Fig. 2.15
Francesco Saverio Sciortino, *Drawing showing part of the new church facade*, c.1907, coloured ink on paper



Top: Fig. 2.16
Photograph dating to c.1910, inscribed 'Nadur - Gozo La famosa Cupola' showing construction of the lower part of the drum that would support the dome

Opposite page: Fig. 2.17
Francesco Saverio Sciortino, *Drawing showing section through dome*, c.1910, pencil on paper

Bottom: Fig. 2.18
Francesco Saverio Sciortino, *Plan of drum, delineating the eight piers that would support the dome*, c.1910, pencil and coloured ink on paper

In preparing the designs for the new dome Sciortino would undoubtedly have studied various examples of domes of Baroque churches in Rome. He would have been familiar with them during the time he spent in Rome. In particular, the domes of the churches of Santi Luca e Martina (completed in 1664) and that of Sant' Ambrogio e Carlo in Via del Corso (1668), both designed by Pietro da Cortona (1596-1669), appear to have been the models upon which Sciortino based his design for the new dome. Within the Nadur parish archives, there are several detailed architectural drawings

of the proposed dome as drafted by Sciortino. One particular drawing in pencil is a detailed transverse section through the drum, dome and lantern showing the relationship between the supporting columns and pilasters set within the circumference of the drum, the overlying entablature and the curved external ribs that spring all the way to the annular ring that supports the ornate lantern (fig. 2.17). The plan shows the outline of the external drum and the arrangement of eight stone piers that are spaced at regular intervals and radially aligned to the centre (fig. 2.18).



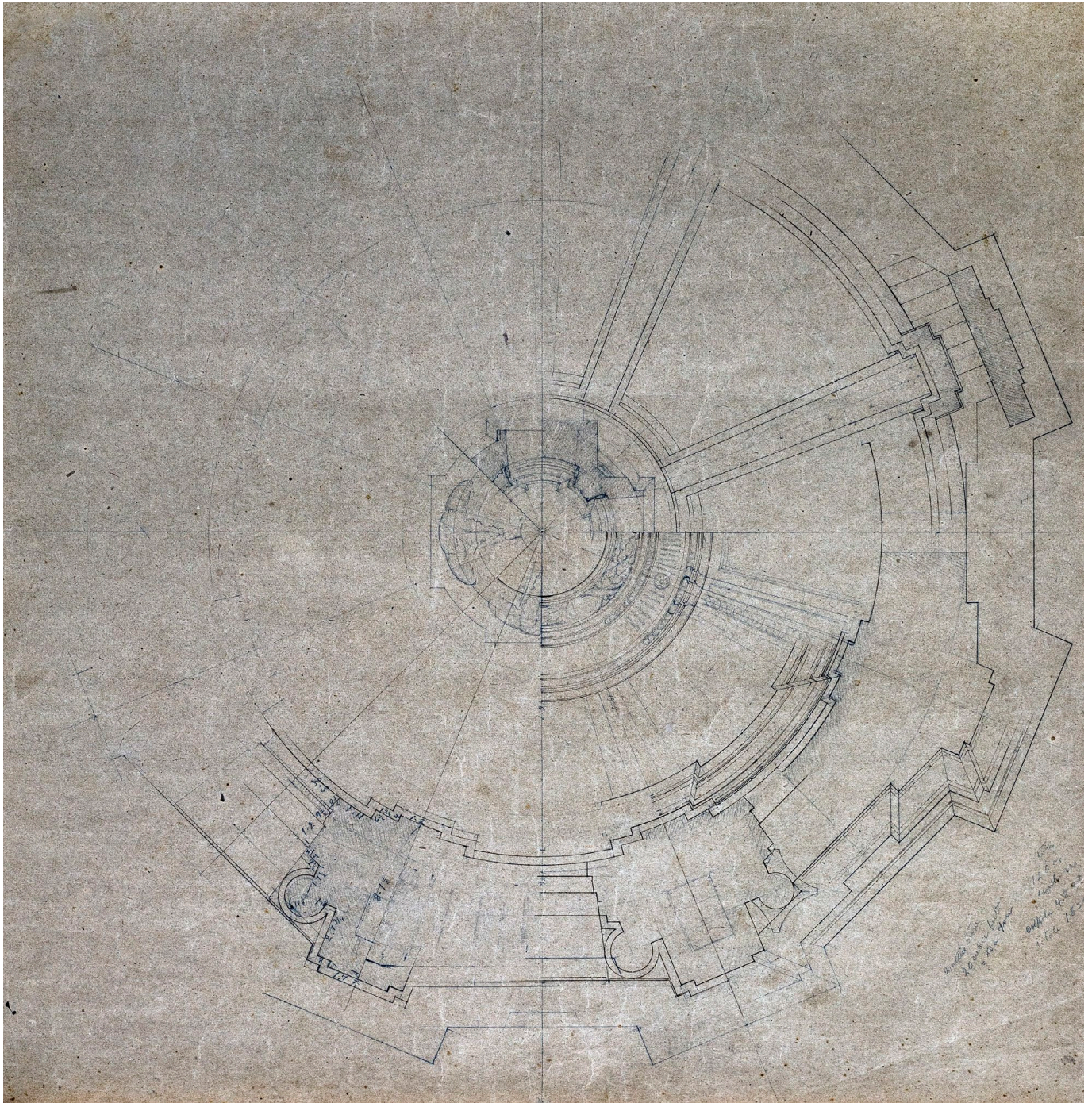


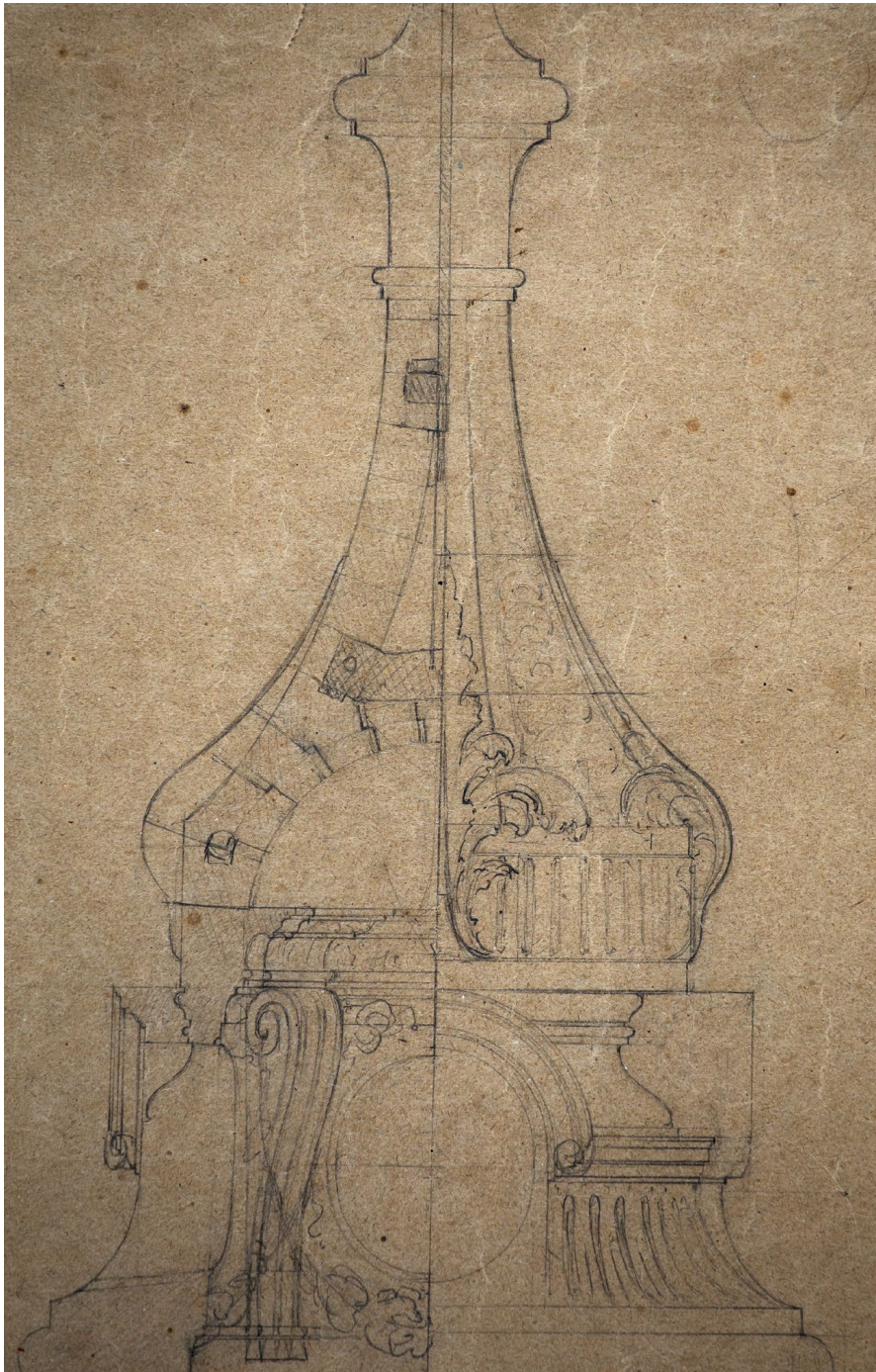
Fig. 2.19

Francesco Saverio Sciortino, *External plan of dome, showing the pinnacle and ribs in relation to the piers set within the external walls of the underlying drum*, c.1910, pencil and ink on paper

Externally, each of these piers combines a pair of columns that are partially engaged to the central buttressing pilaster that is set in between (fig. 2.19). Another pencil drawing delineates, part in section and part in elevation, the profile and decorative details of the pinnacle of the dome (fig. 2.20).

There were some members of the local community who expressed their concerns as to whether the structure of the church could physically sustain the new dome.

However, Sciortino's design was structurally sound as it ensured that the weight of the dome would be equally distributed between the eight piers that were each reinforced with column pairs. The sculptural decoration of the dome was designed by Sciortino but was carved by Paolo Falzon.¹² The dome was officially inaugurated on 27 June 1915, on the occasion of the village feast (fig. 2.21). Dun Martin had fulfilled his lifelong dream. He expressed his admiration of the new dome as follows:



“The dome at the apex of this church, in the form of a supreme crown was inaugurated and consecrated. The dome constructed in recent times is the product of the labour of the Nadur parishioners. It now ranks as one of the finest domes that have ever been built in the Maltese islands. It is worthy of our deepest admiration on the basis of its elegance and beauty. The harmony of all its parts underlies its aesthetic qualities.”¹³

In 1939, Sciortino returned to Malta but the outbreak of the Second World War precluded him from undertaking any new artistic commissions. In 1945, at the age of seventy he resumed his collaboration with the Nadur collegiate church and he designed the sculpture in stone entitled *Faith, Hope, Love* – a majestic frontispiece depicting three figures representative of these virtues, that would surmount the classical triangular pediment above the main entrance (fig. 2.22).

Fig. 2.20
 Francesco Saverio Sciortino, *Drawing of part section and part elevation of the decorative pinnacle to the dome*, c.1910, pencil on paper





Sciortino had prepared a gesso model in Malta but once the bozetto was approved he travelled to Nadur and stayed there until such time that the sculpture was complete.¹⁴ The scaled-down plaster model of *Faith, Hope, Love* (118 x 112 x 23cm) forms parts of the Nadur church collection (fig. 2.23). It is composed of eight individual parts and dates to 1945. The figures are symmetrically arranged with the representations of *Hope* and

Love in a kneeling posture on either side of the central figure representing *Faith* with outstretched-arms mounted on a cross, and an anchor at its feet, representative of Christian faith (fig. 2.24). The three figures metamorphose into one holistic ensemble and represents one of Sciortino's last sculptural works imbued with a distinctly more modern spirit.¹⁵ The sculpture was officially inaugurated on 10 June 1945 by Bishop Joseph Pace.

Opposite page: Fig. 2.21
 Francesco Saverio Sciortino, *Dome*,
 inaugurated in 1915

Top: Fig. 2.22
 Francesco Saverio Sciortino, *Faith, Hope
 and Love*, inaugurated 1945, limestone

Bottom: Fig. 2.23
 Francesco Saverio Sciortino, *Scaled-down
 model for the sculpture Faith, Hope and
 Love*, 1945, plaster of Paris



Above: Fig. 2.24
Close-up view of *Faith, Hope and Love*
sculpture

Opposite page: Fig. 2.25
Hierarchical ordering of various architectural
components within the context of the main
church facade

An architectural appraisal

Sciortino's objective was to create an imposing and monumental church that would be an architectural icon for Nadur and its skyline. The basilica's facade is based on a hierarchical disposition of architectural components that adhere to a pyramidal ensemble of elements, widest at its base and achieving an architectural crescendo at the apex (fig. 2.25).

Stylistically, one can term the church's exterior as being architecturally eclectic, by amalgamating a series of disparate, classical elements (fig. 2.26). The exterior design is a historicist *mélange* of a variety of classical architectural elements. It appears to have also been imbued with Second Empire style, also called Napoleon III, Second Empire Baroque, an architectural style that was dominant internationally during the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁶



ARCHITECTURE - FROM GIUSEPPE BONNICI TO FRANCESCO SAVERIO SCIORTINO • CONRAD THAKE
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A good exemplar is the enlargement to the Louvre in Paris, 1852-57, built to the design of the architects Louis-Tullius-Joachim Visconti (1791-1853) and Hector-Martin Lefuel (1810-1880) (fig. 2.27). The Second Empire style is characterised by the hierarchical ordering of ornate classical elements with an overall symmetrical disposition and the incorporation of low-squared domes treated as pavilions within the facade. It was a style that was widely adopted for the design of monumental public buildings in Paris.

It is reasonable to assume that given his stay in Rome, Sciortino would have been familiar with Italian and French architectural movements of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. He was an avowed classicist who adhered to strict principles of composition in accordance to harmonious proportions but was also not averse to incorporating fine ornamental details and select sculptural decoration in his designs (fig. 2.28). Sciortino was first and foremost a sculptor and an artist of

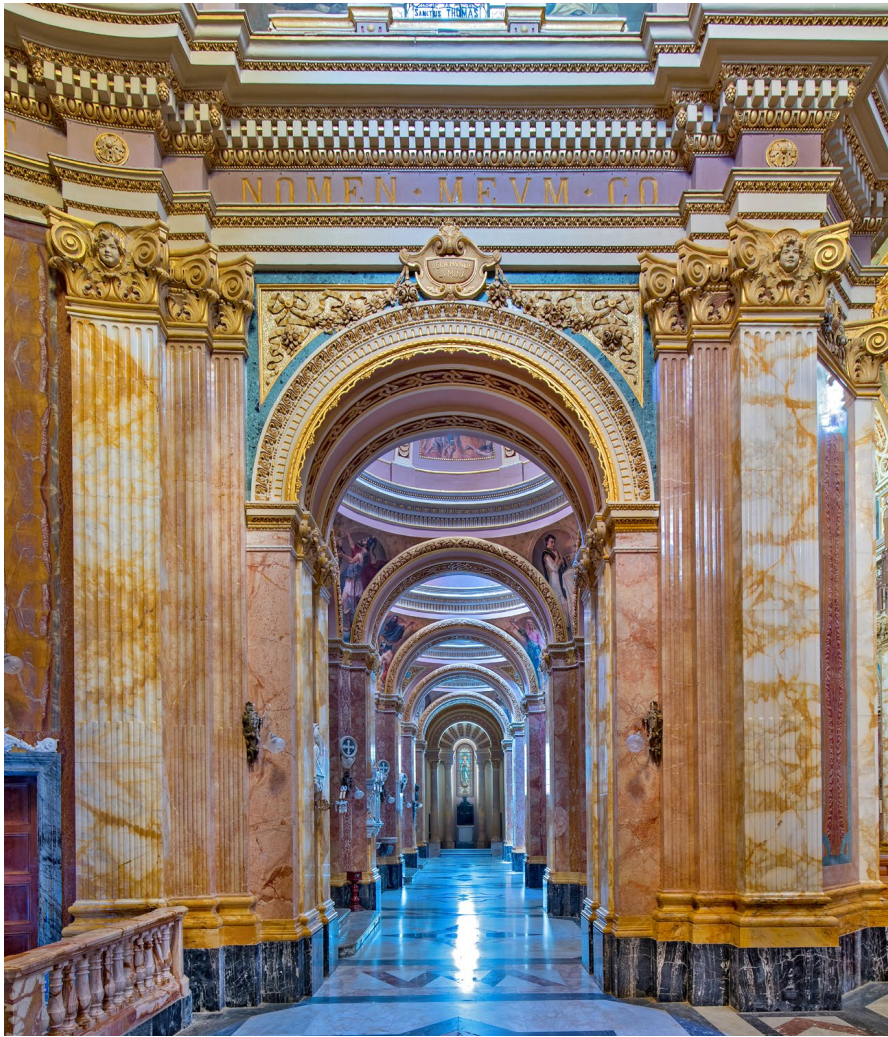
ecclesiastical *objets d'art* and funerary monuments. The Nadur church project which occupied his life-time was a one-time foray in architecture, and he approached it through the mindset of an accomplished sculptor.

Past architectural historians have not given Francesco Saverio Sciortino the credit he deserves. In most architectural accounts his name does not feature at all and when the late architect and historian Leonard Mahoney does write about the Nadur parish church, he expresses reservations about the external appearance of the church claiming that 'the facade is perhaps too ostentatious.' Furthermore, he criticised the fact that 'the lower storey, moreover, has a rather domestic character, whilst the upper, central part of the facades' reminded him of 'railway stations and similar late nineteenth-century secular buildings.'¹⁷ Mahoney was critical of 'some of the proportions used by Sciortino', deeming them to be 'uncanonical, whilst the ornament is often coarse and lumpy.'

Opposite page top: Fig. 2.26
Lateral view of the upper level of the church showing the various saucer domes and buttresses within the side-aisle

Opposite page bottom: Fig. 2.27
Louis-Tullius-Joachim Visconti and Hector-Martin Lefuel, *Extension to the Louvre, Paris, 1852-57*. Built in the Second Empire Baroque style

Above: Fig. 2.28
Francesco Saverio Sciortino and Paolo Falzon, *One of a pair of decorative stone-carvings flanking the Faith, Hope and Love sculpture, c.1913, limestone*



moreover, is pleasant and harmonious, withal unusual, that one remains surprised that with so much richness the interior could yet be so reposeful. The vault, pendentives and the other surfaces above the main cornice are gilded and painted with the same completeness, order and harmony as the lower parts of this amazing interior. The paintings in the vault, domes, apses, etc., running to a stunning total of one hundred and fifty-three were done by Lazzaro Pisani (1854-1932), Sciortino's cousin, and are rightly considered as this painter's crowning achievement.¹⁸

The church interior incorporating a variety of polychrome marbles, low-relief stucco decoration, gilded capitals and painted vaults, is reminiscent of the interiors of Neapolitan and Sicilian Baroque churches. Sciortino was primarily a sculptor and a talented exponent of the decorative arts within an ecclesiastical context. His passion for classical ornamentation permeated his architecture. To Sciortino's mind the creation of an architectural ensemble that provided the appropriate context for a controlled display of fine sculptural decoration was a worthy artistic objective.

On the subject of the splendid dome, Sciortino was certainly guided by Roman Baroque precedents. As already stated, Pietro da Cortona's dome designs served as the basis for Sciortino's dome at Nadur. The design of the drum supporting the dome with its combination of columns and pilasters framing the windows follows closely that of Cortona's design for the dome of the church of Sant'Ambrogio and San Carlo in Via del Corso (fig. 2.30). This was a dome that had no local architectural precedent and could be said to have been a direct Roman import.

However, 'in spite of all these defects the overall effect of the complex (i.e. facade, dome and trailing bell towers) is impressively memorable, recalling the equally striking ensembles of Our Lady of Graces, Żabbar, and St. Nicholas, Siġġiewi.'

In my view, I would argue that Mahoney's lack of enthusiasm for Sciortino's external design was conditioned by his personal subjective preference for the Baroque style as being the natural style befitting a Roman Catholic church. In fact when analysing the church's interior which is imbued with an overt Baroque spirit, Mahoney becomes far more enthusiastic describing it as 'nothing less than sublime' (fig. 2.29). He praised the rich decorative treatment and use of polychrome marble surfaces.

'From floor to the main cornice the interior is encased in the most beautiful marble, and with the most marvellous completeness that I have ever seen. The colour scheme,

The Nadur parish dome would be an architectural icon to any visitor approaching the village from afar. It must have made quite an impression at the time. Sciortino's contemporary, the architect Andrea Vassallo (1856-1928) adopted a very similar profile for the dome crowning the parish church of St Nicholas at Siġġiewi which was completed in 1919, some four years after that of Nadur (fig. 2.31).¹⁹ Although from the point of view of stereotomy and engineering the domes are very similar, Sciortino's dome has a softer and more decorative aspect as regards the design of its pinnacle, even suggestive of a French source.

Fig. 2.29

Interior view of one of the side-aisles, an integral addition in F.S. Sciortino's project to enlarge the Nadur parish church. Note the rich combination of polychrome marble-clad pilasters, gilding of the pilaster capitals and marble flooring



Conclusion

This contribution is the first one that analyses the extensive corpus of architectural drawings delineated by Francesco Saverio's own hands and which today resides within the Nadur Parish Archives. The sectional drawings and detailed drawings of the dome in particular, attest to Sciortino as being not only a consummate architectural draftsman but one who went through great lengths and detail, so as to ensure that his vision of the new church was planned to the minutest detail. Nothing was left to chance, and even when he migrated to Canada he continued to send drawings outlining even minor architectural details. With the Nadur church project Sciortino had succeeded in raising the architectural profile of Gozo, following upon the earlier works of Lorenzo Gafà's *Matrice* and Emanuele Luigi Galizia's *Virgin of Lourdes* church in Mġarr. The Nadur church attracted admiration and interest from mainland Malta. The question that arises and needs to be addressed relates to Francesco Saverio Sciortino's standing in the overall context of Maltese architecture. Sciortino belongs to the subsequent generation of architects that followed that of Dr Nicola Zammit (1815-99) and Emanuele Luigi Galizia (1830-1907), the

latter being undoubtedly the most prolific and accomplished architect of the second half of the nineteenth century.

In comparison to the contemporary architect Andrea Vassallo who would leave his architectural mark in Gozo with the *Ta' Pinu* church, Sciortino had the disadvantage that for considerable periods of his lifetime he was based overseas in the United States, Canada and even for some time in Cuba. Furthermore, unlike Vassallo who practised exclusively as an architect, Sciortino was most of the time engaged in sculpture and decorative artworks. In actual fact, besides the Nadur church project he never had the opportunity to be commissioned to undertake another architectural project be it a private or public commission. These factors have contributed in no small measure to the fact that for several decades, Francesco Saverio Sciortino was completely overshadowed by the artistic legacy of his famous brother Antonio Sciortino. Only in recent years, has there been a growing appreciation and research interest in the life and works of Francesco Saverio Sciortino. Albeit given the extensive international dimension of his artistic career, it would be quite a feat to undertake an exhaustive study and monograph of all his lifetime's achievements.

Left: Fig. 2.30

Pietro da Cortona, *Dome*, church of SS Ambrogio e Carlo, Via del Corso, Rome, designed 1668 © Carlo Raso

Right: Fig. 2.31

Andrea Vassallo, *Dome*, parish church of St Nicholas, Siggiewi, completed 1919 © Conrad Thake