

*Creating a
family patrimony*

VILLA BARBARO IN TARXIEN

By Petra Caruana Dingli

One of Malta's earliest surviving country houses, located in Tarxien, is today still the residence of the Barbaro family. Over the years this lovely property has been surrounded by built-up streets, but it was once sited in open fields.

View of the
garden from
upstairs window



Left: Main entrance
- remodelled in the
19th century
Right: Carlo Antonio
Barbaro in 1748 - detail



Before the eighteenth century, the building of large country houses in Malta was not widespread. Among the best known are Villa Bologna in Attard, Selmun Palace in Mellieha or Villa Preziosi (Villa Francia) in Lija. These were mostly built after 1700 and were prominent in the open landscape, constructed on a relatively imposing scale and designed to impress.

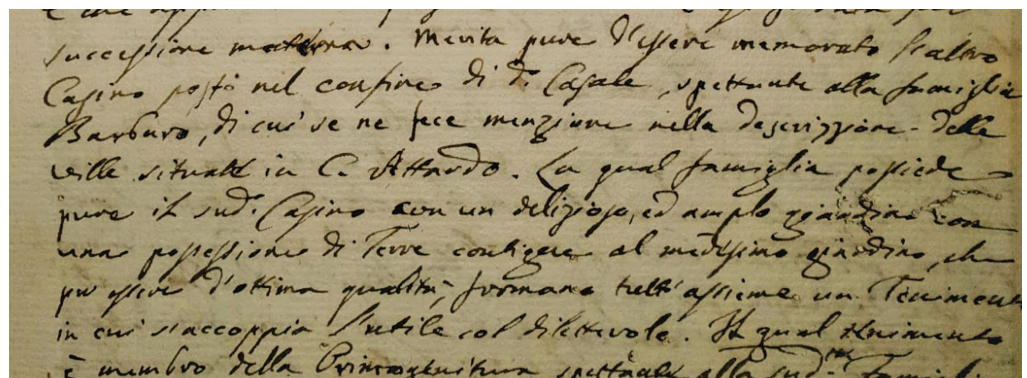
Earlier country houses often began as small hunting lodges. Grand Master Verdalle shifted this to a grander scale in the 1580s, building a fortified lodge and summer retreat for himself at Buskett outside Rabat, today Verdala Palace.

Inquisitor Onorato Visconti followed suit in 1625 and built a summer residence at Girgenti, not far from Buskett, today used by the Prime Minister. This trend continued. Around the 1620s Bishop Baldassare Cagliares built a summer residence (*villereccia*) near Tal-Virtu outside Rabat, and in 1624 Andreotta Cumbo Navarra built a house at Bahrija.

At around the same period, Gio Maria Cassia acquired lands in Ghemieri near Bahrija and some 50 years later his granddaughter Beatrice Cassia and her husband Paolo Testaferrata expanded an existing hunting lodge there into a larger house, today Palazzo Gomerino. Other early country houses include Palazzo Abela in the village of Tarxien, said to have been begun by Monsignor Leonardo Abela in 1562 just before the Great Siege.

Villa Barbaro in Tarxien also dates to this earlier period. The gardens are large while the old house is typically more rustic than later, eighteenth-century Maltese country houses. It is quite long and narrow in shape, and originally had an external stone staircase.

The real fear of raids by corsairs made living in the countryside in the seventeenth century a dangerous business, and the house typically does not have any large windows on the ground floor, with only two narrow slit windows on the façade.



Handwritten
description of the
house by Carlo
Antonio Barbaro,
late 18th century.



The present owners recall the date 1625 inscribed on an external garden wall, but this has since been eroded and is no longer legible. The house is thought to be even older than that. Its first origins have yet to be explored within the family archive and other documentary sources, as well as through an architectural appraisal.

In 1760 this house in Tarxien belonged to Gioacchino Psaila.

Gioacchino Psaila

Only few personal details about Gioacchino have surfaced so far. He was born around 1695 and was the son of Antonio and Maria Psaila. On 26th November 1724 Gioacchino married Rosa Attard.

Rosa's family lived in Senglea. She was the daughter of Giuseppe Attard and Francesca Borg, and was one of at least six children. Her brothers Raffaele and Benedetto were both priests, and another brother Gio Batta Attard had a son named Aloisio who was also a priest. Her sister Marcella married Giovanni Farrugia and another sister Teresa married Francesco Bellia. A third sister, Maria, was married twice – first to Giovanni Psaila and then to Antonio Darmanin. The Attard family had origins in Zebbug, Malta, and owned some land in Handaq near Qormi.

Gioacchino and Rosa Psaila had at least two daughters. Maria Vittoria was born 1726

and Teresa Francesca was born later but did not survive into adulthood.

In 1741 Gioacchino erected an imposing, free-standing niche on some land which he owned in Mriehel, dedicated to his namesake San Ġwakkın (S. Joachim). This monument was restored in 1996 by the Qormi Local Council.

Gioacchino Psaila's *fedecomesso* of 1750

Throughout history, people have sought to build and maintain a patrimony and status for themselves and their families. Formal legal instruments were also used to achieve this aim and to safeguard a family patrimony from being dispersed among heirs or sold off.

One of the available tools was the establishing of a *fedecomesso* – essentially a type of trust which prohibited the division or sale of property received through inheritance. The *fedecomesso* (*fideicommissio*) was widely used in Malta, as it was in Sicily and elsewhere.

A *fedecomesso* enabled a testator to ensure that selected assets, such as a principal family home, other houses, land or artworks, would be transferred as a whole in ownership from one generation to the next, and not divided. Moreover, the testator could restrict this succession from first-born to first-born, through the primogeniture line of the family.

Such trusts could provide stability and longevity to the family status, but on the other

Top left: carved stone staircase
Above: garden path with prospettiva



Above: coffered ceiling
on the first floor
Top right: view of garden
from upstairs balcony



hand they also took away the freedom to dispose of assets and could at times be a source of tensions among relatives.

In May 1750 Gioacchino Psaila fell ill and drew up a will. In it he determined the dowry to be given to his only surviving daughter Maria, as yet unmarried. She is referred to throughout as just 'Maria', not her formal name 'Maria Vittoria', suggesting that this is how she was generally known.

To create a lasting patrimony for his heirs, in his will Gioacchino Psaila also set up a *fedecompresso*. With this legal instrument, he tied up some of his assets to be restricted to inheritance by the male primogeniture of his descendants.

In this *fedecompresso*, Gioacchino included some property at Mriehel near the village of Qormi. He presumably already owned land there when he built the niche in 1741, but he had also acquired some more land in the area in 1744. As Maria was his only child, the income and ownership of these properties were thus intended to pass down through the line of Maria's future eldest son, then her grandson, and so on.

This legal structure was not unusual. His wife Rosa's family had also established a *fedecompresso*, tied to her brothers.

Four months after her father Gioacchino set up this trust, on 20th September 1750 Maria Psaila married in Senglea. Besides money and other goods to the value of 15,000 *scudi*, her

dowry included a house in the principal street of Senglea in the area known as '*del Fiordolese*', another in Birgu in the street known as '*dietro l'Arsenale*', and a third in the area known as '*delli due balle*' (sic) in Valletta.

Maria's husband was 30-year-old Carlo Antonio Barbaro, who had studied law at La Sapienza university in Rome. He was the son of Simone Barbaro and Graziulla, also referred to as Lucrezia, née Bartolo. Carlo's brother, Gio Domenico Barbaro, became a conventual chaplain at the langue of France of the Order of St John. On his marriage to Maria Psaila, from his parents Carlo received a house in Valletta in the area known as '*dall' Arcipelago*', among other property.

Gioacchino Psaila's house in Tarxien

Carlo Antonio and Maria's first son Giuseppe died in infancy. Their second son Gioacchino, bearing his grandfather's name, sadly also died in March 1760. At this point in time they had no other male children, only daughters. In August that year Gioacchino Psaila, who was nearing the end of his life, decided to draw up a codicil to amend his will.

Gioacchino now changed some of the terms of the *fedecompresso* which he had set up in 1750, such as specifying how it could be inherited through the female line of the family. He also added some more land at Mriehel to this trust.



Far left: enfilade
of oldest rooms
downstairs
Left: main façade
Bottom: garden wall

Importantly, he now also included his country house at Tarxien. Here he describes it as a ‘... *tenimento de beni, che possiede in casal Tarxen, consistente in un casamento grande con diversi appartamenti terrani, e superiori, con un giardino con diverse conserve d’acque, e due terreni contigui al detto giardino unitamente col vicolo*’. [translation: ‘a property that he owns in the village of Tarxien, consisting of a large house with various rooms at ground level and above, with a garden with various water reservoirs, and two pieces of land adjacent to this garden together with the lane’].

In his 1760 codicil Gioacchino listed the land neighbouring his Tarxien property as being partly owned by Baron Testaferrata Abela and leased out to Giovanni Bellia, another part owned by Signor Decos, and another part by *maestro* Giacomo Bianco, a well-known *perito*. Another side of the property bordered a public road.

This is the house which is today known as ‘Villa Barbaro’ in Tarxien. It is unclear when Gioacchino Psaila inherited or acquired the property, or whether it came into his possession through the family of his wife, Rosa Attard. Further research could discover this.

One of the witnesses to Gioacchino’s codicil was Fra Francisco Castillo of the langue of Aragon within the Order of St John, then rector of Our Lady of Victory church in Valletta (today under guardianship of Din

l-Art Helwa). In the codicil Gioacchino is noted as residing in Valletta, not Senglea.

Gioacchino died soon afterwards, and in March 1762 his daughter Maria requested permission to have his remains moved to a grave within Porto Salvo church (St Philip Neri) in Senglea, together with his brother Giovanni, and to install an inscribed marble gravestone there. Gioacchino was a benefactor of this church, particularly of its side altar devoted to Our Lady of Sorrows.

Carlo and Maria later had another son named Gioacchino Ermolao Barbaro, and the ownership of the Tarxien house descended through his heirs.

Carlo Antonio Barbaro

In 1778 Carlo Antonio Barbaro was granted the title of Marquis di San Giorgio by Emanuel de Rohan, Grand Master of the Order of St John. Carlo Antonio was also an accomplished scholar. He built up a unique collection of antiquities, which enjoyed a wide reputation including among foreign visitors to Malta. At his country house in Attard he created a beautifully decorated and purposely designed room to display this collection, known as the Zodiac room.

Carlo Antonio and Maria Vittoria now had two country houses – the one in Tarxien inherited from Gioacchino Psaila, and another



Above: 17th century doorway downstairs
Below: the garden

in Attard. This second villa was named 'Bellosguardo', as it enjoyed country views, but today it is mostly known as Villa Barbaro like the Tarxien house. It was originally a smaller house which Carlo Antonio then extended, enclosing its gardens within high walls.

Yet the Barbaros were clearly fond of their Tarxien country house too, and they did not abandon it in favour of their newer and somewhat grander, more 'modern' country house in Attard.

In an unpublished manuscript Carlo Antonio described the Tarxien house as: '*... l'altro casino posto nel confine di detto casale spettante alla famiglia Barbaro ... La qual famiglia possiede pure il sudetto casino con un delizioso ed ampio giardino con una possessione di terre contigue al medesimo giardino, che per essere di ottima qualita formano tutto assieme un tenimento in cui s'accoppia l'utile col dilettevole. Il qual tenimento e membro della primogenitura spettante alla suddetta famiglia*' [Translation: '*... the other house which lies in the outskirts of that village and belongs to the Barbaro family ... this family also possesses this house with a delightful and large garden with a holding of land adjacent to this garden, which is of high quality and together form a property which combines utility with pleasure.*']



This property is part of the primogeniture of this family'].

As expected, the house was modified over the years. At some stage along the way it was painted red and it is still referred to as *il-palazz l-ahmar* (the red palace) in Tarxien. Palazzo Gomerino in Ghemieri outside Rabat is also painted red. The old external staircase was removed. Balustrades were added on the upper terraces, a covered balcony was installed on the main façade, and the main entrance door was modernised. In the 1840s, Gustavo Barbaro added an internal staircase with elaborately carved stonework, on which he inserted the initials 'G' and 'C', after himself and his English wife Caroline.

In 1870 the next title holder Giorgio Crispo Barbaro, 5th Marquis di San Giorgio, lived in the Tarxien house and referred to it as 'St George's Palace'. In the twentieth century, the property was temporarily used as a base by the British army.

Today Villa Barbaro's beautiful and extensive gardens, cultivated and tended by the villa's present owner, are regularly visited by the Royal Horticultural Society.

The villa has been scheduled as a Grade One site, however the context of this historic property is threatened by insensitive and excessive new development. Din l-Art Helwa has been actively engaged in efforts to limit the permitted building heights surrounding the garden. ■

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References: Notarial Archives of Malta, Not. F. Pisani, 12 April 1744, 25 May 1750, 9 Sep 1750, 27 June 1759; Not. A. Zerafa, 4 Aug 1760. Archiepiscopal Archives of Malta, Suppliche 8, 1762; Giorgio Crispo Barbaro, The Nobles of Malta and the Maltese Gentry (Malta, 1870).

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