

The Religious Cults of Thaumaturgical Powers and the Devotion towards St Nicholas of Bari in Malta

Simon MERCIECA, Ph.D.

Director, Mediterranean Institute, the University of Malta

e-mail: simon.mercieca@um.edu.mt

Abstract: *This paper explores the development of religious cult statues in Malta with particular reference to the use of the imagen a vestir statues. At first, the statues were of two types. The first were the small wooden statues about one metre in height. The second type was slightly bigger. The heads, and often the hands and lower part, were sculptured in wood whilst the rest of the body was dressed up. The use of the processional statues owes its origins to Birgu towards the end of the sixteenth century. Slowly the custom spread throughout the island. After Birgu, one of the first Maltese parishes to acquire a statue was Siggiewi. This paper will explain the diffusion of this cult and answer why such a rural parish, was one of the first parishes in Malta to have a processional cult statue.*

Keywords: *Saint Nicholas, Bari, Siggiewi, Byzantine rule, wooden processional statues, Norman rule, Imagen a vestir, pastoral visits, St Roque, Immaculate Conception, Bormla, Senglea, Birgu.*

The old statue of Saint Nicholas – currently kept in a niche in the sacristy of Siggiewi parish church – deserves much more attention than it has received so far due to its historical and liturgical importance. There ought to be no doubt that its artistic value is greater than previously thought. Unfortunately, its current state of preservation leaves much to be desired, even though it is well looked after by the community. In 1977, Vincent Borg drew the attention of the general public to this statue in a short article carried in the village magazine entitled *Is-Siggiewi*, wherein he explored the diachronic importance of this work *vis-à-vis* the history of Siggiewi and religious devotion in Malta.¹

Throughout its history, the statue has been subjected to various amateurish interventions that diminished its former grandeur and definitely contributed to its falling into oblivion. Though a number of interventions were carried out in good faith, the restoration work did not always respect the original workmanship. In some instances the original features were lost or irreparably damaged. Only a few features of the original statue have survived, amongst which is the head sculptured

¹ Vincent Borg, 'L-Istatwa Proessjonali l-Qadima ta' San Nicola fis-Siggiewi', *Is-Siggiewi* No. 3, Malta, 1977, pp 17–8.

in wood. However, the hands and torso are a recent intervention. Unlike the head, the hands are made of *papier-mâché*, as is the rest of the body. Furthermore, the main feature of this statue was its vestments but unfortunately fabric does not wear well with time and it seems that all its original clothing was lost.

The care and conservation of statues means that, as far as possible, their original features should be preserved and restored to their pristine beauty. In order to return to its former glory, the old statue of St Nicholas needs to be attired, once again, in the richly embroidered robes as it was clad originally.

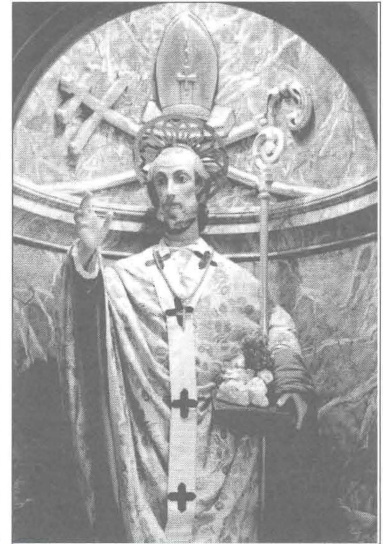
History and Case Study

The scope of this short paper is to explain the history behind this statue. Furthermore, the statue can serve as a case study and establish that, despite the fact that Siggiewi was a rural village, it still followed the trends of the time that unfolded on mainland Italy and, as this case clearly shows, even anticipated certain cult developments that occurred in the city associated with this saint; by early modern times the Italian city of Bari had become synonymous with St Nicholas.²

A recent publication, *Nicholas, the People's Saint*, tried bringing a number of authors together to study the phenomenon of this cult-following in Bari. Certain conclusions therein could help us better understand the devotion to St Nicholas in Siggiewi.³

In 1087, the relics of St Nicholas were transferred from Myra, in Turkey, to Bari and, within two years, the Normans built a church to host these sacred remains which today rest in the crypt of the present basilica. Pope Urban II personally visited the city in 1089, participating in the ceremony during which the saint's reliquary was solemnly deposited in the crypt.

The worship of St Nicholas flourished in Bari after the city's period of Norman rule. As befell Malta, Bari fell into the hands of the Arabs but, unlike Malta, the Byzantines defeated the Arab emirate of Bari and, as a result, the city became the seat of the Catapano, who was a regional Byzantine governor. Nonetheless Bari was soon to



The old procession statue of St Nicholas – Siggiewi

²Giorgio Otranto, 'In the Footsteps of Saint Nicholas', *Nicholas The People's Saint*, Luca De Napoli ed., Bari, 2004, p. 7

³Luca De Napoli ed., *Nicholas The People's Saint*, Bari, 2004.

experience a new political reality. Norman rule permeated the region and slowly began to assert its hold by establishing its power alongside its Byzantine rulers with the result that in due course the latter power fell into decline.

Despite the fact that Nicholas was originally a Byzantine saint, first venerated in Myra, in Bari it was the Normans who began to revere his sacred image. What is even of great relevance is the fact that Myra was an obligatory stopover on the medieval route that pilgrims took from Italy to Palestine. Scholars agree that it was during the High Middle Ages that this city widened its horizons.⁴

Within such a scenario, one can surmise how this devotion reached Malta. It either reached Malta through migratory movement or, more likely, as a result of maritime movements that prevailed throughout the many Christian ports in the Mediterranean. Another possibility is that someone on the island heard the news regarding Nicholas' thaumaturgic powers and introduced this cult in Malta. This cult could also have been introduced to Siggiewi by some migrant from Bari or its environs but, taking in consideration the popularity of this worship in Malta throughout the Middle Ages, such a hypothesis is highly improbable.

Whatever the case, the supernatural powers attributed to this saint in the later Middle Ages were instrumental for the diffusion of this worship in Malta.

Furthermore, it should be noted that when the Angevins replaced the Normans in Bari, the new rulers continued to nurture devotion to the saint. This could serve as further attestation as to the widespread growth of the cult's followers in Malta. The successors of the Normans in Malta had no interest in suppressing this cult.

If the devotion towards this saint was introduced in Malta during Norman rule, this fact can demonstrate that the Normans in Malta – as was the case in Bari and Sicily – openly supported Byzantine traditions, including devotion to St Nicholas. In terms of liturgy, this is a very interesting point. Although the Normans upheld the Latin liturgy, the cult of St Nicholas implies the use of another liturgy associated with the Greek oriental liturgy. Evidence exists both in Sicily and Southern Italy that those churches which undertook the devotion of St Nicholas also used the Byzantine or (as it is also known), the Greek liturgy. Within such a scenario, the introduction of the devotion to the 'oriental' saints in Malta at the end of the Muslim domination should not be seen as a form of passive resistance by the local inhabitants against the Normans. At least in Sicily and Southern Italy, the Normans themselves supported the spread of these oriental saints and the use of the Byzantine liturgy.

⁴Otranto, p. 7.

⁵Charles Dalli rightly notes that certain allegations made about Greek Christian influences in Malta represent a historical problem, a sort of an unresolved historical enigma. Charles Dalli, *Malta, The Medieval Millennium*, Malta, (n.d.), p. 131.

It has been argued that since the Normans followed the Latin liturgy, the existence of so many Byzantine saints in Malta could be due to some form of covert protest towards Norman rule.⁵ Some scholars associated the use of a different religious cult from that of the ruling elite as a form of protest by the local Christians. Those who abandoned their Muslim belief for Christianity sought at the same time to follow a cult which distinguished them from that of the new oppressive rulers. Whilst one cannot exclude cases of forced conversions, one cannot deny that the oriental rituals and supernatural powers of the Byzantine cults appealed more to believers coming from a Muslim background. Islam is an oriental religion with strongly oriental rites. Moreover, the previous faith in Malta had been Greek and there is no doubt that certain Byzantine traditions and customs associated with the Christian faith survived in Malta alongside Muslim rule.

Whatever the case, from the number of churches dedicated to St Nicholas, one cannot but conclude that he became very popular in Malta, to the extent that by 1575 he was the second most popular saint after the Virgin Mary. According to Dusina's records,⁶ 168 churches were dedicated to the Virgin Mary and 32 to St Nicholas. The popularity of the saint can also explain why Siggiewi would be one of the first parishes in Malta to introduce a devotional statue.

The written evidence about the presence of this cult in Malta dates to the fourteenth century.⁷ However, as the popularity of his cult indicates, this devotion has very deep roots in history. Moreover, there should be no doubt that this was linked to the thaumaturgical powers associated with this saint; Nicholas was the person to whom the faithful turned in time of danger. Hence, at a time when Siggiewi was predominantly rural, the need to seek recourse to some saint was the consequence of a vow and a need to give thanks for a grace received through divine intercession. In Bari, recourse to this saint was invoked in particular in times of plague, earthquakes, droughts, and other natural disasters. In this scenario, one is tempted to think that our forefathers similarly invoked this saint to deliver them from all sorts of pestilences and natural cataclysms.

It is still not clear, however, why the Siggiewi church was dedicated to St Nicholas or how far back in history this church goes. One thing is certain: the parish of Siggiewi is mentioned in Senatore De Mello's list, which confirms that it was already a parish in 1436.⁸ Thus, the devotion of this saint at Siggiewi can be dated prior to 1436.

⁶ *Documentary Sources of Maltese History Part IV Documents at the Vatican No. 1 Archivio Segreto Vaticano Congregazione Vescovi e Regolari Malta: Visita Apostolica no. 51 Mgr. Petrus Dusina, 1575*, ed. George Aquilina and Stanley Fiorini, Malta, 2001.

⁷ Vincent Borg, *The Maltese Diocese and the Sicilian Environment from the Norman Period till 1500 AD*, Vol. ii, Malta, 2008, pp. 683–9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 743–48.

The presence of processional statues seems to be linked to devotional pilgrimages. The earliest statue that appears in surviving records is that of St Roque in Birgu.⁹ This was a small wooden statue which, in time of crisis, was taken out in procession as an act of penitence by the faithful praying for deliverance. In fact, St Roque was the 'new' late-fifteenth century saint to whom the people turned during plague epidemics.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the belief in St Roque's¹⁰ thaumaturgical powers against the plague spread throughout Southern Italy. St Nicholas may also at some point in time have been invoked against the plague. Most probably it was St Nicholas who was invoked during times of pestilence in Malta in medieval times. It was a natural process for new cults, such as that of St Roque, to get established at harbour cities as these were the areas most exposed to foreign contacts. These new cults would take longer to take hold in rural areas. This could explain why Siggiewi continued with its old devotion and continued to invoke St Nicholas in times of the plague.

Perhaps the story of the origins of this statue should be sought in Malta's plague history. Borg asserts that it was the first processional statue to be introduced in a rural area. The inhabitants of the area could have copied the Birgu example of the processional statue of St Roque and made a statue of St Nicholas to be carried about in devotional processions. Incidentally, these two statues are the earliest known statues of male saints in Malta. I do not think that it is a mere coincidence that both have a similar eschatological reference.

Documentary references help us date the existence of St Nicholas's statue prior to 1667. During his pastoral visit to Siggiewi on 11 December 1667, Bishop Luca Buenos lists the statue in his inventory of all the worldly goods in the church's possession. He also gives a detailed description in Italian:

*Item una vara con la figura di S.to Nicola con la sua sottana pavanozza, stola, amitto et cingolo et con la mitra di lama bianca guarnita con gallone d'oro et cingolo con la pizzila d'oro nelli soi pendenti et un'anello.*¹¹

Borg rightly considers this description as tangible proof that this was the first processional statue in Malta to be specifically created to represent a titular saint, other than those of the Virgin Mary. Moreover, this statue has international importance; indeed Siggiewi can boast of having had a processional statue before the one commissioned for the basilica of St Nicholas of Bari, in Italy.

⁹ A.A.M., *Visitatis Pastoralis Gargallo, 1598–1602*, f. 233r.

¹⁰ Peter Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy*, Cambridge, 1987, pp. 51, 209, 211.

¹¹ A.A.M. *Visitatis Pastoralis Buenos 1667–68*, Vol. 20, f. 442v.

In 1682, the procurators of the Bari church began a new programme to embellish the place of worship, transforming it into a baroque edifice. Neapolitan artists and artisans were commissioned to execute a number of new artifices, including the silver statue of St Nicholas.¹²

Bari would also adopt the widespread custom of attiring a processional statue in a replica of the bishop's vestments and, as was the case in Siggiewi, the Bari statue one (and still is) bedecked in all the liturgical vestments that are normally associated with the position of bishop, from mitre to pallium to crozier. The difference between the two was that the Siggiewi statue was not adorned with the chasuble, the dalmatic, and the pallium, which elements would be introduced later on with the arrival of the new statue. There is no doubt that the iconography of this new statue followed the Bari model. Bishop Buenos makes no mention of these articles with reference to the old statue and in his report he only notes a ring, a cassock, an amice, a mitre, and a stole. Buenos takes a particular interest in the mitre which he describes in detail saying that it was made of white silver cloth with gold lace at each end of one of its two pendants. He also refers to the cassock, which was a sort of undervest, referring to it as *pavonazzo*, which meant that it was a richly designed fabric of violet/blood-red colour.

Moreover, this old statue had an overall cope, made of white and red damask, which was only put on when it was taken out in procession. Furthermore, this must have been a lightweight statue for, unlike the wooden one, the inventory does not document the existence of forked stands or *forcini*, but the inventory does carry a separate entry recording the statue's cope.

*Item cappa di damaschi glo rosso et bianco per la figura di S. Nicola guarnita con il gallone d'oro.*¹³

The word *cappa* or cope was included in the description of the statue, described above, but then crossed out, thus further indicating that at this time the statue did not keep its cope during the non-festive period. There was no reference to the presence of a crozier or pallium. Judging from these descriptions, there is no doubt that the saint was dressed according to the Latin liturgy with mitre and red cassock as Latin bishops used to wear and still do.

¹²Nicola Cortone, 'The Treasure of Saint Nicholas', *Nicholas The People's Saint*, Luca De Napoli ed., Bari, 2004, p. 51.

¹³A.A.M. *Visitatis Pastoralis Buenos 1667–68*, Vol. 20, f. 442ʳ.

Dressed-up Statues

The purpose of dressed-up statues was to re-create an image as close to reality as possible.¹⁴ But there was yet another reason which is often overlooked. Dressing up statues had the specific function of reminding the faithful that the colours of the vestments indicated the liturgy of the day. Robing a statue allowed for flexibility to utilize the same statue in more than one liturgical function. The major changes in dress code took place during Lent and Holy Week. During these periods, statues were dressed in violet or black to follow the liturgy of the day. This interpretation certainly holds for statues dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

In Malta, the custom of dressing statues up in replicas of sacred vestments has been widely attributed to Spanish influence. Indeed, this custom was widely adopted in countries that came under the influence of the Iberian Peninsula and can still be seen today in various churches, particularly in Seville and its environs. However, I strongly believe that, in Malta, the diffusion of this custom should not be entirely linked to Spain but to those countries and areas that were geographically close to Spain or fell under Spanish rule. When this custom caught on in Malta, the island was no longer under Spanish influence. Already, during the seventeenth century, Spanish cultural influence was slowly waning in Sicily. Besides, robed statues can be found in other areas and cathedrals that were never under Spanish influence. For example, in Corsica, the old cathedral of Calvi still maintains the tradition of robing its processional statue. On 15 August, the feast of the Assumption, the statue of the Virgin was and is robed in white. The same statue was robed in black as a sign of mourning on Good Friday to represent Our Lady of Sorrows. While it is true that Calvi geographically faces the Iberian Peninsula, it should be recalled that this city was never under Spanish or Aragonese rule. Corsica belonged to the Republic of Genoa before falling under French rule.

Perhaps, a more classical example of a statue being dressed up is to be found in the basilica of St Peter in Rome. Until this day, the seated bronze statue of Saint Peter is adorned with a chasuble on the saint's feast day, 29 June. This tradition dates back to medieval times. This statue adorned the old medieval St Peter's basilica where it was already bedecked on his feast day.

One should differentiate between the different customs related to processional statues that were becoming popular in Malta in early modern times. While the custom of dressing up statues continued in Malta until the late eighteenth century, in reality there were two different trends. The first dates to the first half of the seventeenth century when mannequin statues were introduced.

¹⁴Sandro Debono, *Imago Dei, Sculptured Images of the Crucifix in the Art of Early Modern Malta*, Malta, 2005, p. 34.

The second trend dates to the second half of the eighteenth century, to the period when the Maltese began to migrate *en masse* to Spain. The introduction (or perhaps the re-introduction) of this Spanish custom could be attributed to them. Many of these migrants settled in the harbour area and this would explain why such a custom received a particular boost in this part of Malta.¹⁵ I consider this last custom as separate and independent of the first. In fact, as I shall be arguing further on, some of these early dressed statues began to be replaced during this period.

An accurate analysis of the historical documentation can lead to the conclusion that the origins of the processional statue of St Nicholas date to the first half of the seventeenth century. It is definitely later than 1575 as no reference to it is to be found in Pietro Dusina's report. As already discussed, the first written reference to the statue, together with its ecclesiastical vestments, is to be found in the report made by Buenos of his pastoral visit in 1667.¹⁶ The statue is mentioned again by Bishop Cocco Palmieri in his pastoral visit of 1686¹⁷ and in the inventory of the Siggiewi church compiled in 1693 under the title '*Inventario e nota delli beni mobili, stabili ori argenti e partite bullali che possiede La Ven(eranda) Lamp(ada) del S(anti)S(si)mo Sacramento della Chiesa Par(rochia)le del Siggewi fatto nel mese di Xmbre 1693*'. On page 4 of this unnumbered manuscript, one finds the following entry: '*più una statua di San Nicolò vestita pontificalmente*'.

Thanks to this note, it can also be established that the statue was the property of the church or parish and not of some confraternity. During this period, all the parish church's property was compiled under the title of *Veneranda Lampada*.¹⁸ This definition derived from the fact that the Blessed Sacrament was kept in a tabernacle on the main altar in front of which an oil lamp burned all day. The responsibility of its upkeep lay entirely on the parish church.

The above document reveals a change in the custom of bedecking the statue. It seems that around this period it was decided to keep the statue permanently clad in pontifical robes throughout the year; one can thus surmise that the cope was now included amongst its sacred vestments together with the pontifical sandals, pallium, and crozier.

¹⁵ A bust size *imagen a vestir* of the Lady of Sorrows was brought to Bormla in the 18th century and was placed on the side altar dedicated to the Holy Cross. A similar image can also be found at Birgu parish church. The latter is an old one but that of Bormla should be linked to the new 18th-century migratory trends with Spain. The new maritime route that began to develop with the latter country during the second half of the 18th century were the subject of an extensive study by Carmelo Vassallo entitled *Corsairing to Commerce: Maltese Merchants in XVIII Century Spain / Carmel Vassallo; Ship Illustrations by Joseph Muscat*, Malta, 1997.

¹⁶ A.A.M. *Visitatis Pastoralis Buonos 1667–68*, Vol. 20, f. 442^v.

¹⁷ A.A.M. *Vista Pastoralis Cocco Palmieri 1685–87*, Vol. 24, f. 281^v.

¹⁸ A.A.M. Conti. Vol. 65 Siggiewi 1672–1739, *Inventario e nota delli beni mobili stabili ori argenti e partite bullali, che possiede La Ven(eranda) Lampa(da) del SSmo Sacramento della Chiesa Par(rochia)le del Siggewi fatto nel mese di Xmbre 1693*.

The inventory also mentions two banners used in processions or ‘*bandiere . . . l’una di velluto rosso con la figura del santo n(ost)ro protettore e l’altra di broccato piccola di diversi colori*’.¹⁹ In itself, this is proof that processions were being solemnly held at Siggiewi at the time. Moreover, by the second half of the seventeenth century, this statue was not being associated with casual devotional processions, performed as an act of piety and in thanksgiving after the making of some collective vow. By the second half of the seventeenth century, it also began to be associated with the feast of St Nicholas and one can rightly conclude that it was now considered as part and parcel of these festivities.

The parishioners gave great importance to their feast and did their utmost to have solemn celebrations. According to the church accounts for 1685, the feast was celebrated twice a year, in May and December. Musicians, in particular violin players, were brought over from Valletta to participate in these festivities.²⁰

In *Imago Dei, Sculptured Images of the Crucifix in the Art of Early Modern Malta*, Sandro Debono refers to the origins of the first statue of Our Lady of the Rosary at the Dominican church in Valletta which was inaugurated in 1615. This statue too fell into this category. It consisted of a mannequin, adorned in real clothes, and only its hands and head were sculpted, most probably in wood.²¹ Were the Dominicans the first to introduce to Malta this tradition of dressed statues? Is there any sort of connection between the Siggiewi statue and the Dominican Order? What is less known is the fact that there existed a strong link between Bari’s basilica of St Nicholas and the Order of the Preachers. This affiliation is deep rooted in history and it was the reason why, in 1951, Pope Pius XII entrusted its administration to the Dominican friars.²²

At a local level, the tradition of having dressed-up statues used in processions is nowadays associated with Birgu. But the custom of having a processional statue of the patron saint dressed up in Birgu developed later than in Siggiewi. In fact, the statue of St Lawrence dates to the late seventeenth century and was definitely introduced after 1676.²³

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁰ A.A.M. Conti. Vol. 65 Siggiewi 1672–1739, *Conti*. Vol. 65 Siggiewi 1672–1739 Conto della Procura della Ven(eran)da Lampada del S(anti)S(s)mo Sacram(en)to della Chiesa Par(rocia)le di Casal Siggehwi (*sic.*), p. 26.

²¹ Sandro Debono, *Imago Dei, Sculptured images of the Crucifix in the Art of Early Modern Malta*, Malta, 2005, p. 34.

²² Giovanni Matera, ‘The Friars Preachers and Saint Nicholas’, *Nicholas The People’s Saint*, Luca De Napoli ed., Bari, 2004), pp. 23, 27.

²³ Carmel Cassar, ‘The Maltese Festa, a historical and cultural perspective’, *First International Conference of the Sief Working Group on The Ritual Year in association with the Department of Maltese, University of Malta Junior College Msida, Malta*, George Mifsud-Chircop ed., Malta, 2006, p. 57. In 1676, a pilgrimage was organized at Birgu during which prayers were said to God to deliver the people of this town from plague. Interestingly, this and later processions included the relics of the holy cross, relics of St Lawrence and a statue of St Roque. The absence of a statue of St Lawrence in this procession seems to indicate that Birgu then still lacked a processional statue of the patron saint.

Its existence is attested for the first time in the records of Bishop Cocco Palmieri's pastoral visit in 1685.²⁴ What is of particular interest is the fact that this was not the parish's first dressed-up statue.²⁵ According to Bishop Buenos' notes of his pastoral visit in 1667, the three parishes of Birgu, Bormla, and Senglea, had processional statues of the Virgin dedicated to the Immaculate Conception robed in white.²⁶

From the 1667 visit, it transpires that Bormla, had two processional statues. The first one was '*una statua della madona (sic.) con il suo vestito di terzanello bianco*',²⁷ whilst the second one was made entirely from wood and was inventoried as '*una vara indorata che serve per la Madonna*'.²⁸

Unlike in Siġġiewi, Bormla's mannequin statue was not a processional statue and was not carried outdoors on its feast day, which then was already being celebrated on 8 December. At this period, the church's dedication and feast was in honour of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. Incidentally, Bormla continued with the tradition of taking out its statue only during devotional pilgrimages. The other statue had a different story and usage. Bishop Buenos does not give any information about whether the '*vara indorata*' was a processional statue even if the word '*vara*' so indicates. This is further corroborated by the fact that in reports of subsequent visits it is stated that it belonged to the Confraternity of the Holy Rosary and was taken out in procession on the celebration of the Confraternity's feast. One tends to conjecture that the dressed statue was perhaps the first to be acquired by this parish and this was the statue used in devotional pilgrimages.

Senglea's oldest processional statue of the Madonna was an *imagen a vestir* and this remained the main processional statue until a new wooden statue was acquired, which according to tradition, has a miraculous story, having been salvaged from a shipwreck and which will be discussed further below.

Frans Buhagiar attests that the first statue to be commissioned for the parish of Żabbar was that of a clad Virgin. The Żabbar parish carried on using this statue until the turn of the nineteenth century when Mariano Gerada was commissioned to sculpt the new one which is still venerated in this parish. Unlike in the case of Siġġiewi, all traces of Żabbar's old statue have been lost.³⁰

Originally, processions did not involve statues but were a simple manifestation of faith during which a richly decorated cross was taken out. Richer churches introduced relics of saints which they took out on devotional pilgrimages. One of

²⁴ A.A.M. *Vista Pastoralis Cocco Palmieri*, Vol. 24B, f. 58^r.

²⁵ Borg (1977), p. 18.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ A.A.M. *Vista Pastoralis Buenos*, Vol. 20, f. 255^v.

²⁸ Ibid., f. 256^v.

²⁹ Ibid., f. 256^r.

³⁰ Frans Buhagiar, *Santwarju Madonna tal-Grazzji Żabbar*, Malta, 1998, p. 18.

the first wooden statues that, according to tradition, seems to have been used in processions was that of St Joseph in Rabat (Malta). Because this statue belonged to a religious Order, it escaped the scrutiny of pastoral visits with the consequence that it is now very difficult to rebuild its history. It was not commissioned by a confraternity but represents the recycling of an older figurehead which seems to have decorated the bow of the Hospitaller ship known as *gran carracca Sant'Anna*.³¹ Yet, even here, one tends to think that this statue was only taken out on devotional pilgrimages rather than as part of the saint's feast celebrations. There should be no doubt that it was acquired after 1575, as no reference to it is to be found in Dusina's visit. Then, at the turn of the eighteenth century, a documentary reference is found about a statue of the saint that was brought over from the Carmelite church of Valletta.³² This historical note is taken to refer to a second statue of the saint which was acquired by this confraternity, but most probably, it alludes to the arrival at Rabat of this old statue of St Joseph. It seems difficult to attribute this reference to this second statue as both in terms of style and material, *papier-mâché*, the second statue must date later than 1700.

Senglea, too, adopted, a wooden processional Madonna, what seems to have been a lost figurehead salvaged in the Adriatic Sea and following the advice from members of the crew who happened to be from Senglea, the captain agreed to donate it to the parish church of this town.³³ At first, these two statues were used concurrently but then, the older mannequin fell out into disuse. The wooden statue is already mentioned in Buenos' pastoral visit of 1667 as belonging to the confraternity of the Immaculate Conception of this town and is described as '*di legno indorata con li soi bastoni e quatro forcine*' (*sic.*)³⁴ The statue is also recorded in Bishop Cocco Palmieri's pastoral report of 1686 wherein he states that it was kept on the altar of the confraternity and describes the statue as being '*ligneam*



The statue of the Immaculate Conception of Cospicua after it was redecorated by the Ghezzi Family of silversmiths of Milan

³¹ Joseph Muscat, *The Carrack of the Order*, Malta, 2000, pp. 26–8.

³² Archives of the Arciconfraternity of Saint Joseph, Our Lady of Mount Carmel Basilica, Valletta, Ms. Lib. I Ann., Conf. S. Giuseppe, f. 159. *Vide also* Lawrenz M. Sammut, O.Carm., *Is-Santwarju tal-Karmnu*, Malta, 1952, p. 83.

³³ Simon Mercieca 'Contextualizing the Past: Pictorial Memory and Landscape in Gozo'. Forthcoming.

³⁴ A.A.M. *Visitatis Pastoralis Buenos*, Vol. 20, f. 224'.

deaurata et partim variis coloribus depicta referens imaginem B.M.V. Immaculatae Conceptae cum corona argentea in eius capite.³⁵ The bishop adds that this statue was taken out in procession on the feast of the Immaculate Conception and that people from all over Malta flocked to this parish on 8 December to participate. From this document it clearly transpires that the same statue began to be taken out also on 8 September, when this parish celebrated the feast of Our Lady of Victories.

Bormla must have soon put away the mannequin statue because Cocco Palmieri's pastoral visit in 1686 only refers to one processional statue, that is, the one belonging to the confraternity of the Rosary.³⁶ He makes it a point to specify that this statue representing the Immaculate Conception was completely made of wood³⁷ and that it was taken out in procession on the first Sunday of October when the confraternity commemorated the feast of the Rosary.³⁸ It was kept in a wooden niche, under lock and key, in the chapel of St Roque at the same church.³⁹ There is an interesting iconographical fact that a statue dedicated to the Immaculate Conception was taken out in a procession in honour of the Madonna under a different title and shows that iconographical representations were seemingly not that important during this period. Eventually, during the eighteenth century, this statue was donated to Qrendi, a neighbouring parish of Siggiewi, after the confraternity had acquired a new statue which was considered to be iconographically better as it correctly represented the popular image of the Virgin of the Rosary: a Madonna holding Baby Jesus. The image of the Immaculate Conception was that of a pregnant Madonna without the inclusion of Baby Jesus. This statue of Our Lady of the Rosary was eventually changed in 1826 when a new statue was made by the sculptor Pietro Paolo Azzopardi.⁴⁰

Also towards the middle of the eighteenth century a new statue was made representing the Immaculate Conception. This new statue was probably made from what remained of the old mannequin that used to be dressed up to represent the Immaculate Conception. The wooden head of this mannequin and its bottom made up of the feet and the serpent, were incorporated into this new statue, that is, a body was made to form a solid statue. This new body continued to serve this statue until 1904, when it was removed and replaced by a silver-plate dress.⁴¹

³⁵ A.A.M. *Visitatis Pastoralis, Cocco Palmieri*, 1686, Vol. 23, f. 102^r. Trans. *It (the statue) is gilded and painted in various colours reproducing the wooden likeness of the BMV Immaculate Conception with a silver crown on its head.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, f. 86^r.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, f. 90^v and A.A.M. *Visitatis Pastoralis Buenos*, Vol. 20, f. 255^v, f. 90^r.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, f. 86^r.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, f. 90^r.

⁴⁰ A.P. *Della Veneranda Confraternita' dell Santissimo Rosario Eretta nella S.Insigne Collegaita e parrocchiale Chiesa della Citta' Cospicua*, Libro Esito, p. 127.

⁴¹ *Raccolta di alcuni di arredi per uso sacro di esclusiva fabbricazione delle premiate fabbriche Riunite Ant.o Ghezzi e Figlio Andreoni e Franceschini*, Milan, Corso Vittorio Emanuele N. 12, Tav. 73. The

Conclusion

This information about the use of wooden and *imagen a vestir* figures reveals another aspect which had been overlooked in the history of the introduction of processional statues in Malta. The first wooden statues were small in size. St Roque of Birgu was about a metre high. The wooden statue of the Immaculate Conception (which has now become the main processional statue of Senglea) is also very small in stature. Even another wooden statue – that of St Stephen at Cospicua, dating to this period – is small in size and about a metre high. The *imagen a vestir* models represented advancement in size as they were taller, having normally the height of a human being. It seems that it would be on this model that the new processional wooden statues, introduced in the second half of the seventeenth century, such as the statue of the Immaculate Conception of Cospicua (now at Qrendi) were scaled.

A trend had now set in whereby the statues preferred for use in processions were those of wood and their popularity increased in the eighteenth century. Those parishes that had adopted the older custom of dressing up statues began to feel inferior and, with the exception of Birgu, sought to replace them with wooden ones. The eighteenth century began to offer those parishes or confraternities that had no statues, or happened to be too poor to afford one of wood, the opportunity of having cheaper statues made of *papier-mâché*, a solution within the reach of most pockets.

The change of the processional statues at Żabbar and Siġġiewi must be studied within the development of this fashion. Once Siġġiewi built its new parish church, the parishioners transferred several items from the old church – including the old statue of St Nicholas. Cocco Palmieri records the existence of this old statue in the new church, where it continued to be taken out on feast days. The procession was held in the evening, after the reading of the second vespers. The bishop described this event as the '*processione generali in qua defertur statua eiusdem sancti*' (*sic.*) In the new church, the feast lost none of its previous importance.⁴² Once the new church was embellished, the attention of the parishioners turned to the acquisition of a new statue.

catalogue published by silversmiths of Milan, Antonio Gezzi e figlio, attests that the head of the statue and bottom part, including the serpent belonged to an older statue. The way the statue of the Immaculate Conception of Cospicua is described, shows that the Gezzi silversmiths removed the main body of the statue and preserved the head and bottom part because, they were of older make. The exact description of the work done on the statue of the Immaculate Conception of Bormla is as follows: '*Statua di S. Maria Immacolata, eseguita in lastra d'argento a 900/1000 battuta e riccamente ornate di cesello, pietre e stelle. La testa e la estremità sono in legno intagliato, appartenenti alla Venerata Statua secolare già esistente.*'

⁴² A.A.M. Visitatis Pastoralis Cocco Palmieri, Vol. 24B, f. 281'.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, dressing up statues slowly began to be considered no longer decorous and Siġġiewi reacted by asking one of the most prominent sculptors in Malta, Pietro Felici, to carve a new statue, which he finished in 1736.⁴³ Bormla and Senglea did not remain immune from developments. The story of two processional statues of the Virgin at Cospicua has been explained in the previous paragraphs. Unlike what has happened in Siġġiewi, where the head of St Nicholas was spared from further intrusions, the head of the Virgin at Cospicua, which formed part of the old mannequin, suffered from a barbarous intervention, when glass-eyes were introduced to give it a better human expression. The same story happened to Senglea's wooden statue as it too suffered from a similar modification in the nineteenth century, whilst the older statue of the Virgin, fashioned according to the *imagen a vestir* model, fell into disuse by the turn of the eighteenth century with the consequence that the parish did not find any difficulty to sell it to the parish of Xaghra, Gozo, in 1751, for 6 *scudi* and 2 *tari*.⁴⁴

Żabbar would later follow suit, and even Birgu did not remain completely immune to this new trend. In Birgu, the mannequin statue of the Immaculate Conception was replaced in 1838, by a new wooden statue, the work of Xandru Farrugia, and most probably, the head of the Virgin that is now on exhibit at the parish museum belongs to it. Then, around 1883, instead of replacing the statue of Saint Lawrence, the clergy of Birgu, preferred to have the effigy of St Lawrence remodelled by Abraham Gatt in accordance with the new romantic characteristics synonymous of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ However, even after this arrangement, the statue still did not satisfy early twentieth-century aesthetics and Can. Joseph M. Farrugia, popularly known in Birgu as Dun Ġanmarí, entered in secret discussions with the Birgu-born sculptor Antonio Buhagiar to make a new statue. Buhagiar did begin working on a new statue but the project was aborted for some unknown reason.⁴⁶

Replacing the statue at Siġġiewi could have been caused by other considerations besides aesthetic ones. The new effigy seems to indicate a change in popular devotion and the statue in Bari was taken as a model. The two effigies are now very similar but, unlike the old statue, the new one is more in the Greek idiom. As already seen, the old statue was dressed in accordance with the Latin liturgy. The Felici statue is a full-length figure of the saint in the act of bestowing the Greek

⁴³ Joe Carabott, 'L-Istatwa Titulari ta' San Nicola ta' Bari', *Is-Siġġiewi*, Vol. 1, No. 5, June 1978, p. 34. *Vide* also Giudo Lanfranco, *L-Istatwi Titulari u l-Istatwarji Taghom*, Malta, 1999, p. 40.

⁴⁴ S. Mercieca, 'Contextualizing the Past: Pictorial Memory and Landscape in Gozo'. Forthcoming. Giovanni Faure, *Li Storja ta' Malta u Ghawdex bil Gzejjer tahhom u il Grajjiet li saru fihom*, (Malta, 1916), Vol. 4, p. 1120.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁶ Mario Buhagiar, *Antonio Buhagiar 1906–1998 Portrait of a Neglected Artist*, Malta, 2008, p. 14.

blessing. Even the dress features are now the same as those of Bari, and Felici depicts St Nicholas wearing a chasuble and holding a crosier. The style of the chasuble in this new statue was, at this period, associated with the Greek liturgy as the Latin rite used a different type.

The impact of such liturgical attire on the faithful must have been considerable. The use of an imposing chasuble whose sides enveloped the arms of the statue could not pass unnoticed by the congregation who were not used to seeing such type of liturgical vestments. The Latin or Roman chasuble did not have such features and only concealed the shoulders of the priest leaving his arms and hands uncovered.

But there were also other differences. As in the Bari statue, this new statue of Siggiewi sought to convey the three cardinal virtues associated with devotion to this saint in liturgy (represented by the 'Greek' ecclesiastical vestments), faith, (expressed in Bari by the saint holding the bible in his left hand), and charity (shown through the representation of three golden spheres normally placed resting over the bible). In the new Siggiewi statue, these last two virtues were expressed by one of the two angels, or boys, at the foot of the statue holding them in his hands.

As already discussed, originally the cult of St Nicholas was associated with his thaumaturgical reputation to the extent that he became known as a thaumaturg. He was associated with performing wonders and miracles related to nature, such as controlling the winds and seas, subduing storms, and defeating evil.⁴⁷ Like the one of Bari, the old statue aimed at purporting these values. In the eighteenth century, the saint figure began to be associated more and more with the upholding of justice and the protection of children and girls of marriageable age. These new devotional attributes reached the island, and Siggiewi did not remain immune from this new fashion. When the opportunity arose, the parishioners took the chance to express these new religious values. The addition of angels or boys at the foot of the statue attests this iconographic change up to this present day. More importantly, these eschatological changes helped to keep devotion towards this saint strong and alive.

⁴⁷Michele Campione, 'Travellers of Faith', *Nicholas The People's Saint*, Luca De Napoli ed., Bari, 2004, p. 59.