

The Historic Xewkija Windmill and the Xicluna Family of Millers

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The historic grain windmill at Xewkija, Gozo, was recently restored to its former glory and, located as it is on the main road between the harbour at Mgarr and Rabat, should now be an additional attraction both for the locals and for the many visitors to the Island. The restored windmill is shown in Figure 1. The windmill, which is colloquially known as '*Il-Mithna tat-Tmien Kantunieri*' (The Eight-Cornered Windmill), is the earliest surviving windmill in Gozo, having been built in 1710 by the Foundation of the Grandmaster of the Knights of St John Raymundo Perellos y Rocafull (1697-1720).

However, the Xewkija windmill was not the first one to have been built in Gozo. In the 1680s,

the Foundation of Grandmaster Gregorio Carafa (1680-1690) had commissioned the building of a windmill, which was located in what were then the outskirts of Rabat on a site which now houses the Bishop's Seminary. Less than a hundred years after its construction, the structure of the windmill had deteriorated to such an extent that it was deemed to be beyond economical repair and the property was therefore sold to a local prelate, Canon Giovanni Maria Cauchi, who wanted the site to build a new women's hospital in lieu of an older one which had existed in the Citadel for many years. In the meantime, the Carafa Foundation acquired a new site, located between Rabat and the village of Sannat, on which it built another windmill which



Figure 1: The restored windmill at Xewkija.

was completed in 1783 and which later became known as 'Ta' Marziena' (Attard Tabone, 1996). Fortunately this windmill has survived although it was recently the subject of a controversy in view of a massive development proposed in its vicinity which threatens its visual integrity.

The First Xewkija Millers

It is generally acknowledged that the first miller who acquired the lease of the Xewkija windmill after its construction was a man by the name of Giovanni Maria Xicluna. This understanding is probably to some extent based on the most interesting contribution entitled, 'From Wheat to Bread through the Gozo Windmills' by the respected Gozitan historian Joseph M. Attard Tabone for the 1996 publication of the University of Malta Gozo Centre under the title of, 'A Focus on Gozo'.

This is what Attard Tabone had to say on the first Xewkija miller and his family:

'Gio Maria Xicluna was the miller in 1738. Soon after Xicluna died, his widow married Simone Galea who together with his stepson Michele Xicluna renewed the lease in 1742. This windmill was operated for many years by members of the Xicluna family who were a versatile family of millers and millwrights.'

However, as far as I am aware, so far no further information on the actual identity of Giovanni Maria and his family, and indeed on any other early Xicluna millers who may have operated this windmill, has become available.

Carlo Xicluna

I have now sourced new information which somewhat fills this vacuum and sheds some more light on the early management of this windmill. The widow who married Simone Galea some time after her husband, the Xewkija miller, had passed away

was not, in fact, the widow of Gio Maria Xicluna. Simone had actually married Grazia Xuereb, who however was the widow of Carlo Xicluna, at the Matrice on the 25 July 1742.¹ As we shall see, Carlo, who had died, aged around 47, some years before on the 14 February 1738, was an elder brother of Gio Maria with whom he would have been in partnership in the running of the windmill. Indeed, it was probably Carlo himself and not his brother Gio Maria who had taken over the management of the Xewkija windmill some time after its completion in 1710.

Grazia was 48 years old and had already mothered 14 children when she married Simone who, however, was then only 30 years old, practically the same age as her eldest surviving son, Natale Michelangelo Andrea, who, curiously enough, himself married only one month after his mother's second marriage. As the miller's wife, Grazia must have been well known in her native village of Xewkija and her marriage to a much younger man must have been the talk of the village. In today's modern world, her story would certainly have made it to the front page of a popular glossy gossip magazine. Grazia lived a long life and she died on the 13 December 1774, aged 80. Her widower Simone, then still aged 62, did not give up and married again in his native village of Xewkija a few years later in 1779. He passed away in 1787, aged 75.²

I have identified a significant amount of information on Carlo Xicluna. Carlo was the son of Damiano Xicluna and Caterina Mangion who were married at the Matrice, Gozo, on the 14 July 1667. The couple, for some hitherto unknown reason, migrated to Malta some time after the birth in 1672 of their third child, Salvo, and they eventually had at least six other children, including Carlo and Gio Maria. I have been unable to establish where in Malta the family initially settled and where their children were born but there is sufficient archival information suggesting that the family eventually, and certainly by the year 1695, had settled in Żejtun. The Liber

1 Guljana Masini, Series 20, Gozo Marriages (Galea).

2 Unless otherwise indicated, the genealogical data on baptisms/births, marriages and deaths in Gozo listed in this paper have been sourced from the Guljana Masini. The Guljana Masini consists of 88 manuscript volumes listing, inter alia, all the births, marriages and deaths in Gozo between 1554-1934.

Status Animarum for the year 1709 for the Parish of St. Catherine in Żejtun clearly shows that the family was then living in Casal Bisbut, one of the hamlets then existing within that Parish. It also shows that while a number of children in the family had by that time already married and left the household, Carlo and Gio Maria, then said to be aged 18 and 13 respectively, were still living with their parents. The records in the Żejtun Parish Archives on the marriage of three of the couple's elder female children, respectively in the years 1695, 1701 and 1705, show that the family had then already been living in that hamlet.³

Salvo, the third child of Damiano and Caterina, born in Gozo before the family's migration to Malta, eventually married Teresa Pulis in Żabbar in 1696. The record of this marriage in the Żabbar Parish archives clearly states that Salvo's parents were then living in Żejtun. Salvo was a direct ancestor of Emmanuele Scicluna (1820-1886), who was created Marchese Scicluna on the 1 June 1875 by Pope Pius IX and whose nephew, Giuseppe Scicluna-Bugeja, who was also created Marchese Scicluna on the 10 December 1878 by Pope Leo XII, was the founding father of the Scicluna family of bankers, shipowners, grain merchants and eventually brewers.⁴ One of the descendants of Marchese Scicluna became colloquially known by the nickname of 'Ic-Cisk'.

Carlo's mother Caterina Mangion herself had an interesting family history. Her grandfather, Mariano de Mangion, was the illegitimate child of a slave and of an illustrious and erudite prelate, Don Nicola Mangion (1586-1656).⁵ Don Nicola was the holder of a Doctorate in both Canon and Civil Law, he also held the important ecclesiastical appointment of Vicar General of the Diocese and it is known that for a time he served in the Parish of Naxxar, where he was very popular with the parishioners. Although he was based in Malta, Don Nicola was the appointed Rector of the Chapel of the Annunciation located in the picturesque valley, known as *Wied il-Lunzjata*, situated in the outskirts of Rabat, Gozo. At his own expense, in 1644, he commissioned the artist Fra Lucas Garnier to paint a titular painting of the

Annunciation for the Chapel, a painting that has survived to this day (Buhagiar, 1995). Don Nicola was also the holder of the medieval title of *Signore di Nigret* and of the important civil appointment of *Uditore* (Advisor) to the Grandmaster of the ruling Order of the Knights of St John. One wonders whether any of the Grandmasters that he advised was aware of his secret liaison, although it has to be stated that Don Mariano had apparently fathered his child when he was still around 19 years old and when he may not yet have joined the priesthood.

Figure 2 is a portrait of *Don Nicolaus Mangione Melitensis* which is located at the Old University Building in Valletta, Malta. Don Nicola, in fact, had been entrusted with the establishment and the management of an office and tribunal in the Maltese Islands of the *Sacra Congregazione della Reverenda Fabbrica di San Pietro delle Urbe*. This was a Congregation of Cardinals which had to ensure that any pious legacies in the Catholic Church were actually channelled towards the construction and embellishment of St Peter's Basilica in Rome.



Figure 2: Portrait of Don Nicolaus Mangione Melitensis.

3 AP Żejtun, Marriages (Volume 3), 1679-1724.

4 www.genealogy.com/ The Siculo-Arabic family of Xicluna.

5 www.genealogy.com/ Mangion.

Don Nicola held this appointment from 1623 to 1655, a year before he died, following which this responsibility was assumed by the Inquisitor himself.⁶

Back to Carlo Xicluna himself, the Xewkija miller. Carlo married Grazia Lucrezia Xuereb at Xewkija on the 19 February 1713 and, as already indicated, the couple had 14 children, born between December 1713 and October 1734, including Michele, who was born on the 12 May 1723 and who was therefore only 19 years old when in 1742 he renewed and took over the lease of the Xewkija windmill together with his 30 year old stepfather Simone Galea. Of the eight male children of the couple who survived their infancy, four, including Michele, followed in their father's footsteps and became millers and millwrights in their own right, a sure indication that they had been apprenticed with their father Carlo and their uncle Gio Maria, the original Xewkija millers. Indeed, on the basis of the definitive information available to date, Carlo and Gio Maria must be credited with the creation of the Xicluna family of millers who, together with two other separate families, practically monopolised the milling trade in Gozo during most of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The other three children of Carlo who left their native Xewkija and acquired the lease of a separate windmill in other locations in Gozo were Giorgio (born 1715), in Kerċem, Damiano (born 1729), in Nadur, and Marcello (born 1734) in Xagħra. The three of them were the first millers to have acquired the leases of the so called New Windmills in the respective villages. These windmills, constructed by the Foundation of Grandmaster Manuel de Vilhena (1722-1736) in 1784 (Kerċem) and 1787 (Nadur and Xagħra), had replaced previous windmills in the same villages, all of which had been built by the same Foundation but which had to be demolished due to the poor materials used in their construction (Vella, 2001). It is probable that the three Xicluna millers had already been in possession of the leases of the old windmills before they were assigned those for the new ones as soon as these had been commissioned. Indeed, the fact that the lease of all

the windmills belonging to this Foundation were assigned to members of the same Xicluna family would indicate the high esteem in which these millers were held.

Gio Maria Xicluna

The information available on Gio Maria Xicluna, the other early Xewkija miller mentioned by Attard Tabone in the indicated publication and who presumably was the one who officially held the lease of the windmill, is somewhat more limited. However, there are clear and well documented indications that Gio Maria was indeed Carlo's brother, one of the other and younger children born to Damiano and Caterina after their migration from Gozo. Gio Maria, clearly identified as the son of Damiano and Caterina, is included in a list of literally hundreds of children who received the Sacrament of Confirmation from Bishop Fra Davide Cocco Palmieri on the 14 June 1699 in the Parish of St Catherine, Żejtun. Interestingly enough, his father Damiano was godfather to one of the children during the same event. During those far away times, confirmation ceremonies in both Maltese and Gozitan Parishes were held sporadically and sometimes after the lapse of many years, so it was not surprising that each ceremony involved a large number of children of different ages. Gio Maria's brother Carlo himself was godfather to at least six children from different families during the next Confirmation ceremony held in the same Parish of Żejtun ten years later on the 24 June 1709. Apparently, during those times the religious significance and responsibilities of being a godparent was hardly understood and the selection of a godparent was often based on considerations of convenience.

Gio Maria and Carlo's mother, Catarina, passed away at Żejtun on the 7 March 1710 and, as already indicated, it is probable that Carlo moved to Gozo some time after. However, Gio Maria was still around 14 years old at the time and therefore still too young to accompany his elder brother and to assume the arduous responsibilities of a miller and a millwright. In fact, it is more likely that Gio Maria

⁶ Information provided on line (19 September 2020) by the Inquisitor's Palace – National Museum of Ethnography, Malta.

joined his brother in Xewkija following his marriage to Maria Busuttil in the Parish of Żejtun on the 11 February 1715. Gio Maria would by now have been around 19 years old and the relevant Parish marriage record states quite clearly that he was the son of Damiano and of the late Catarina.⁷

I strongly suspect that before the two millers took over the responsibility for the new Xewkija windmill, they had already been apprenticed in their trade in their native village of Żejtun, although there is no documentary evidence to substantiate this. The earliest windmill to have been built in that village was known as *Il-Mithna tal-Flas* or *Il-Mithna tal-Ħerba*, a windmill which was eventually demolished and which is said to have been located in the hamlet of Ħal-Bisbut where the Xicluna family is known to have been living. Had their father Damiano taken over the management of that windmill, in which case he would have to be credited with being the earliest member of the Xicluna family to take up milling as an occupation? Unlike his two younger sons, Damiano never returned to resettle in his native Gozo but died in Żejtun on the 3 June 1724 at the age of 73.

There are various references in different Gozo parish archives to the family of Gio Maria Xicluna and Maria Busuttil, although obviously none of these refer to the couple's marriage since this did not take place in Gozo. One of their children, Giuseppe, died in his infancy on the 15 July 1723. Another son, Angelo, baptised at the Matrice, eventually married Silvestra Portelli at Nadur on the 17 January 1740 while yet another son Damiano, evidently named after his grandfather, was likewise baptised at the Castello (Matrice) and eventually married Maria Galea at Xewkija on the 14 September 1760. The Matrice parish records show that Gio Maria himself died on the 8 April 1738, just a couple of months after his brother Carlo. The death of both brothers within such a short period of time and when both were relatively young is indeed enigmatic and one cannot help wondering why this happened.

Angelo, one of the sons of Gio Maria, was another second generation member of the Xicluna family of millers who must have been apprenticed with

the original Xewkija millers and who eventually became a miller and millwright in his own right. It is known that on the 1 February 1769, Angelo took up the lease of the windmill at Rabat, Gozo, for a period of 29 years (Vella, 2001). As we have already seen, this was the first windmill to have been built in Gozo, around 90 years before, by the Foundation of Grandmaster Gregorio Carafa. It is not improbable that Angelo in fact had already been running this windmill well before the 1769 lease, by which time he was already 56 years old. In fact, while the first child of Angelo and Silvestra, born in 1744, was baptised in Nadur, the village where they were married, all the other children born to the couple after 1846 were baptised in the Parish of St



Figure 3: The windmill at Ta' Marziena, between Rabat and Sannat.

⁷ AP Żejtun, Marriages.

George in Rabat, which would indicate that by that time they had already settled in that town, indeed possibly in the windmill itself. As already stated, the Rabat windmill was eventually demolished and the same Carafa Foundation subsequently commissioned the building of another windmill, now known as *Ta' Marziena*, which was located on the road between Rabat and Sannat. The new windmill was completed in 1783, when the lease was immediately again assigned to Angelo Xicluna, who by now was already 70 years old and who was obviously being assisted by one or more of his children. A picture of the current state of the windmill is shown in Figure 3.

Several Third Generation Xicluna Millers Migrate to Malta

By the end of the 18th Century the extended Xicluna family of millers had grown considerably and, while those windmills in Gozo which had been occupied and operated by the early Xicluna millers generally continued to be occupied by members of the family for successive generations, very often for practically the whole operating life of the windmill, the number of available windmills on the Island could not satisfy the demands of all the third generation members of the family. It was inevitable that, in the circumstances, a number of family members in this group would choose to seek alternative opportunities in Malta. As it happened, it was mainly the children of Marcello Xicluna, the Xagħra miller, and therefore the grandchildren of Carlo Xicluna, one of the first Xewkija millers, who took the plunge and migrated to Malta.

The first of these Xicluna millers who migrated to Malta was Carlo Liberato, the first child of Marcello Xicluna (Xagħra miller) and Angela Bonello, born on the 23 May 1760. It is known that in 1785, during the rule of Grandmaster Emmanuel de Rohan-Polduc (1775-1797), Carlo had already settled in the village of Naxxar, where he had taken on lease one of the two windmills then located in that village, namely the windmill known as *Tas-Sgħajtar*, which is still standing today on the road between Naxxar and Mosta. The Naxxar Parish baptism archives show that during that year Carlo was chosen as godfather to a

child born to a couple who were not related to him and clearly state that he was then living in that village. Unlike some of his brothers who migrated to Malta after him, Carlo had not married in Gozo before his departure but eventually, in 1788, he married a girl from Lija named Grazia Feneke. Grazia seems to have been quite a popular person in her village and, for many years, in fact between 1788 and 1812, she was repeatedly chosen to be godmother to children born to couples who were evidently not in any way related to her.⁸ Was she perhaps one of the village midwives who was conveniently called to act as a godmother to newborns who were baptised on the very same day of their birth?

One of Carlo's younger brothers, Coronato, followed him a few years later in 1791. Coronato had married Margarita Buhagiar in his native village of Xagħra on the 18 January 1791, when he was only 22 years old, and the couple moved to Malta soon after, where they initially also settled in Naxxar, presumably hosted by Carlo himself. However, this must have been a stop gap arrangement since, some time after the birth of their second child in that village in 1793, the couple are known to have been living in Casal Luca where Coronato had taken on lease the windmill in that village, a windmill which has since been demolished. Unfortunately, Coronato's wife Margarita died, aged 32, on the 3 October 1799 in Xagħra where the family must have returned for some time because of the mother's illness. However, there is no evidence that Coronato resettled in Gozo so he must have returned to Malta soon afterwards.

The migration to Malta of these third generation Xicluna millers came to a halt during the last decade of the 18th Century. This is not surprising since this was a period characterised by unprecedented political and social upheaval, namely the end of the long rule of the Order of St John, the French occupation, the uprising against the French garrison and the commencement of British rule. However, once this upheaval was over, a number of other children of Marcello Xicluna evidently felt comfortable and secure enough to start moving again. Damiano (born 1774) is on record to have already been living in Qrendi in September 1800, where he had acquired

8 AP Naxxar, Baptisms (1779-1815).

the lease of the windmill known as *Il-Mithna ta' Santa Caterina*. Damiano's brother Daniele (born 1776) followed him soon afterwards. The Żurrieq Parish archives record the birth of two of Daniele's children in 1803 and 1805 and clearly indicates that the family was then living in that village. However, his sojourn in Żurrieq did not last long and it is known that some time afterwards the family had moved to Siġġiewi, where the miller had acquired the lease of one of the windmills in that village, now known as *Il-Mithna tat-Tank* (Vella, 2001). Daniele eventually, and certainly before 1827, returned to Gozo with his family where he is known to have settled in the *New Kerċem* windmill, a windmill which had previously been occupied by a different line of the Xicluna family.

It should be pointed out that the above-mentioned Daniele Xicluna was one of the direct ancestors of former Maltese Prime Minister Dom Mintoff. One of Daniele's daughters, Caterina, married Aloisio Mintuf (this is how the surname was then written) at the Matrice, Gozo, on the 25 October 1834. Caterina was Dom Mintoff's great grandmother. The name Daniele continued to be inherited in the family from one generation to another. In fact, Mr Mintoff's paternal grandfather carried that name as did one of his brothers.

The Xewkija Windmill in the 19th Century and the Xicluna Millers

Back to the Xewkija windmill. As already stated, when Michele Xicluna, son of Carlo Xicluna, inherited the lease of the windmill in 1742 he was only 19 years old. Michele married Rosa Pace at the Matrice two years later on the 1 October 1744 and he must have continued to operate the windmill for many years, possibly even up to the last decades of that century. His wife Rosa died on the 25 June 1787, aged 66, when Michele, who was then 64 years old, was still alive.

Fast forward to 1839 when it is known that the windmill was being run by another member of the Xicluna family, Giuseppe Xicluna, who had actually acquired the lease of the windmill before that year. In 1847 Giuseppe had submitted a

petition to the Governor requesting a reduction in the rent payable on the windmill (Vella, 2001). Such petitions by windmill operators in both Malta and Gozo had now become commonplace, mainly due to the fact that several millers were finding it difficult to make ends meet in view of the ever increasing competition. Following the introduction of British rule, the number of windmills in both Islands mushroomed, especially after the year 1838 when the Government monopoly on the ownership of windmills was abolished with a Government Notice which provided that '*any person who may be disposed to undertake their construction for their own profit or advantage may do so*'.

By the year 1851 the lease of the Xewkija windmill had passed on to Marcello Xicluna who was a third generation Xicluna miller and who is not to be confused with the second generation miller with the same name who had been operating the Xagħra windmills during the previous century. On the 5 March of that year, Marcello submitted yet another petition to the Governor, again requesting a reduction on the rent due on the windmill and lamenting that, in order to keep up with his dues, he had to sell some of his personal assets, that the population of Gozo, especially that of Xewkija, was then in a state of extreme poverty, that several of the well to do families on the Island had been setting up their own '*centimoli*' (animal driven mills) in their own homes and that, to cap it all, a bad drought had greatly reduced the production of wheat. In spite of Marcello's passionate pleas, the British authorities do not seem to have been impressed and his request was refused. Not unsurprisingly, Marcello gave up the lease of the windmill some time after. Ironically enough, the rent payable was reduced substantially for the lease that followed (Vella, 2001).⁹

It is not easy to determine with absolute certainty the actual identity of these last two Xicluna millers. Michele Xicluna, who had inherited the lease of the windmill in 1742, did have a son named Giuseppe who, however, would have been 87 years old when the above mentioned 1847 petition was submitted, so he obviously has to be ruled out. Having closely analysed the genealogical information available on the members of the extended Xicluna family

9 Historical Research Sharing Activity – Personal Blog by Vincent Peresso.

living at the particular time, I believe that it can be reasonably concluded that both Giuseppe and Marcello were the children of Daniele Xicluna who, as we have seen before, had returned to Gozo after having migrated to Malta in the early 1800's. Giuseppe, in fact, was the first child born to Daniele in 1803 when the family was living in Zurrieq. He married Maria Grima at Rabat, Gozo, on the 5 October 1830 and, in taking up the lease of the Xewkija windmill, he had obviously been aspiring for an independent means of living. His younger brother Marcello married Loreta Camilleri on the 9 January 1841 and, in taking over the lease of the windmill from his brother, he must have been motivated by the same aspiration. It would seem that their aspirations did not sufficiently materialise and that they both ended up with a disappointment.

When Marcello Xicluna relinquished the lease of the Xewkija windmill some time after 1851, the involvement of the Xicluna family of millers in the running of this windmill, which had lasted for nearly a century and a half, had come to an end. However, over time, the families of Gio Maria Xicluna and, in particular, the family of Carlo Xicluna had grown considerably and so did their involvement in the running of other windmills all over the islands of Gozo and Malta. In several cases, Xicluna millers continued to run particular windmills until they became obsolete following the introduction of steam operated mills during the last decades of the 19th Century and the early years of the following century. But the Xewkija windmill must be considered as their ancestral home where it all began. The restoration of the windmill should, therefore, also be considered as a fitting tribute to the enterprising spirit, the resilience and the skills of this family as well as to the important service which they provided over the centuries to the rural communities in which they operated.

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