The Jesuits' Church in Valletta: Mechanics, Patterns and Connections

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Any visitor to Malta around 1650 would have regarded the Jesuits' church in Valletta as second to none in its distinctly Italian character. It bore a decidedly Italian imprint in both its architectural articulation and the imagery and quality of its altar paintings. These elements, unsurprisingly, linked it closely to Rome and, as will be discussed here, to Naples and Sicily. What is most significant is that, in terms of style, the Jesuits' church embraced the *Italianate seicento* more fully than any other church in the city. It embodied the new visual language that came to define the Catholic Church and was rapidly spreading from the Catholic centre to its European peripheries, particularly after the early 1620s.

By 1650, the original church, built only 50 years earlier, had just been remodelled. Compared to it, the other churches in Valletta, including St John's Conventual Church, despite their own relatively young age, would have looked austere, military, dark, and old-fashioned. The new Jesuits' church was the first building to initiate the transformation of Valletta into what can now be described as Baroque[1]. It bridged the transition from early Counter-Reformation architecture to the more expressive, dynamic style that flourished during the mid- and late seventeenth century.

To clarify, although this essay focuses on the church, it is necessary to consider the broader context of the entire Jesuit complex in Valletta (Fig. 1). The spatial organisation and layout of both the church and the adjacent college, as in other Jesuit colleges, were designed to integrate religious and educational functions within a single cohesive

[1] Literature on Baroque Architecture in Malta is vast. For a synoptic survey see: C. Thake-Q. Hughes, *Malta: the Baroque Island,* Malta 2003; C. Thake, *Baroque Churches in Malta*, Malta 1995. For Francesco Buonamici in Malta see: D. De Lucca-C. Thake, *Francesco Buonamici, The Genesis of Maltese Baroque Architecture*, Malta 1994; C. Thake, *Francesco Buonamici (1596-1677): A pioneer of Baroque Architecture in Malta and Siracusa*, in "Annali del Barocco in Sicilia" - 2, *Studi sul Seicento e il Settecento in Sicilia e a Malta*, Rome 1995, pp.18-29; D. De Lucca, *Francesco Buonamici: Painter, Architect and Military Engineer in seventeenth century Malta and Italy*, Malta 2006; Idem, *'Serve per abbellire' - Francesco Buonamici's two baroque Jesuits' church facades in Valletta and in Trapani'* in "Journal of Baroque Studies", 3(3), Malta 2023, pp. 5-62; A. Antista, "È stimata la migliore *della Provinzia": la chiesa del collegio gesuitico della Valletta e le sue vicende costruttive nella prima metà del Seicento*, in "Quaderni dell'Istituto di storia dell'architettura", n. 78, 2, 2023.

Fig. 1. Valletta, The Church of the Circumcision of the Lord - Jesuits' Church, Aisle.

complex[2]. Thus, this essay engages with spread, mechanics, patterns and connections. It concerns an overriding intent to transfer Jesuit ethos and the imagery of the great Italian cities to the Mediterranean frontier, connecting this church and its visual impact with the other major Jesuit hotspots in Southern Italy and Sicily.

Other papers in this volume note and discuss that the church that survives today is not the first Jesuit church built on this site in Valletta. A rather compact but complicated story can be summarised as follows[3]. The first church (in turn greatly remodelling an earlier diocesan church dedicated to St Paul) bears the inspiration of the great Neapolitan Jesuit architect Giuseppe Valeriano (1542-1596). Valeriano died shortly after the foundation stone was laid in 1595[4]. It must be emphasised that Valeriano never

[2] For a synoptic survey see C. Thake, *The University of Malta: an architectural appraisal from inception to the present*, in *The University of Malta: legacies and bearings,* eds. K. Sciberras-E. Buttigieg M.A. Falzon-D. Fenech-G.M. Martin, Malta 2023, pp. 118-153.

[3] For the notes on history of this church see: P. Pecchiai, *Il Collegio dei Gesuiti in Malta*, in "Archivio Storico di Malta", fasc. 2-3, Rome 1938; A. Leanza, *La Compagnia di Gesu' e la Sacra Milizia Gerosolimitana in Malta*, Rome 1939; J. Vallery-Radot, *Le Receuil de Plans D'Edifices de la Compagne de Jesus conserve' a la Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris*, Rome 1960, pp. 48-49; P. Pirri, *Giuseppe Valeriano Architetto e Pittore 1542-1596*, Rome 1970, pp. 207-209, 374-376;

[4] On Valeriano see: P. Pirri, *Giuseppe Valeriano…*, 1970. The research of Pirri on the subject, and the vast array of documents that he published, shaped scholarship on early Jesuit architecture. Literature is the spread of Jesuit architecture is vast. See, for example: R. Wittkower-I.B. Jaffe, *Baroque Art and the Jesuit contribution. A Simposium*, New York 1971; R. Bösel-H. Karner, *Jesuiten architektur in Italien (1540-1773). Teil 2: Die Baudenkmäler der mailändischen Ordensprovinz*, Vienna 2007. On the work of Pirri see V. Balboni, *'Portare lo studio Sul terreno concreto dei documenti'. Pietro Pirri el lo studio dell'architettura gesuitica*, in "Palladio", n 58, 2016, pp. 57-70.

physically saw this site or the work in progress; his plans, in simple terms, provided the *template* for global Jesuit churches.

This underlines the *connection*, making the Maltese complex part of the unitary architectural spirit of the Jesuit expansion. The church under discussion fits beautifully within the *mechanics* of this scheme. It was built according to the Jesuits' international mode – a framework that defined their ethos and identity. At the same time, it clearly allowed the building to be anchored in indigenous techniques and materials, in this case through native masons working with Maltese limestone.

There is not much in terms of documentation that defines Valeriano's building project. It appears that the works proceeded slowly and that in the early years of the seventeenth century changes were made to the Valeriano's plans. The basic framework is known. For this period, the political framework for the mechanics of that happened is largely Sicilian. Changes to the complex in Valletta were entrusted to other major Jesuit architects, namely Natale Masuccio and (after 1616) Tommaso Blandino, who were in turn responsible for building or completing a large number of Jesuit churches built in Sicily[5].

Scholarship has well shown how the Valeriano - Masuccio - Blandino trajectory was followed by other churches in Sicily[6]. Clearly, this is another obvious *connection*, even though more evidence is required for Masuccio's and Blandino's periods in Malta. The Maltese Jesuits were under the Sicilian province, with its headquarters in Palermo and therefore it was only natural that, at this stage, this building project was part of the internal provincial process and the pattern that they had established.

Whilst the Sicilian oversight is tangible, it should be added here that a Jesuit delegation from Rome had instructed that changes be made to the plans of the complex during the period 1616–1619[7]. Details are rather scant, and the entire issue is not easy to unravel – or even to follow.

Significantly, there has been no better period to study the fabric and materiality of the church than there is at present[8]. There is a lot in terms of architectural and sculptural evidence that is being uncovered during the current restoration project conducted jointly by the Jesuit Church Foundation and the Restoration Directorate. The different layers of the church, so compact that one can refer to three churches within the span of fifty years, is providing valuable data for a much clearer picture. These will be examined together with a multidisciplinary team in the coming months or years. Significant material evidence has been gathered from the different phases.

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5 J. Vallery-Radot, *Le Receuil de Plans…*, 1960, p. 49. This is engaged with in detail by P. Pirri, *Giuseppe Valeriano…*, 1970. See also M.R. Nobile, *La Provincia di Sicilia*, in *La arquitectura jesuitica. Actas del Simposio Internacional*, Zaragoza 2012, pp. 91-139.

6 J. Vallery-Radot, *Le Receuil de Plans…*, 1960, p. 49; P. Pirri, *Giuseppe Valeriano…*, 1970.

7 J. Vallery-Radot, *Le Receuil de Plans…*, 1960, p. 48.

8 Restoration and conservation work on the internal fabric of the Jesuits' Church complex commenced in 2021 under the direction of the Restoration Directorate and the newly established Jesuits' Church Foundation. With the establishment of the said Foundation, a collaboration between Church and State, on 31 July 2021, oversight of the comprehensive conservation project fell within its remit, under the direction of Dr Nicholas Joseph Doublet, Architect Mark Azzopardi, and their team.

Fig. 2. Valletta, The Church of the Circumcision of the Lord - Jesuits' Church, Main Altar.

As is well known, an explosion at the *polverista* next door rocked the church in 1634, damaging it so severely that major rebuilding was required. Initial attempts by local masons to reinforce the structure after the explosion had clearly been insufficient. This provided the impetus for the Jesuits to move forward boldly and embrace the new style. In Malta, the Jesuits transformed the young but old-fashioned church into the one that still stands today. The project, as is well known, was undertaken by the Italian architect Francesco Buonamici, who arrived in Malta from Rome in 1635 under the protection of Cardinal Francesco Barberini[9]. For the first time, the architect responsible for the church in Valletta was not an internal one – that is, not a Jesuit himself. It broke the pattern.

Buonamici's intervention was necessitated by circumstances, but also by a desire to impact the city. During his twenty-year stay in Malta, Buonamici made a number of working trips to Sicily and the Jesuit connection with Sicily became, so to speak, inverse. The Jesuit anchor was strong and Buonamici played a role in taking the 'new architectural language' to Sicily. There is insufficient space here to examine these remarkable interconnections in detail; however, recent and ongoing studies by Sicilian scholars have provided, and continue to provide, a more comprehensive understanding of Buonamici's architectural activity in Sicily, particularly in Palermo, Noto, Trapani, Licata, and Siracusa[10].

Buonamici's rebuilding in Valletta came at time of some political turmoil for the Jesuits in Malta, with their temporary expulsion from the island in 1639. The expulsion was short-lived. Rebuilding process continued in the 1640s, and was completed in the 1650s.

With its front door open, the eastward drive into the church was dominated by huge Solomonic twisted columns at the sanctuary end (Fig. 2); the first time that these columns were used on such a monumental scale in Malta. These followed Bernini's obvious success at the Vatican crossing, with his towering baldacchino. They carried political subtleties too. Rome's new iconography had *spread* to Malta.

[9] See D. De Lucca-C. Thake, *Francesco Buonamici…*, 1994; C. Thake, *Francesco Buonamici (1596-1677)…* , 1995, pp.18-29; D. De Lucca, *Francesco Buonamici:…*, 2006.

[10] See, for example: V. Manfrè, *Il progetto di Francesco Buonamici per la chiesa Madre di San Nicolò a Noto Antica*, in "Lexicon", n. 22-23, 2016.

Fig. 3. Valletta, The Church of the Circumcision of the Lord - Jesuits' Church, Main Altar, Child Jesus.

It spread to the side chapels, imprinting the entire church with their dramatic value, aesthetic appeal and religious symbolism.

Jesuit iconography defined Jesuit presence. The (IHS) *nome di Gesù*, or Jesuit monogram, crowned the altar scheme (Fig. 3), with the altar painting representing the Circumcision of Christ, as in the great church of Il Gesù in Rome. The titular was executed by the Florentine reformer Filippo Paladini and dates to the very onset of the church, namely to the mid-1590s (Fig. 4)[11].

Jesuit presence and political clout were also clearly engineered through artworks of *impact*. The term high art, in this case, refers to artworks of significance imported into the island from major Italian centres, specifically Rome and Naples. A patronage *pattern* emerges clearly, with works by notable Italian artists being commissioned through the allocation of chapels to private families in *jus patronatus*. The economy, mechanics, and procedures of such commissions were similar to those in practice in Italy. For the church in Valletta, these are well documented.

At this point, the works that we should briefly concentrate on are the side altar paintings. The first three discussed here belong to the Valeriano-Masuccio-Blandino

[11] For a survey of Paladini in Malta see K. Sciberras, *Caravaggio to Mattia Preti - Baroque Painting in Malta*, Malta 2015, pp.15-22.

Fig. 4. Filippo Paladini, mid-1590s, *The Circumcision of Christ*, Valletta, The Church of the Circumcision of the Lord - Jesuits' Church.

Fig. 5. Battistello Caracciolo, mid-1620s, *Return from the Flight into Egypt*, Valletta, The Church of the Circumcision of the Lord - Jesuits' Church.

church and are the most notable examples of Neapolitan Caravaggism in Maltese churches. Of these, Battistello Caracciolo's *Return from the Flight into Egypt*, is a potent manifestation of the naturalist brand that imprinted Neapolitan religious art with a strong dose of reality (Fig. 5)[12]. It was commissioned in the mid-1620s, and is well documented. The family walks together out of the picture into the space of the audience in an engaging moment of real-life stance. It is, to say the least, impressive that the family would reach out to an artist of stature such as Caracciolo for this work in Valletta. It was, together with Guido Reni's Christ *Embracing the Cross* for the Grand Master's Palace, the most important painting to arrive in Malta in the 1620s.

In its resolute representation of tangible reality, the altar painting representing the *Guardian Angel* fits squarely within the same tradition (Fig. 6)[13]. The devotion to the

[12] The painting was attributed to Caracciolo by Roberto Longhi. See R. Longhi, *Battistello*, in "L'arte", 18, 1915. It was documented by Stefano Causa A85, in S. Causa, *Battistello Caracciolo. L'opera completa*, Naples 2000. See K. Sciberras, Cat. 14, in *Caravaggio and Paintings of Realism in Malta*, eds. C. De Giorgio-K. Sciberras., Malta 2007; Idem, *Caravaggio…*, 2015, p. 47.

[13] K. Sciberras, *Caravaggio…,* 2015, p. 48. See also Idem, Cat. 15, in *Caravaggio and Paintings…*, 2017 for previous attributions and specific bibliography.

Fig. 6. Anon early 17th century Neapolitan (Paolo Finoglio?), *Guardian Angel*, early 1630s, Valletta, The Church of the Circumcision of the Lord - Jesuits' Church.

Fig. 7. Giovanni del Prete, early 1630s, Ss *Lucy and Agatha, Valletta*, The Church of the Circumcision of the Lord - Jesuits' Church.

Guardian Angel was relatively new for Malta, but it had gained considerable popularity in mainland Europe, also through the Jesuits. It had found great following in Naples, as captured in the remarkable altar painting datable to the 1630s and executed by Filippo Vitale for the Pieta Dei Turchini.

The belief in Guardian Angels firmly entered the daily spiritual practice of the faithful, with the angel serving as a companion on the journey to holiness. Realist pictures, such as the one under review, resonated with this and underlined the presence even further. An extraordinary work, the painting in Valletta also dates to this period (early 1630s). Its authorship is still the subject of debate, moving to artists close to Caracciolo such as Paolo Finoglia, Filippo Vitale, or Hendrick van Somer. Being anonymous does not lower its quality; it simply makes connoisseurship research more difficult and subject to debate. When it becomes very difficult to attribute, the painting becomes a conversation piece.

In terms of scholarship, authorship of the altar painting representing *Ss Lucy and Agatha* is a fascinating discovery (Fig. 7). It is one of the very few known (and signed by the inscription *IOANES DE LO PREITE FACIEBAT* on the left of the work) paintings by a talented but unfortunately obscure artist, otherwise documented only

Fig. 8. Nicolo de Simoni's (Nicolaus Lozet), 1650s, *Education of the Virgin*, Valletta, The Church of the Circumcision of the Lord - Jesuits' Church.

Fig. 9. Giovan Francesco Romanelli, 1642, *Christ appearing to St Ignatius of Loyola*, Valletta, The Church of the Circumcision of the Lord - Jesuits' Church.

in Naples[14]. His name is Giovanni del Prete. The *pattern* is the same. Naples, again, in the early 1630s. Once properly published, this painting will open connoisseurship opportunities for the attribution to del Prete of other paintings elsewhere. It can well be compared, for example, with his large altar painting of the *Virgin and Child with Saints Francis, Michael the Archangel, and Bonaventura* (1642) at the Chiesa del Monte dei Morti in Catanzaro[15].

The other altar paintings were commissioned for the revamped Buonamici church and are, as expected, decidedly more mid-century in spirit. They connect with Rome

[14] This painting remains largely unpublished and reading of the signature was never associated with Giovanni del Prete. His name is recorded in documents in Naples for 1632 and 1636, published by Antonio Delfino and Eduardo Nappi. See *Ricerche sul '600 Napoletano. Catalogo delle publicazioni edite dal 1883 al 1990, riguardanti le opere di architetti, pittori, scultori, marmorari ed intagliatori per i secoli XVI e XVII, pagate tramite gli antichi banchi pubblici napoletani*, ed. E. Nappi, Milan 1992, with a later reprint edited by Domenico Antonio D'Alessandro and Giuseppe Porzio. I thank Giuseppe Porzio for directing me to these references.

[15] I am grateful to Giuseppe Porzio for bringing this painting to my attention.

and Naples. Executed in the 1650s, Nicolo de Simoni's (Nicolaus Lozet) *Education of the Virgin* (Fig. 8)[16] marks an opening to colour in the Neapolitan brand. It brings to Malta contemporary currents influenced by Massimo Stanzione and Bernardo Cavallino. De Simoni was, like several other artists in the city, of Flemish extraction but worked largely in Naples (and possibly in Spain) between the 1630s and 1650s. This painting shows Neapolitan art moving out of its Caravaggist imprint.

Beyond any doubt, the most impressive picture executed for Malta in the 1640s was Giovan Francesco Romanelli's large altar painting representing *Christ appearing to St Ignatius of Loyola* for the transept altar assigned to the Abela and Testaferrata families (Fig. 9)[17]. Terminated in 1642 - the painting is signed and dated at the bottom of the work - it was clearly commissioned (possibly by the powerful Vice-Chancellor of the Order of St John and famous historiographer Gian Francesco Abela) at a time when Buonamici's remodelling was underway, or rather at its onset.

It is my impression that the mechanics and connections for this commission might have been facilitated by Buonamici himself, possibly around 1639 or 1640. At this time, Romanelli was President of the Academy of St Luke and at the height of his career[18]. Both Buonamici and Romanelli were strongly patronised by Cardinal Francesco Barberini and must have known each other well.

The *connections* are so profound that this extraordinary painting speaks volumes about the intent to get the style of Rome to Malta, and specifically that of the papal family, into the Jesuit church. This was, essentially, Baroque Rome.

[16] K. Sciberras, *Baroque Painting in Malta*, Malta 2009, p. 81; Idem, *Caravaggio*…, 2015, p. 73.
[17] K. Sciberras, *Baroque Painting*…, 2009, p. 81; Idem, *Caravaggio*..., 2015, p.73.
[18] For research on Romanelli see the essays by Bernard Kerber. For surveys on the artist see L. Barroero, *Giovanni Francesco Romanelli*, in *Pietro da Cortona (15797-1669)*, exhibition catalogue, Rome 1997, pp.181-186; M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Pietro da Cortona e i 'Cortoneschi'*, Rome 1998, pp.157-170, with a later edition of 2002.

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