

THE SUNDAY TIMES

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Enduring fascination of Malta's wayside chapels



One can't but be fascinated by the chapels peppering the Maltese countryside. Despite their unassuming character and the tranquillity they exude there is great interest in their history and why they were built.

The fact that some of these chapels are found in the least likely places – sheltered in caves or hidden in some unreachable valley, for example – has heightened their mystery even further. Yet each chapel, wherever its location, has its own story to tell.

In the Great Siege of 1565 all chapels outside the urban areas had fallen under the Turks

Some of these chapels are, in fact, small churches. According to Prof. Mario Buhagiar of the University's History of Art Department, while the terms are used loosely and interchangeably, in the Maltese medieval context the word cappella referred to what we would today call the parish church.

In fact, the word kappillan (from the Italian cappellano, parish priest) refers to the priest who looks after the cappella (parish church). Moreover, in today's context the architectural meaning of the word 'chapel' is a building forming part of a church and which could never exist physically on its own.

We owe much of our knowledge on early Maltese churches to Mgr Pietro Dusina's report drawn up during his apostolic visit to the island in 1575. It is the first fully detailed documentary source of the state of the Church in Malta at that time.

In his report, Mgr Dusina gave an exhaustive account of the state of these churches as well as a detailed account of the state of the Church itself in Malta. There were cases where he deconsecrated these churches because of the poor condition he found them in. One has to keep in mind that Mgr Dusina came to Malta only 10 years after the Great Siege of 1565, when all chapels outside the urban areas had fallen under the Turks, who had ransacked them.

Our earliest chapels are presumed to date back to the 12th and 13th century when the Basilian monks who came from southern Italy started the process of re-Christianisation of Malta. Malta at that time was essentially a Muslim community after the long Arab presence which lasted from 870 to 1240 AD, even if the Normans first came to Malta in 1091. The Normans left things pretty much the same until 1240.

The earliest type of churches may be said to have been troglodytic chapels, or rock-cut churches, sometimes also called crypta.

These chapels were usually either hewn into a cliff face, or were natural caves adapted for use as a church. Their main purpose was to serve the community of farmers in that area, although one must also consider that the seclusion of these cave churches offered the opportunity for an isolated and contemplative life for a hermit.

A few examples of these rock-cut churches include the chapel of St Paul the Hermit at Wied il-Għasel in Mosta, Ġebel San Pietru near Naxxar, Għar San Niklaw near Mellieħa and Ġebel Ciantar near Siġġiewi, as well as the well-known Sanctuary of the Nativity of the Our Lady in Mellieħa.

Other rock-cut churches were associated with early Christian catacombs, such as those of St Paul and St Agatha in Rabat, which are the two largest underground cemeteries in Malta. The first known reference to a built church in Malta is, curiously enough, found on a portolan (old map) that dates back to the 1296, where a church dedicated to St Mary on Comino is identified.

The earliest types of chapels were quite plain and relatively unadorned, usually looking no different from a small square room.

Often, an apse could be found on the east end and which was generally cylindrical, though occasionally it was also square. The roof was normally slightly pitched and supported by gently pointed arches. The doorway was usually low, and it too had a slightly pointed archway.

Unfortunately today few doorways show these original features since most of them have been either heightened or re-cut to a square-headed shape. It was popular for a church in the 15th and 16th century to have doors on the side façades in addition to the one at the front. These doors permitted entrance into adjoining churches and sometimes even gave access to a burial ground, such as in the case of the church of the Assumption at ̄Hal Millieri.

These medieval churches do not have windows but instead they normally have a small slit that allows the church to have some ventilation. Because of this, these churches were also very poorly illuminated. During his apostolic visit Mgr Dusina ordered that oculi (or deep eyes – a rounded window) be constructed above the main doors to provide better illumination inside the chapel. The design of the oculus varied, with some being simple and others being heavily ornamental.

In his report, Mgr Dusina made reference to bells and bell cots, since with the exception of Santa Marija tal-̄Flas in Qormi, it seemed only the larger parish churches had a bell or bell cot. Bells were costly and poor churches had to do without them. It is also possible that any bells there had been originally were taken by the Turks to be melted to make cannons.

Another feature of these churches are the water spouts (mwiēżeb) found around their roof. Their function was strictly utilitarian – they served to drain the roof from the rain – even if they look pretty and quaint.

Inside, the chapels were simple and generally bare. The altar stood in the apse at the east end, but sometimes additional altars could be found around the church.

Stone benches (dukkiena) were sometimes found along the sides of the church, although people usually ended up sitting on the floor. The floor itself was sometimes covered with flagstones but more frequently with beaten earth known as torba, a composition of soil mixed with stone chips, which was then covered by a thin film of lime and clay.

These churches occasionally had some graves in them. However, burial generally took place in graves just outside the church, under the parvis (zuntier).

A particular feature in some of our oldest chapels, such as that of ̄Hal Millieri, is that one needs to go down a few steps to enter the church. This rightly gives the impression that the church is somehow anchored to the ground. This could have been done to associate the chapel with a cave or tomb, and therefore symbolic of Jesus being born in a cave and resurrecting from a tomb. Symbolism in medieval times was very important to the builders of these churches.

Another interesting feature found inside these old chapels was the iconostasis, a large wooden gate which used to separate the altar area from the rest of the church. One such iconostasis is still found in the chapel at Comino. In other chapels, only the holding-holes in the masonry remain.

Some medieval chapels used to have frescoes on their walls. Unfortunately today only a few have survived, with those at the church of ̄Hal Millieri being among the best preserved set. Frescoes are also found in the church of Santa Marija of Bir Miftu ̄n in Gudja depicting the Last Judgment, with pictures of little devils taking the poor souls of the damned with them to hell. On the other hand, the frescoes of saints found in ̄Hal Millieri are thought to be copies of images found in an earlier church built on the same site.

The churches that carry the greatest architectural value are those built during the time of the Order of St John. There was money to splash around, and the building of these churches was entrusted to some of the best architects, sculptors and painters of the period, who adorned our churches with treasures.

These churches were generally built or patronised by members of the Order, not by farmers, and so they ended up being a small indulgence in opulence. Well-known artists such as Mattia Preti, who had been entrusted with works in the Order's Conventual Church of St John, was the architect of Sarria church in Floriana, and was also responsible for a number of titular paintings and altar pieces found in several chapels, including that of Tal-Mirakli in Lija and that of St Anthony the Abbot found in Verdala Palace.

Some Grand Masters and knights, like Fra Wolfgang Philipp von Guttenberg, who loved these churches, were among the main benefactors of many churches dedicated to Our Lady found in Malta. These include the ones dedicated to Our Lady of Mercy in Qrendi and the Immaculate Conception in Msida.

Mgr Dusina visited over 400 chapels in Malta and Gozo. At the time the population numbered around 20,000, so one could say there was a chapel for every 50 inhabitants. From Mgr Dusina's report it also transpired that most of these churches were dedicated to Our Lady under one of several different titles.

Interestingly, at the time, a number of chapels were built exactly next to each other. In 1575 there were at least 22 such pairs, with some other villages having three and even four churches close to each other. Today one can find an example of these chapels in Naxxar (those of St Lucy and the Nativity of Our Lady) as well as the chapels of St Roque, the Annunciation and St Leonard (today a private residence) in Balzan. Other villages had a concentration of chapels in one place, as was ̄Fax-Xluq near Siġġiewi.

The best explanation for such an intense concentration of chapels is the strong Catholic faith embraced by the Maltese at the time as well as the fact that life centred mainly around religion. With the Knights ruling Malta, government and religion were one and the same thing.

It is also believed that most chapels were built as an ex-voto in thanksgiving for a grace or favour received from Our Lord, the Virgin Mary or a saint. This would explain why there are more chapels dedicated to particular saints, such as St Roque, the protector against infectious diseases, including the plague, and to St Leonard, the patron saint of captives and slaves.

Another reason for the large number of churches was that they were also being used to bury the dead. Other churches were privately owned and this earned the founders and their families the right to be buried inside them.

However, owners of these churches had a number of obligations regarding their privilege of building them. These included the celebration of Masses and the singing of vespers on the feast. Naturally, owners were also expected to maintain the church in good condition.

Another possible reason for the large number of churches is that since at the time most people worked the fields and lived in small village clusters it was much easier and more convenient for them to have a church built close to them. Moreover, roads were nearly non-existent or in a dire state.

However, one must also keep in mind that the only activities held in these churches was a Mass on the feast day of their patron saint and therefore to hear Mass more frequently than once a year, they still had to travel to the parish church.

Talking about churches or chapels one cannot but bring to mind the numerous legends associated with them. The best known are those associated with the churches of Tal-Isperanza in Mosta and that of Żguġina connected with the chapel of San Dimitri in Għarb, Gozo.

A particularly fascinating legend is that of a monument with three crosses and sculpted with several Passion symbols. It is close to the chapel of Our Lady of Light at Bidni Hill in Marsascala and speculation abounds as to why it was erected.

One version is that until 1615, Żabbar and Marsascala formed part of Żejtun. Since Żabbar's population was growing, the residents petitioned the bishop to establish it as an independent parish. This was granted and so it is said that this cross was built to establish the parish limits of Żejtun and Żabbar.

Yet, the writer Ġuzè Muscat Azzopardi narrates three further stories regarding the origin of these crosses. One is that three monks had been killed and buried there by the Turks. A second story is that a man had died of the plague and was buried there. But the last and most intriguing is that of a hermit who had been buried under those crosses after rising three times from the dead.

In recent years interest in these chapels has grown and this led to the restoration of a number of them both by government entities as well as NGOs such as Din l-Art Helewa. One hopes that this momentum is kept so that more chapels are restored.

Here one has to mention four that require immediate attention: the chapels of the Annunciation at Is-Salib tal-Għolja in Siggiewi, the chapel of the Visitation at Wied Qirda in Żebbuġ, that of St Michael is-Sancier in Rabat, as well as that of St Peter the Fisherman in Baħar iċ-Ċaġhaq. Unfortunately some of our chapels are being left closed for a long time while others are being used simply as storerooms.

These small wayside chapels are little architectural jewels that should be preserved. While they may not be as striking as other churches, they still have their story to tell.

Preserving them for future generations is like preserving a family heirloom, which once lost, cannot be retrieved. And with their loss, a part of our history will be obliterated.

A new society, 'Hbieb il-Kappelli Maltin', was recently founded to promote interest in the large number of chapels spread throughout Malta. Anyone interested in becoming a member may e-mail hbieb@kappellimaltin.com or send a letter to the secretary, Hbieb il-Kappelli Maltin, c/o 98, Dun Gejtano Mannarino Street, Birkirkara BKR 9085.

This article was written on behalf of www.kappellimaltin.com. The aims of the website are to give in-depth information and raise public awareness about Maltese chapels. For more information contact webmaster@kappellimaltin.com.

7 Comments

Post comment

Alfred Grech

Today, 16:37

Caroline, Roderick plus Noel Ciantar, Joe Brinct, John Scerri of Canada have given us the opportunity to learn much more about our precious and historic chapels. My wife and I belong to their Association, Hbieb il-Kappelli Maltin and we are glad we joined because we have learned so much from them.

I urge everyone to join this Association which is on Facebook not only to enjoy the info they offer us but also to help promote these precious gems that we have in our midst.

Your efforts are truly appreciated.

Michael Owen

Today, 15:21

I would like to add that there is now a beautiful Pictorial Map of San Pawl il-Bahar showing many sites and structures dating back to 3800 BC.

The map with over 70 photos and descriptions is the product of years of work and research from my friend Frank Scerri with the collaboration of the local council.

Contributions from Mayor Perit Graziella Galea and councillor Frank Gauci.

Copies are available from SPB council office.

Stefan Limongello

Today, 12:28

A very refreshing article that aims to show part of the unique Maltese heritage that is sometimes neglected. To my mind come the building of monstrosities near some of these chapels, coupled with the usage of some of these buildings as warehouses and other purposes.

Congratulations to the two authors who undoubtedly are knowledgeable about this subject, probably because they love it. That's my perception at least.

If I may correct one minor detail - and perhaps serve as a challenge to the authors - is the following, where it is argued that:

"Our earliest chapels are presumed to date back to the 12th and 13th century when the Basilian monks who came from southern Italy started the process of re-Christianisation of Malta. Malta at that time was essentially a Muslim community after the long Arab presence ..."

Although it is a known fact that the majority of the inhabitants in Malta were Muslims at the time, a sizeable community of Jews existed (probably near today's Rabat). Also, Catholics belonging to both Catholic (Roman) traditions as well as Byzantine ones were here too during the Arab period. The fact that no chapels seem to exist may be due to the fact that we have few things from the whole period.

However, it would be interesting to see whether - as is assumed - Gozo had a bigger Christian community than in Malta. Further information might be found in the narrative by the Byzantine poet and native of Sicily in the entourage of King Roger. It is written that he fell out with his king who sent him to exile on Melitogaulos - where he writes a long lament in verse. This detailed description might shed important new light on Christianity in the Maltese islands.

Looking forward to more articles in the same vein.

Caroline Busuttil

Today, 14:22

Many thanks for your comments.

As regards your comment on the re-Christianisation of Malta, we have quoted the theory of Dr Mario Buhagiar in his book "The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands (2005)" Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti. However we are aware of other theories regarding the re-Christianisation of Malta by other experts in this field. Since we were limited by space we chose not to go into the different theories since these theories on their own, merit an article themselves. We have only mentioned that most renowned theory.

You may be interested though to listen to two audio interviews done by Roderick Busuttil to both Dr Mario Buhagiar and Prof. Stanley Fiorini where they mention their theories regarding re-Christianisation of Malta. In his interview Dr Fiorini explains his theory, that during the Arab period, Gozo had a bigger Christian community and re-Christianisation of Malta could have been brought over from Gozo after the fall of the Arab period.

You can listen to these interviews here: <http://www.kappellimaltin.com/html/il-programm.html>

Caroline Busuttil

Today, 12:18

We would like to thank The Sunday Times for publishing this article.

We would like to add the references used for this article since for some reason they have been left out:

References:

- Kiliin (2000) A Hundred Wayside Chapels of Malta and Gozo. Heritage Books.
- George Aquilina OFM and Stanley Fiorini (2001) Documentary Sources of Maltese History. Malta University Press.
- Mario Buhagiar (2005) The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands. Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti.

• Rev. Canon Joe Abela (1999) Marsascula – Wied il-Ghajj. Marsascula Parish Pastoral Parish Publication.

We would like to clarify that the photo of the waterspout is of St. Blas Chapel l/o Siggiewi and the word Mizieb is actually the Maltese word for waterspout.

Caroline and Roderick Busuttil
www.kappellimaltin.com

Mario P. Sciberras

Today, 11:42

very interesting arrticle on part of the Maltese heretage. How can prospective new members join "L-Ghaqda"?
Keep it up

Caroline Busuttil

Today, 12:19

Mr. Sciberras,

Anyone interersted in becoming a member in Hbieb il-Kappelli Maltin may e-mail hbieb@kappellimaltin.com or send a letter to the secretary, Hbieb il-Kappelli Maltin, c/o 98, Dun Gejtano Mannarino Street, Birkirkara BKR 9085.

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