

THE FRESCO CYCLE IN THE CHURCH OF THE ANNUNCIATION AT HAL MILLIERI, MALTA SOME ICONOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Many of the known late medieval Maltese churches carried murals of saints intended for the contemplation of the congregation.¹ An almost complete cycle survives in the Hal Millieri church of the Annunciation of the Virgin, but records exist of several others, such as the Siculo-Byzantine *Blessing Christ*, which filled the apse of the now demolished church of St Michael (known as *Ta' S. Cir*), at Bubaqra, a few hundred metres away from Hal Millieri.²

The Hal Millieri murals cannot antedate the early fifteenth century because the present church was built around that time.³ Stylistically and iconographically they, however, relate to an earlier period.⁴ Painted in a technique which is largely fresco, but contains significant additions *a secco*,⁵ they depict life-size hieratic saints who stare down from the walls with a fixed austerity. Gestures are stereotyped and anecdotic elements eliminated. The saints stand against a simple backdrop divided by a thin white line into an ornate lower section decorated with tendril-like motifs on an ochre ground, and a plain, dark-blue upper field which is, however, articulated by an inset rectangular frame outlined by another thin white line; in some instances there are two, instead of one, inset rectangles, which intersect each other (pl. 1).

¹ Maltese late medieval churches are discussed in M. Buhagiar, "Medieval Churches in Malta", in A.T. Luttrell (ed.) *Medieval Malta – Studies on Malta before the Knights*, London 1975, 163-180, *idem*, "The Church of Hal Millieri and Medieval Church Architecture in Malta", in A.T. (ed.), *Hal Millieri: A Maltese Casale, Its Churches and Paintings*, Malta 1976, and *idem*, "Medieval Malta: Its Hypogea, Cave-Churches and Ecclesiastical Buildings" in *Architecture in Malta I: Historical Aspects* (ed. SACES), Malta 1986. On Maltese late medieval paintings see G. Bautier-Bresc "The Paintings at Hal Millieri", in Luttrell *Hal Millieri*, G. Wettinger, "Artistic Patronage in Malta: 1418-1538", in *ibid*, and Mario Buhagiar, *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands 1400-1900: Painting*, Malta 1988, 10-31.

² V. Bonello, "La Chiesa Bizantina di San Ciro a Malta", *Brutium*, xvii, 1938.

³ T.F.C. Blagg, A. Bonanno, A.T. Luttrell, *Excavations at Hal Millieri, Malta – A Report on the 1977 Campaign conducted on behalf of the National Museum of Malta*, Malta 1990.

⁴ G. Bautier-Bresc, *op.cit.*

⁵ P. Zanolini, "Il Restauro degli Affreschi nella Chiesa di Hal Millieri a Malta", in Luttrell, *Hal Millieri*, and S. Cather, *The Church of the Annunciation, Hal Millieri, Malta: Recommendations for the Restoration of the Wall Paintings* (Report submitted by the Conservation of Wall Paintings Department, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London), Limited circulation.

The saints, depicted on the side walls, in the compartments formed by the wall piers, are Nicholas, Andrew, James the Major, John the Evangelist, Lawrence, Vincent Martyr, Augustine, Blaise, Leonard, and a probable Agatha and Paul. Their identity is determined by inscriptions in a very angular Gothic script such as was used in Sicilian inscriptions until the second half of the fifteenth century,⁶ otherwise there is very little to distinguish them. Augustine has a dark face, possibly to emphasize his African origin, and he carries a crozier; another crozier is carried by Blaise, while Andrew holds a Latin cross, John a quill, and the possible Paul what might be a sword. All saints carry books and have a hand raised stiffly in benediction or pressed near the breast (pl. 2).

On either side of the west door are two other icons which are rather different. They both represent St George and are near replicas of each other (pl. 3a.b). The saint appears on a prancing white steed in the act of transfixing the dragon with a long lance at the handle-end of which is a white pennant with a red cross; the crowned and sceptred Princess of Trebizond is present in one corner to welcome her liberator. These two *St Georges*, which are painted in profile, were presumably intended to balance each other, but as they both face the same direction (left to right) the result is only partially successful. Such a repetition of cult images was not unusual in Late Medieval Malta. The later fresco cycle in the cave-church of St Agatha contains, for example, at least nine juxtaposed St Agathas, three St Leonards, and four sainted bishops wearing the palium and holding a crozier, all possibly St Nicholas or, perhaps, St Blaise. Altars in churches, moreover, often had identical dedications, and there are also instances of similarly dedicated churches in the same neighbourhood.⁷ The only explanation I can suggest for this strange practice is that the paintings, like the churches and altars, were often technically ex-votos. The two *St Georges* at Hal Millieri would therefore suggest two separate vows to the saint.

In 1976, Geneviève Bautier-Bresc noted that the choice of saints at Hal Millieri reflected an archaic pattern of devotion which seemed to have been frozen in the eleventh or the twelfth century; none of the newer saints associated with the western mendicant orders was, for example, represented. She therefore suggested that the painter took some anachronistic programme as his model.⁸ Her suspicion received support from the 1977 archaeological dig which proved that the earlier Hal Millieri church also contained frescoes. The recovered fragments of painted plaster are, however, too small and brittle to permit any hypotheses as to style or iconography. It is quite possible that the old church had its collection of frescoed icons which were

⁶ G. Bautier-Bresc, 100.

⁷ M. Buhagiar, *Medieval Churches*.

⁸ G. Bautier-Bresc, 99.

still an object of popular cult in the early fifteenth century when the church was rebuilt. It would not have been unlikely, in the circumstances, for the procurators of the church to commission an artist to make copies after the icons with the object of reproducing them in the new building. The iconographical style is, in fact, as perplexingly anachronistic as the choice of saints, and it contains hints of a blend of Byzantine and Romanesque elements.

Luttrell warns against the dangers of looking for distant origins in the stylistic influences behind the Hal Millieri paintings and proposes that they are descended from the Byzantine frescoes of south-east Sicily. He singles out for special attention the cult images of the catacomb of S. Lucia at Syracuse,⁹ where they decorate the walls and ceiling of two seventh-eighth century A.D. oratories that were revitalised as shrines in the early Norman period when some, at least, of the murals were painted.¹⁰ The saints depicted seem to belong to the same primitive devotional programme, but the style is exclusively Siculo-Byzantine and betrays no knowledge of Romanesque.

Similarly stylistically removed, and decidedly inferior in quality, are the cult images of the rural rock-churches of Syracuse and Lentini.¹¹ It is however worth noting that the cult images in the Grotta di S. Lania, at Lentini, share a rather similar background with the Hal Millieri saints, including the inset white rectangular frame.¹² The inset rectangle also appears in some of the fourteenth or early fifteenth century images in the Grotta del Crocefisso which also carry inscriptions in angular Gothic letters. They however reveal different programmes and different hands. Of particular relevance to Hal Millieri is a panel with a swelled up figure of St Christopher carrying a diminutive Christ Child on his shoulders, while crossing a fish-filled stream and holding a long scroll with an angular Gothic inscription.¹³ His large almond-shaped eyes recall the Hal Millieri saints, but in spite of this and other apparent similarities, there are irreconcilable stylistic differences and the general effect is quite alien. Aldo Messina's suggestion that it might be by the hand of the Hal Millieri painter is unlikely.¹⁴

⁹ T.F.C. Blagg *et al.*, *Excavations*, 126.

¹⁰ G. Agnello, *Le Arti Figurative nella Sicilia Bizantina*, Palermo 1962, 170-180.

¹¹ These are, however, closely related to the wall icons of the Maltese rock-cut churches, especially the Mellieha Madonna and the earliest images at St Agatha (M. Buhagiar, *Iconography*, 10-11).

¹² A. Messina, "La Cripta di Santa Lania (Lentini), e il problema delle arcate cieche nell'architettura altomedievale", *Bizantino-Sicula*, ii (Palermo 1975).

¹³ The inscription is a votive prayer in medieval Latin addressed to the saint by the donor.

¹⁴ A. Messina, Review of Luttrell, *Hal Millieri*, in *Archivio Storico Siracusano*, new series, iv (1975-1976). The Grotta del Crocefisso, to the west of the Valle Ruccia, in the Lentini countryside, contains the most important fresco-cycle of the Sicilian rock-churches (G. Agnello, *op.cit.*, 229-235, figs. 215-216; A. Messina, *Le Chiese Rupestri del Siracusano*, Palermo 1979, 36-48).

The inset frame which helps to break up the monotony of an otherwise dull background, seems to be a recurrent motif in Sicilian wall paintings of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, such as the fresco of St Thomas in the early fifteenth century church of S. Domenico at Trapani.¹⁵ This cult image is, perhaps, the closest one can get in Sicily to the Hal Millieri saints (pl. 4). It shows the tonsured saint in the Dominican habit, standing in majestic frontality, with his head gently inclined to one side, and with one hand held close to the chest and the other holding a closed book which he presses to his body. As at Hal Millieri, the stylisation and schematisation is Romanesque rather than Byzantinesque.

Geneviève Bautier-Bresc has noted that the Hal Millieri frescoes recall in some respects Sicilian works of Pisan inspiration such as, for example, the paintings by Niccolò di Maggio and by the Master of the Trapani Polyptych.¹⁶ The two artists were, however, more accomplished than the Master of Hal Millieri. Aldo Messina sees, on the other hand, a close parallel with the fourteenth century murals of the *matrice vecchia* of Castelbuono (pl. 5), and with those in the church of S. Bigio, in the neighbourhood of Cefalù, where the hieratical saints have the same majestic monumentality and the same melancholy veiled eyes.¹⁷

The suggested influences behind the Hal Millieri paintings are, therefore, of a varied and sometimes conflicting nature, but they seemingly point to Sicily as the immediate source of provenance. It is their distant Romanesque origin which cannot be identified with precision. The fact that their style is more westernizing than one would normally expect from the Arabo-Byzantinesque culture of a rural community of erstwhile Muslims converted to a Greek rather than a Latin Christianity, is surely a significant fact, especially if one accepts the probable hypothesis that the present frescoes are a copy of an earlier cycle, possibly in the first Hal Millieri church. This would bring us close to the period of transition from Islam to Greek Christianity.¹⁸ There might possibly have been Romanesque frescoes in the more westernizing climate of Mdina or the Gozo Castello which provided the necessary prototype, but these have not survived.

¹⁵ V. Scuderi, *Arte Medievale nel Trapanese*, Trapani 1978, 102-103.

¹⁶ G. Bautier-Bresc, 101.

¹⁷ A. Messina, *Review*, 239 and A. Mogavero-Fina, "Gli Affreschi Trecenteschi di Castelbuono", *Sicilia*, lxxv, 1974, 67-71. Messina believes the S. Bigio frescoes to be 15th century and therefore contemporaneous with Hal Millieri; they are, however, dated to the 11th century in G. De Simone, "Un Tesoro Nascosto in Sicilia", *Sicilia*, lvi, 1967.

¹⁸ The evidence for Greek Christianity in Malta in the sub Saracenic period between the eleventh and early fourteenth centuries is discussed in M. Buhagiar, *Christian Catacombs, Cult Centres and Churches in Malta to 1530*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis submitted in the University of London in 1993, 313-359.

A limestone relief (58 x 53cm) of two standing, frontally posed male saints, at the Gozo Folklore Museum, suggests some awareness of Romanesque sculpture but its age and provenance are unknown.¹⁹ The two saints whose identity cannot be determined because of the present poor state of preservation, bless the spectator with a stiffly calculated gesture which is reminiscent of the Hal Millieri saints. Their iconography and stylistic peculiarities point to a source of influence rooted in an artistic milieu formed of a blend of Romanesque and Byzantinesque elements.

A thirteenth century fresco of two saints, above the steps leading down to the crypt of the famous basilica of San Vincenzo a Galliano, outside Milan, suggests a Lombard origin for the style. The fresco has a striking similarity to the Hal Millieri cult images (pl. 16). It shows two monumentally rendered, aristocratically elongated saints, side by side, very much in the manner of the Hal Millieri *SS. Lawrence and John* and *SS. Agatha and Blaise* panels (pls. 2, 7), and they similarly avoid looking at the spectators and have their head turned slightly to present an oblique three-quarter face. One is a mitred bishop raising one hand in benediction and holding a crozier in the other, while the second, a tonsured monk, presses a closed book to his chest. They stand against a neutral background composed of two colours, darker above and lighter below, and show a similar mode of representing the whole figure. The stylisation of the ample draperies is however different and, on the whole more elegant. The style is Romanesque tempered by Byzantine influence, but Costanza Serge-Montel has proposed that it also reveals Lombard idiosyncracies.²⁰

The most likely route by which Lombardo-Romanesque influences could have reached the Maltese Islands was via the Lombard duchies of south and central Italy where the ground was particularly suitable for the cross fertilization of Lombard, Romanesque, and Byzantine iconography. The Norman conquests of the eleventh century provided the right opportunity for the export of this hybrid style to Sicily and Malta. The Greek-rite monks of South Italy seem to have played a very significant role in the evangelization of the two islands,²¹ but their contribution to the moulding of artistic and devotional programmes has still to be properly assessed. It should also be appreciated that the Norman conquerors absorbed and adopted the Lombardo-Byzantinesque culture of the Apulia and Calabria regions of South Italy in much the same way as they did the Arabo-Byzantinesque culture of Sicily. Norman presence in the Maltese Islands might therefore, have facilitated the dissemination there of the two parallel strains.

¹⁹ M. Buhagiar, "Paintings in Gozo – A Concise Analytical History" in C. Cini (ed.), *Gozo – The Roots of an Island*, Malta 1991, 84.

²⁰ C. Serge Montel, "Gli Affreschi Gotici Lombardi", i, *I Maestri del Colore*, 224, Milan (Fabbri Editori) 1963, 1.

²¹ M. Buhagiar, *Ph.D. Thesis*.

An example of cultural penetration at grass-roots level through the Norman channel is the cult St Cataldus, a Lombard saint held in particular veneration in the south-eastern port town of Taranto, which was introduced into Malta in early sub-Saracenic times.²² The cults of Nicholas of Bari and Leonard of Siponto may also have reached Malta in the same way. The images of the saints, who were both especially popular among the Normans of Apulia are, at Hal Millieri, given the posts of honour on either side of the apse, behind the altar screen.

The available evidence seems to suggest that it might be more profitable to look for the prototypes of the Hal Millieri saints in South Italy rather than in Sicily. Bautier-Bresc has indicated the area round Lecce where there are comparable frescoes in a similar style in the church of S. Caterina at Galatina,²³ and in the church of Suinzano which has two *St Georges on Horseback* and a *Mounted St Eustace*, all very close to the Hal Millieri *St Georges*.²⁴ These clues have not so far been seriously followed up, but it is probable that she was pointing in the right direction. The logical emphasis on the intimacy of the cultural and ethnic bonds between Malta and Sicily has had the negative effect of hindering investigation into other, equally possible, sources of influence.

One final consideration concerns the artist. An intriguing detail about the Hal Millieri frescoes is an inscription of a single word seemingly written in a fifteenth century cursive hand. It was discovered in 1974, in the course of restoration works, beneath the *intonaco*, on the sinopia skin of the panel with SS. Agatha and Blaise (pl. 7). It is painted in the same pink colour as the other fragments of sinopia inside the church, and has been read *Garinu* by Anthony Luttrell and Geneviève Bautier-Bresc,²⁵ and *Agacinu* by Stanley Fiorini whose opinion I sought during a visit to the church on 30 November 1991. Both are equally plausible late medieval Sicilian surnames. *Agacinu*, which survives as a surname in Catania, where St Agatha is honoured as patroness of the city, is deceptively attractive because the female saint in the fresco is presumed to be Agatha. The surviving three letters of the saint's name A...IA, have been read *AGATIA* by Bautier-Bresc but there can be no absolute certainty about this. Whether *Garinu* or *Agacinu*, the real meaning of the word must remain unknown. The temptation is to read it as the signature of the painter, which it might well be.

²² *Ibid.*, 348. On St Cataldus see A. Carducci, "Sull'Origine Longobarda del nome Cataldo", *Annali di Storia della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia*, i, (Università degli Studi), Lecce 1980.

²³ G. Blasi, *Galatina e la sua Gemma*, Galatina 1934; P. Putignani, *Il Tempio di S. Catarina in Galatina*, Galatina 1947.

²⁴ Bautier-Bresc, 102.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

The anachronistic programme of the Hal Millieri frescoes and the possibility that they are, in part at least, a faithful copy of an earlier cycle, do not reveal much about the background and training of the painter. On the other hand, the grace and exquisite serpentine curve of the putative Agatha, who is decidedly more elegant than the other saints might, perhaps, suggest a hand trained in Gothic iconography (pl. 7).²⁶ The probability is that he was an itinerant painter who earned a precarious livelihood by touring town and country churches to seek commissions for murals and for *icone*, or altar paintings, and devotional images. The existence and apparent popularity of such artists is well known but their activities and achievements have still to be reconstructed.²⁷

²⁶ This stylistic difference is hard to explain unless one suggests that St Agatha was not in the original programme and substituted another saint in the fifteenth century version, possibly for an exvoto reason.

²⁷ On itinerant artists in Malta see M. Buhagiar, "Some Late Medieval and Early Modern Panel Paintings in Malta", *Melita Historica*, viii/3 (1982), 177-189.



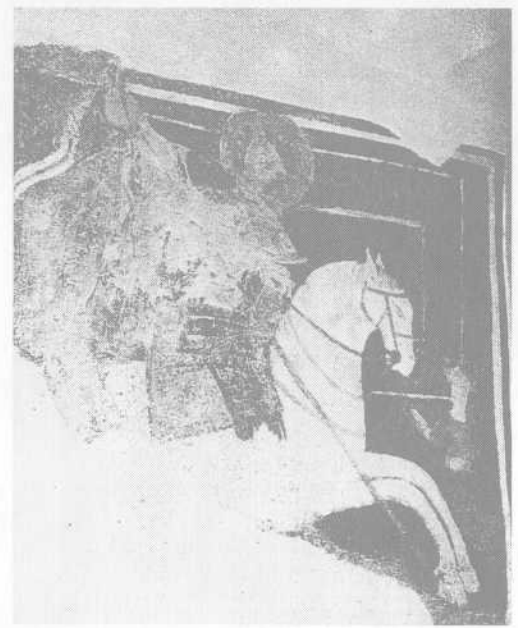
Plate 1: ANNUNCIATION CHURCH, HAL MILLIERI: St Nicholas



Plate 2: ANNUNCIATION CHURCH, HAL MILLIERI: Fresco of St Lawrence (left) and St John the Evangelist (right) with the name of either saint written in angular Gothic letters near the haloed heads.



A.



B.

Plate 3: ANNUNCIATION CHURCH, HAL MILLIERI: The Two St Georges

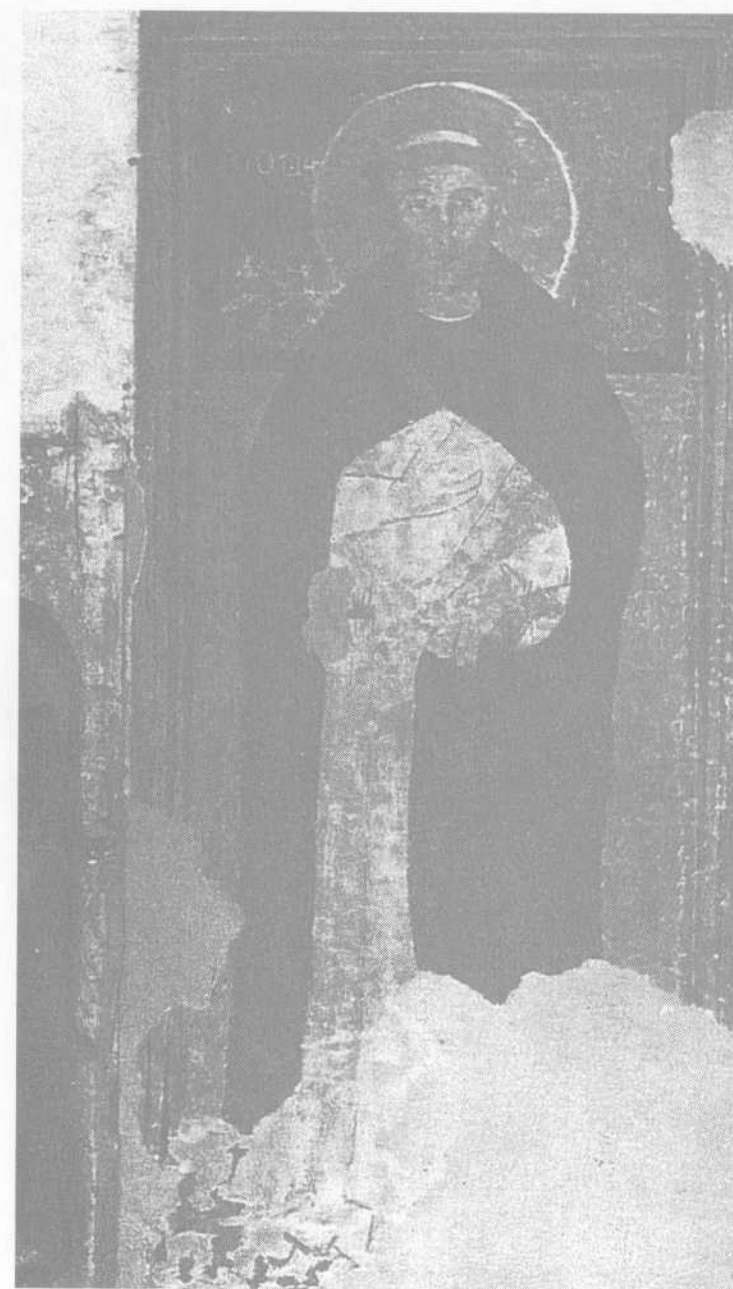


Plate 4: CHURCH OF S. DOMENICO, TRAPANI, SICILY, St Thomas.



Plate 5: MATRICE VECCHIA, CASTELBUONO, SICILY: Three Saints.



Plate 6: BASILICA OF SAN VINCENZO A GALLIANO, MILAN: Two Saints



Plate 7: ANNUNCIATION CHURCH, HAL MILLIERI: St. Agatha (?) and St Blaise with a one word inscription on the sinopia skin of the mural.