

THE APSE OF THE CHOIR IN THE CHURCH OF ST PHILIP OF AGGIRA AT ZEBBUG

Salv. Caruana

THE BUILDING OF THE CHOIR

The authorisation to build the present parish church of Zebbug was given by Bishop Baldassare Cagliares on 11 July 1662. The fabric of the church had been completed by 1632. Gian Francesco Abela calls the church “magnificent”¹ and the people of the thriving rural town were justly proud of it. Bishop Paolo Alpheran de Bussan was also impressed and remarked that the church was one of the largest and built in a very fine manner².

Around 1650 the people and clergy of Zebbug decided to enlarge the church by building a new bay along its western axis to allow four new altars with the respective dedications of the Virgin of Carmel and St. Joseph. Two bell towers were also built on the west facade at about the same time. This building programme was completed by 1655³.

After the lapse of another five years the numerous clergy of the thriving parish took the decision of again enlarging the church this time along its eastern axis. This involved the remodelling of the choir which was to be given a spaciouly proportioned apse. This was a courageous decision that required hard work and money.

THE ACQUISITION OF LAND AND THE START OF THE WORKS

The administrators of the church at the time were Bartolomeo Vassallo and Salvatore Balzano. These received their appointment on 12 January 1659 and remained in office until 10 March 1664. This covered the entire period of the building of the new choir⁴.

1 S. Ciappara, *Storia del Zebbug e Sua Parrocchia*, Malta 1882, p. 23.

2 Vis. Past., *Alpheran de Bussan*, 10 May 1736, p. 421.

3 S. Ciappara, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

4 Zebbug Parish Archives, *Amministrazione Lampade 1659-1664*, f.1r.

In 1660 a house at the back of the church was bought from a certain Paolina Gatt for the sum of 250 *scudi*, and the purchase was registered in the Acts of notary Gio Battista Azzopardi. Part of another house was also purchased at the same time for the sum of 48 *scudi* from Angeria, wife of R. Lombardo, as can be seen from the Acts of notary Lucio Azzopardi dated 4 September 1660⁵.

Meanwhile work as already in hand. This can be seen from the fact that on 8 May 1660 the architect Tommaso Dingli received the sum of 2.4.0 *scudi* for on site works during the period of four and a half days. A manual worker, Giuseppe Catania had earlier, on 3 March 1660, received his first payment, and on 6 March payments were also issued to the stone dressers Giacomo Micallef and Mario Dimeg, and to the labourers Augustino Psayla and Matteolo Butigieg for unspecified works⁶.

FUND RAISING

Considerable money was required for the start and completion of the work. Fund raising took different forms. While works were in progress a vase in which the natives of Zebbug could leave their contributions, was placed in the church. On 12 January 1659 the vase was found to contain 1.4.0 *scudi*.

The lists of four popular collections survive. They list respectively 192, 106, 90 and 138 names. The four lists are always headed by the names of the parish-priest and the two administrators Bartolomeo Micallef and Salvatore Balzano.

In February 1664 another general collection was organised in the church and in the streets of the town. 43.9.0 *scudi* were collected.

An annual collection was furthermore organised between 1660 and 1664 on New Year's Day.

Some benefactors made donations for stones and other necessary things, while a total of 56 *scudi* was collected from 17 individuals who left a bequest after their death.⁷

5 Ibid., f.33r.

6 ff. 27r-29v.

7 ff. 12r-13r.

THE ARCHITECT

Building works proceeded at a fast rate. The architect Tommaso Dingli was on site among the masons on fifty eight and a half days during the period between 8 May and 31 August 1660⁸. In the beginning of October 1660 architect Francesco Sammut took over control of the work. This architect remained responsible for the building until its completion. In the last months he was also entrusted with the building of the titular altar of St. Philip⁹.

The parapet wall was however entrusted to the Italian architect Francesco Buonamici who was active in Malta between 1637-1659. Buonamici was a significant architect among whose works one can mention the parish church of St Paul at Rabat, and the churches of the Jesuits and The Suffering Souls in Purgatory (*Ta' l-Erwieh*), both in Valletta. His involvement in the parish church of Zebbug amounted only to a minor intervention¹⁰, but it is possible that Buonamici undertook the building of the parapet wall because he might have been also responsible for the design of the conch of the apse.¹¹

ENTHUSIASTIC WORK

The principal workers were Gio Maria Attard, the *scalpellino* or stone carver Bartolomeo Minuelli, who was probably Sicialian, and the Maltese *scalpellini* Michele Debono, Simeone Sciarra, and Lorenzo Gafan (*sic.*). These were in time replaced by Gerolamo Valdu and Andrea Gordan. All the other varieties of building labourers were naturally also present on the building site. The reference to Lorenzo Gafan is significant. The famous Maltese architect was at this time employed as a stone carver (*scalpellino*). He worked in the conch of the apse for 43 days and received in payment 25.3.0 *scudi*. This was in several instalments between 9 July and 8 October 1662¹².

Work also proceeded on around 50 Sundays when the workmen were only paid in kind by receiving bread and wine at mid-day. In addition to the free work on Sundays, work was also carried out during the night for a period of 2 weeks when the only expense was of 3 *tari* for the oil of the lamps.

8 ff. 29v-33v.

9 f. 66v.

10 Zebbug Parish Archives, *Lampade (10 Agosto 1655-12 Gennaio 1659)*, unpag.

11 M. Buhagiar, 'Pioneer of Maltese Baroque Architecture', in *The Sunday Times*, 17 April 1994. See also D. De Luca, C. Thake, *The Genesis of Maltese Baroque Architecture; Francesco Buonamici*, Malta 1994.

12 Zebbug Parish Archive, *Lampade (1659-1664)*, ff. 44r-54v.

During two years of work 110 labourers were employed in the building. Together they gave a total of 4100 days of work. In this way the shell was completed in the beginning of March 1662, nearly two years after the commencement of the work. When one considers the size of the choir this was no mean achievement. The new extension measured 12.3 x 9.74 x 16.1 m.

After 11 March 1662 the workmen who remained in employment were, besides Lorenzo Gafà, Girolamo Valdu and his son and Andrea Gordan, who were all stone carvers. This suggests that the remaining work was mainly stone carving¹³.

THE SCULPTURE

The parish church of Zebbug boasts of the earliest baroque east end apse in the Maltese Islands. Lorenzo Gafà later introduced elaborations on this apsidal arrangement in the various churches for which he was responsible¹⁴.

It is possible that the carved stone decoration was suggested by the parish priest and the clergy who took their inspiration from Psalm 150:

Praise God in His Holy Place
Praise Him with the sound of trumpet
Praise Him with lute and harp
Praise Him with timbel and dance
Praise Him with strings and pipes.

Architect Francesco Sammut and the stone carver Manuelli gave a dynamically theatrical visual interpretation of this beautiful Psalm in the sculpture of the conch of the apse. Besides this magnificent baroque decoration Manuelli also produced the two larger than life-size statues of the major apostles Peter and Paul and the two cherubs (these were originally four) that crown the ornate frame of the titular painting.

THE PAINTER LUCAS GARNIER

The artist commissioned to produce the titular painting was Fra Lucas Garnier, a French artist who was also a Knight of the Order of St. John. Unfortunately he remains largely unstudied and his artistic personality cannot therefore be properly delineated. Garnier started work on the large painting around March 1662, when the

stretcher, six and a half canes of canvas, and other material were delivered at his bottega. Although Fra Luca Garnier has other works scattered in various Maltese churches, the Zebbug painting is considered his masterpiece.¹⁵

Work on the choir altar started around mid-June 1663. The design was produced by architect Francesco Sammut while the stones were bought from master mason Girolamo Micallef. The actual work was entrusted to the carvers Girolamo Valdu and Minuelli.

The last work was a small painting of the Dove of the Holy Spirit commissioned from Lucas Garnier. The artist received a total of 160 *scudi* for the two paintings.

In this way work on the apsidal extension of the church was brought to a happy conclusion thanks to the able co-ordination of the two administrators Bartolomeo Vassallo and Salvatore Balzano. The total cost of the work amounted to 1736.3.15 *scudi*.

¹³ Ibid., ff. 72v-76r.

¹⁴ V. Borg, 'Maltese Churches', in G. Mangion (ed.), *Maltese Baroque*, Malta 1989, p. 69.

¹⁵ M. Buhagiar, *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands*, Malta 1988, p. 79.

¹⁶ Zebbug Parish Archives, *Lampade (1659-1664)*, f. 74v.



The Choir Apse, Church of St. Philip of Aggira, Zebbug.