

THE HIGH ALTAR OF ŻEBBUĠ PARISH CHURCH, MALTA

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Although Żebbuġ had been raised to parish status before 1436,¹ the present parish church was mainly built in the seventeenth century when a relatively large capital investment in church building was taking place all over Malta.²

The knights of St John, who were then embellishing their conventual church with paintings, stone carving and marble ornamentation, gave an impetus to the local ecclesiastical authorities to imitate them.³ By time, as more funds became available, Żebbuġ Parish Church initiated commissions of artistic paintings, organs, church furniture, silverware, bells, damask hangings, liturgical vestments and marble works. Among its ornaments, the high altar is a gem of interest which particularly enriches this temple. Studies published on Żebbuġ Parish Church ascribe the marble work on this altar to Francesco Cerrotti in Rome,⁴ on a design by the Maltese artist Francesco Zahra.⁵ Though such works were partly correct in this assertion and in stating that Maria Dimech bequeathed 1,000 scudi for this project, recently-discovered documents have shed more light on other assumptions contained therein.

1. S. Ciappara, *Storia del Żebbuġ e sua Parrocchia*, Malta 1882, 9. On the origin of Maltese parishes, cf. A. Luttrell, 'Le origini della parrocchia a Malta', in *The Making of Christian Malta*, Variorum Collected Studies Series, Aldershot 2002, article xviii.
2. For further details, cf. L. Mahoney, *A History of Maltese Architecture from Ancient Times up to 1800*, Malta 1988, 173-210 and J. Tonna, *L-Arkitettura f' Malta*, Malta 2004, 13-43 and 150-51.
3. J. Debono, 'St John's Conventual Church: stone carving, gilding and marble work (1640s-1660s)', in *Art and Artisans in St John's and other Churches in the Maltese Islands ca. 1650-1800*, Malta 2005, 3-56. See also K. Sciberras, *Roman Baroque Sculpture for the Knights of Malta*, Malta 2004, passim.
4. Ciappara, 36 and L. Vella, *Storja ta' Haż-Żebbuġ*, ed. L. Cachia, Malta 1986, 43.
5. Zahra was one of the most prominent Maltese artists of the eighteenth century. For further details on this artist, cf. the various articles in *Francesco Zahra 1710-1773*, ed. J. Azzopardi, Malta 1986, and J. Debono, 'The Will of Francesco Zahra 1710-1773', *Melita Historica*, x, 3 (1990), 23-44.

Durante's high altar

On 8 June 1728 Domenico Barbara, on behalf of Maria Dimech,⁶ sister to his mother, commissioned Gregorio Durante, a local marble-artisan, to work the required number of good quality marble slabs and lay them on the framework of the high altar except its tabernacle.⁷ The altar, constructed of Maltese stone, may have been ordered from another artisan. The projected marble works included the altar table, its frontal and side panels, its posterior except for that area reserved for the wooden steps, the two pedestals with their cyma moulding and dado and the two-stepped gradine to carry two rows of candlesticks. The parties agreed that the project was to be executed according to a design drawn by Gio. Nicola Buhagiar who was also responsible for singling out the marble type and colouring.⁸ As a consequence, the parish priest Gio. Battista Sagnani authorized the ordering of the marble slabs in Trapani.

As this project could not be totally completed within a definite period of time, it was also agreed upon to finish first the altar table by the following August and the rest within a year, commencing from the arrival date of the slabs from abroad. The sum of 25 *scudi* was to be withheld from the full amount of 600 *scudi* if Durante failed to finish the altar table by the appointed time. Moreover, if the marble-artisan defaulted on the remaining work, he would forfeit 50 *scudi*. Meanwhile, he received 150 *scudi* in advance payment and was promised 250 *scudi* according to work in progress; the rest remained due till the full termination of the project.

Transport expenses for the finished marble slabs from the workshop to the church were to be borne by Domenico Barbara, the client. Durante had to direct this task, subsidize the expenses involved by 15 *scudi*, lay the marble slabs of the altar personally, and assist the workers engaged in the fixture of the Consecration Crosses. He was also bound to countersign the documents prepared by parish priest Sagnani for the marble importation, its safe transportation to Malta, and its eventual payment.

6. On 13 December 1727 Maria, widow of Joseph Dimech and daughter of the late notary Gio. Battista Azzopardi, bequeathed the sum of 1,000 *scudi* to be spent on marble decorations of the high altar in Żebbuġ Parish Church: N[otarial] A[rchives at] V[alletta], Not[ary] A. Pullicino, R 408/12, ff. 169v-177, esp. 171-171v.

7. NAV, Not. G. Grech, R 303/16, ff. 701v-703.

8. On Gio. Nicola the artist, see D. Cutajar, 'Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Art in Malta', in *Marian Art During the 17th and 18th Centuries*, ed. M. Buhagiar, Malta 1983, 18-9 and 45; *id.*, 'The Roots of Maltese Rococo Art', in *Property Magazine*, no. 1 (February 1986), 6-7; E. F. Montanaro, 'Materials for the life of Francesco Vincenzo Zahra', in *Francesco Zahra*, 9-10 and the genealogical table on 30; M. Buhagiar, 'Francesco Vincenzo Zahra (1710-1773) A Critical Appreciation', in *ibid.*, 39 and 48-50; *id.*, *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands 1400-1900: Painting*, Malta 1987, 125-26.

Most probably, this project of the high altar's decoration with marble had been in the offing for some time. On 11 April 1727, Rev. Mario Fenech, procurator of St Philip's Parish Church at Żebbuġ, handed the sum of 88 *scudi*, meant for the purchasing of marble to Maruzzo Calafato from Żebbuġ.⁹ He insured this amount for its transfer to Catania in Sicily on the *fregata di neve* under captain Gio. Antonio di Domenico from I-Isla. Besides this amount, Calafato received another 125 *scudi* spent previously on an additional load of marble for the church. While insuring both amounts for the duration of the voyages out of his devotion to St Philip, he promised that, in case of loss, he would pay them back in full within four months of the mishap.

In the interval between 8 June 1728 and early July 1729 some progress in the embellishment work was registered. On 6 July 1729 Maria Dimech handed over the sum of 750 *scudi* to Rev. Paolo Calleja, presbyter of St Philip's Church, in order to cover the payment of 150 *scudi* to Gregorio Durante the marble-artisan, 50 *scudi* to Gio. Nicola Buhagiar the artist and 450 *scudi* to Domenico Barbara, nephew to Dimech, possibly for future payments.¹⁰ The outstanding amount of 100 *scudi* was possibly withheld by Father Calleja also for future use.

It seems that this project of the high altar assigned to Gregorio Durante was only partly finished by him. Most probably he was able to complete the altar table, its frontal and side panels and the two pedestals. No definite answer can be given for this apparent halt in the project. Durante might have been prevented through ill health or because his work was no longer acceptable to the parishioners and other church authorities. At that time, contact with the Order of St John could have helped Żebbuġ church procurators to become aware of the arrival on the island of Francesco Cerrotti, a renowned foreign marble artisan.

In fact, in 1730 parish priest Rev. Gio. Battista Sagnani presented a petition to the bishop stating that, as the sum of money contributed by a parishioner for the marble tabernacle of the high altar was not sufficient to meet all the expense involved, he would be permitted to transfer additional amounts from other church funds.¹¹ He hoped as well that, in that way, he would be able to contract Francesco Cerrotti, a Florentine *marmista*, for the execution of the works involved against the payment of 100 Roman *scudi* per annum. Cerrotti's arrival in Malta in late 1729 to install Grand Master's de Vilhena mausoleum in St John's Church,¹² helped the

9. The deed does not specify for what purpose this importation of marble was going to be applied: NAV, Not. A. Pullicino, R 408/11, ff. 322-323.

10. NAV, Not. G. D. Pace, R 388/36 (1725-32), ff. 80-80v (1728-29).

11. On 28 January 1730 the Bishop approved Sagnani's petition: NAV, Not. G. Grech, R 303/18, ff. 498-498v.

12. K. Lankheit, *Florentine Barockplastic 1670-1743*, Munich 1962, Doc. 489 and Doc. 523 as quoted by Sciberras, 126, fn. 122. Cf. *Infra*, fn. 20.

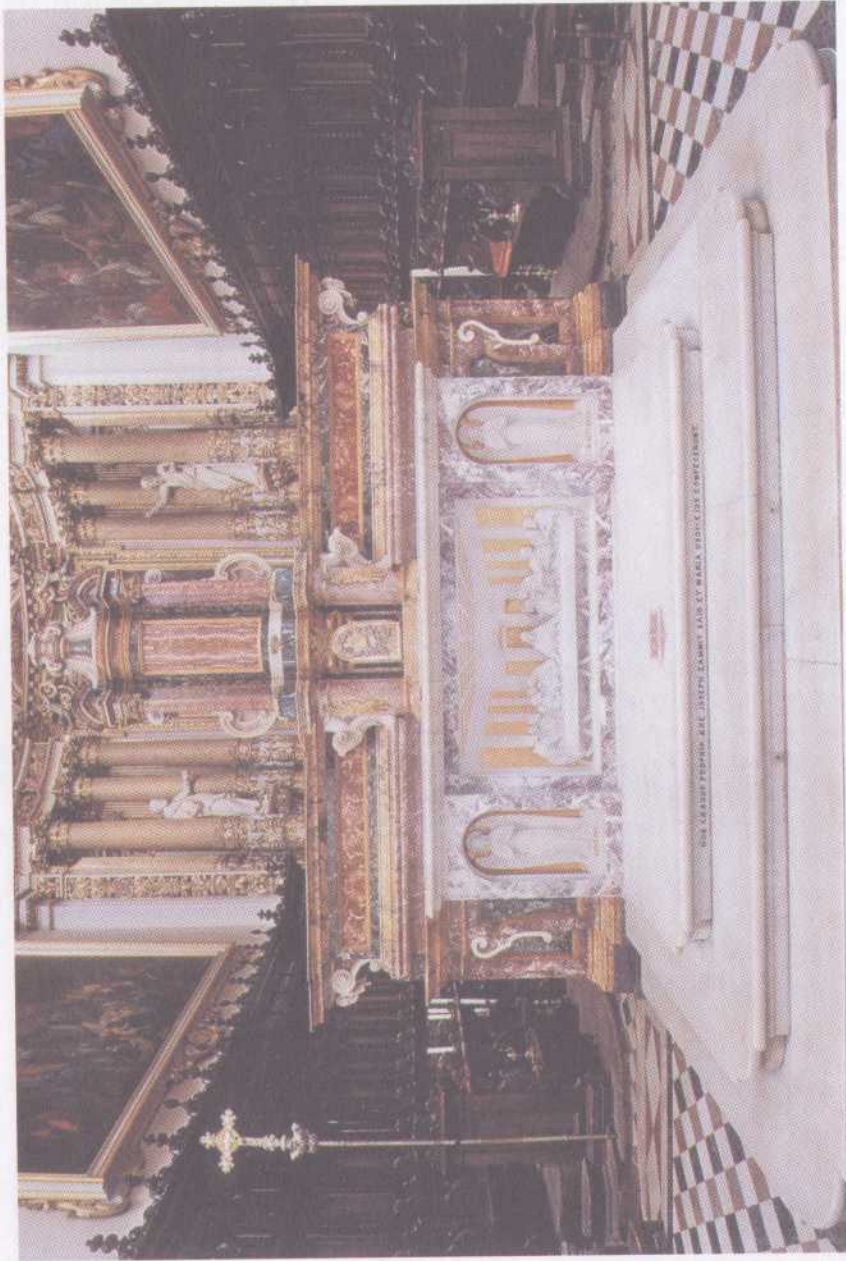


Fig. 1. The main altar of Zebbuġ Parish Church



Fig. 2. Detail of the ciborium.

parish priest to formalize the necessary steps for the continuation of the project.¹³

Cerrotti's high altar

On 28 January 1730 Cerrotti accepted to work in Florence a pedestal-based two-stepped gradine or *scannello* of the main altar and the ciborium, all of different marbles as designed by Gio. Nicola Buhagiar.¹⁴ He was allowed two years for this marble decoration, all at a cost of 630 Roman *scudi* of which 50 were paid in advance. He was to receive another 100 *scudi* on the arrival of the marble samples in Malta and the remaining balance within five years in equal instalments.

The agreement describes in detail the technical undertakings for the projected works in the gradine and the tabernacle, with a door rotating on a wooden wheel and the figure of Christ in low relief; besides the specific use of marble and bronze parts, everything was prominently displayed in the design.¹⁵ The upper step in the gradine was to be one and-a half *palmi* in width while the lower step only one *palmi* in width. Having chiselled the marble slabs in Florence, Cerrotti was to transport them with the expected diligence to Leghorn secured in wooden cases against damages and free of all customs dues. Their transportation expenses from Leghorn to Malta were to be borne by the Żebbuġ church authorities. On arrival at their destination, Cerrotti or his representative was to assist in their laying in place as had been agreed earlier.

13. Francesco arrived in Malta on 8 December 1729 on the Order's warship, *San Giovanni*, accompanied by Francesco Formelli, probably his assistant: N(ational) A(rchives of) M(alta at Rabat), Manuscript not numbered, List of Persons arriving in Malta from May 1724 to August 1743, no foliation. Their stay here was rather brief for they were issued with the *patente* of departure for Leghorn on 29 January 1730: NAM, Magna Curia Castellaniae, Registrum Patentarum, vol. 19 (1727-1734), unfoliated.
14. The clients were Rev. Gio. Battista Sagnani and the procurator Rev. Pietro Paolo Calleja on his own behalf and that of others: NAV, Not. G. Grech, R 303/18, ff. 496v-498.
15. Ibid. f. 497: '... con la facciata, e lati di marmo siccome il giro per la parte posteriore uniforme alla facciata, e fianchi per un palmo di vivo coll'ossatura di macigni, il tabernacolo poi dal gradino superiore in sù deve andare per la parte posteriore coperto tutto di marmi lisci senza rilievo, mà, che corrono le fascie, e colori uniformi alla facciata, e dall'ultimo guarnicione superiore del Tabernacolo per tutto il finimento deve girare attorno un quattro facciate fatte uguale come inanzi, con questo però, che non sia tenuto à fare nel tabernacolo le teste componenti nel disegno, ma quelli si lasciano per farli essi Signori Paroco, e Procuratori à spese della Chiesa d'altro materiale, di più sia tenuto à far lo specchio superiore del Tabernacolo in forma, ce possi girare à modo di rota da monache per commodo dell'esposizione del Venerabile di marmo riportato sù la rota di legno ... di fare à sue proprie spese li capitelli, e base delle colonne sicome la porta del ciborio e cartella con due festoncini sul frontespizio, ò pure cascanti al lato della porta con Christo di mezzo rilievo, la fermatura, e chiave tutti di bronzo.'

Work on the marble slabs moved ahead smoothly. Commendatore Fra Giuseppe de Nobili in Trapani directed his brother Commendatore Fra Gio. Maria de Nobili in Malta to receive on his behalf the amount of 14 *onze* 11 *tari* 10 *grani* Sicilian currency equivalent to 71 *scudi* 11 *tari* Maltese currency due for the transportation and insurance premiums of grey and bluish marble slabs despatched to Cerrotti in Leghorn for eventual workmanship as directed by Gio. Nicola Buhagiar. On 13 July 1730 Fra Gio. Maria de Nobili received this amount from Rev. Pietro Paolo Calleja, procurator of Żebbuġ Parish Church.¹⁶

It seems that by August 1731 the marble slab workmanship for the eventual decoration of the high altar was at an advanced satisfactory stage. Maria Dimech then subscribed the outstanding amount of 250 *scudi*, still due from the 1,000 *scudi* bequeathed to the church authorities for this project.¹⁷ The amount of 750 *scudi* had already been issued earlier for the same purpose.¹⁸

According to the contract of obligation signed in January 1730 between Cerrotti and the church authorities, he had to be present during the laying process of the marble slabs. However, it is not known whether he was personally present or not, because it was Claudio Durante who put them in place in 1734.¹⁹

Other known works ascribed to Cerrotti

Apart from the two-stepped gradine and the ciborium for Żebbuġ Parish Church, Cerrotti executed other masterpieces in marble. These include two mausoleums dedicated to Grand Masters Marc Antonio Zondadari from Siena and the Portuguese Manoel de Vilhena together with four tombstones also in St John's Church inlaid with components of varied kinds of marble and inscriptions.²⁰ At the Grand Master's behest, Cerrotti laid exquisitely the marble slabs on an altar found in the Cathedral of Mdina. The slabs had been deposited in a store for 10 years without anybody taking responsibility for their final putting in place. Cerrotti drew the design and worked accordingly.

16. Ibid. ff. 958v-959.
17. This amount was received by Rev. Mario Fenech, Rev. Gio. Maria Psaila and Rev. Pietro Paolo Calleja, procurators of Żebbuġ Parish Church: NAV, Not. A. Pullicino, R 408/15, ff. 463-463v, 3 August 1731.
18. Cf. supra, fn. 10.
19. Ciappara, 36.
20. C. Napoleone, *La Cappella Corsini nella basilica romana di San Giovanni in Laterano*, FMR Italia 2001, 16 and 29.

Conclusion

Along the years alterations and consequent restorations were carried out on the high altar. On 21 April 1887 the marble-artisan Mariano Spina²¹ received the sum of 312 scudi equivalent to 26 English pounds sterling for such work following a design drawn by Lazzaro Pisani who also received 3 English pounds sterling for it.²² The altar gradine was widened to accommodate in a better way the silver candlesticks and the statues of the apostles. Another major alteration was carried out later between the years 1955 and 1964 when Rev. Philip Xerri was procurator of the church. The then existent marble frontal was removed and placed on the dorsal side so that the Last Supper could be installed instead.²³ Two angels were also placed on each side of the high altar and the marble of the lower gradine was replaced by white slabs.²⁴

21. Spina was a Sicilian from the province of Catania who settled in Malta in the late 1870s. This was not the only work he undertook in this parish church for, in 1882, he was commissioned to pave the choir area: P[arish] A[rchives] Ż[ebbug], Esito Lampade Libro B 1859-1897, ff. 220v-221. See also Vella, 95.

22. PA., Esito Lampade Libro B 1859-1897, f. 222.

23. Vella, 122.

24. Personal communication by Rev. Salv. Caruana.