

A BRIEF NOTE ON THE BLACK FIGURE IN THE MDINA ST PAUL'S POLYPTYCH*

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A panel, representing the *Conversion of St. Paul*, of the *Mdina St Paul's Polyptych* has been recently restored by Mr Samuel Bugeja.¹ This restoration borders on the sensational since the restorer has uncovered a layer of painting under which a completely new figure has now made its appearance. Art historians may now have a better idea of the iconography of this panel and I, for one, am surmising that it is not improbable that the panel had for its subject an incident in Malta's medieval history, namely the Norman conquest of the island.

It is not within the scope of this paper to go into the details of the restoration. However, one cannot appreciate fully the original insertion of this black figure and its subsequent painting without comparing the two representations; before and after the restoration. (See figs. 1 and 2)

The pre-restoration panel presented a whitish horse on whose left there lay on the ground St Paul, obviously after he had fallen down during his dramatic Conversion; behind this whitish horse a group of mounted riders gave the impression they were part of St Paul's retinue. The horses of these comrades were all painted in a brownish colour, thus suggesting one homogeneous group. Their reins and bridles, however, were not convincing because of their thick black colour. The Lord above was also painted in dark colours. Nothing in this pre-restoration representation hinted at any emblematic theme other than that of the Conversion of the saint. One should here note that in no fifteenth or earlier Conversion scene in Catalonia does one find St Paul lying on the ground. Usually, he is portrayed falling off the horse. The fact that he is lying on the ground has drawn the attention of a Spanish art historian, who has been kind enough to convey to me by letter this piece of information.²

The post-restoration representation shows a number of significant changes: the Redeemer's dark clouds have disappeared and Christ is wearing very white

* I must thank Canon John Azzopardi for his constant encouragement and counsel generously given in all the stages of this research.

1 See restoration report, dated September 1993 (Cathedral Archives).

2 Prof. Miguel Angel Aloncio in a letter dated 28 Feb. 1994.

robes whiter than the clouds which encircle Him, not dissimilar to a Piero della Francesca Resurrection.³ The whitish horse has been cleaned and a more brilliant white has emerged. The brown of the three horses has been removed and in its stead three gorgeous hues have appeared: lead grey, chrome yellow and a flesh coloured tint. This radical cleaning allows the onlooker to appreciate not only these colours but also the details of both riders and horses. One can distinguish clearly - since they are drawn in different colours - the shanks, pasterns, hocks, fetlocks and hooves of these horses; the riders' hair is blond suggesting a Nordic complexion. One must also point out that the dark clouds of the pre-restoration depiction covered a good one fourth of one rider's painted hair. The black bridles and reins covered other reins which were originally red and more slender. The whole colour scheme of the mounted riders and the landscape characterized by clusters of elegant trunks and trees and limpid slopes, all point to an International Gothic painter influenced however by fourteenth-century Italian artists, such as: Gherardo Starnina (as regards the landscape's treatment);⁴ Spinello Aretino (as regards some figures' treatment);⁵ Ambrogio Lorenzetti (as regards some decorative harness details);⁶ not to mention French and Italian miniaturists, such as Giovannino Dei Grassi. But what I consider very important is the artist's attitude to painting itself. In the second half of the fourteenth century, the Florentine painter, according to Argan, "fa opera di translitterazione, di traduzione di un testo in figure; affinché sia chiaro che le immagini non valgono per sè ma per i concetti che manifestano, opera una trasposizione in termini di allegoria; l'accuratezza descrittiva, l'evidenza formale hanno dunque il solo scopo di rendere attendibili i concetti che illustrano".⁷ This brings about a situation in which the unity of vision of this panel is somewhat broken. This characteristic lends support to the theory that the painter, albeit Spanish, might have had a Florentine training rather than a Siense one, since Florence rather than Siena laid a premium on the ideal message of art; or, equally probable the painter was commissioned by a scholar, expert in ecclesiastical and political history to render faithfully a fund of motifs which met the demands of the Maltese in the late fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth.

3 Piero della Francesca, fresco at S. Marco, Florence.

4 Gerardo Starnina, *Thebaid*, panel, Florence, Uffizi.

5 Spinello Aretino, *Entry of Pope Alexander III in Rome*, Siena, Public Palace.

6 Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Effects of Good Government in the city*; fresco. Siena, Public Palace. On the Siense elements, see E.V. Borg. *St Paul's Polyptych*, 1978, Malta, *passim*.

7 G.C. Argan, *Storia dell'arte italiana*, vol 2, Florence 1977, p. 45.

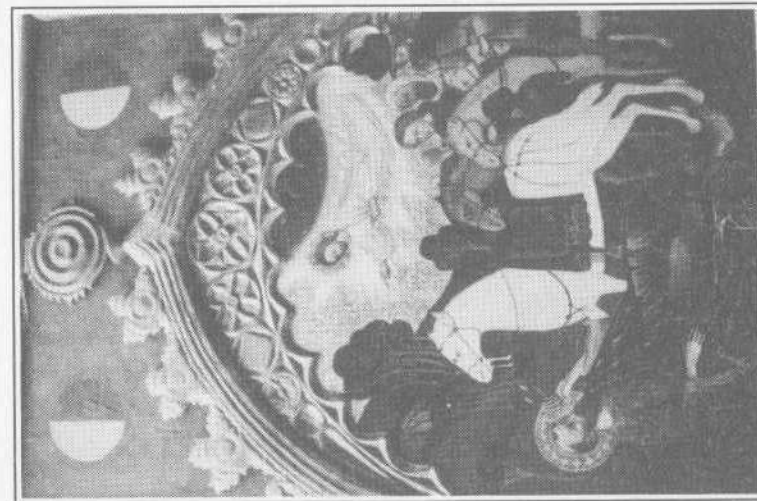


Fig. 2 Conversion panel of the Mdina St Paul's Polyptych after restoration

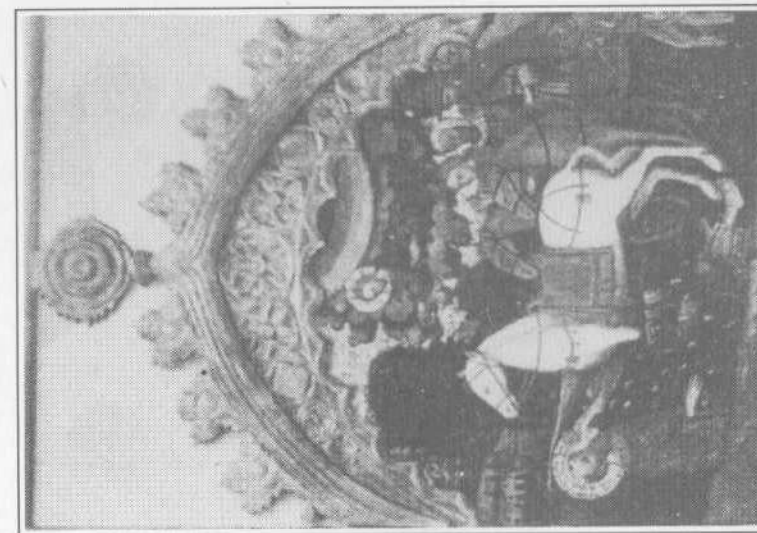


Fig. 1 Conversion panel of the Mdina St Paul's Polyptych before restoration

However the most significant figure to emerge from this restoration is a black figure which is standing between the hind quarters of the white horse and the figure of a high ecclesiastical dignitary who mounts a mare rather than a male horse used for warfare and who is portrayed in the act of blessing him. Even the first mounted figure is in the act of blessing someone. The fact that this black figure has Negroid features, lends support to my hypothesis that the subject

matter of this panel may be related to the Norman conquest of Malta. In brief the three mounted figures may be, from left to right : Count Roger, who in 1091 carried out a form of razzia of the island; next to him is Godfrey Malaterra, his constant companion monk and chronicler; beside him is a Papal Legate wearing the red cardinal's hat and mantle. The black figure may be the Qaid who represents Muslim Malta, which is either being converted or paying homage to the new conquerer of the Maltese islands. Why have I associated the Negroid figure with Muslim Malta? I have based my hypothesis on two considerations ; first the polyptych has been obviously carried out specifically for Malta since various scenes deal as much as possible with some particular episode relative to Malta's history. Second, one may find a literary counterpart to this negro figure. William Wistar Comfort writes that "the people in France knew that the Saracens were not all... black brutes, and in general, there is no comment on their lack of comeliness. But when special reasons call for the grotesque as a desired type, it is the African type that does duty."⁸ In fact he quotes a stanza from the *Chanson de Roland*.

*Devant chevalchet un Sarrazin, Abisme
Plus fel de lui n'eut sa cumpagnie.
Teches ad males e mult granz felonies;
Ne crei en Deu, lu filz seinte Marie;
Issi est neirs cume perz ki est demise;
Plus aimet il traisuir e murdrie
Qu'il ne fesist trestut l'or de Galice.⁹*

Lines 1917-18 refer to the pagan king Marsile, where he is described with Negroid features, with large nose and broad ears :

8 W.W. Comfort, *The Literary Role of the Saracens in the French Epic*, Publications of the Modern Lang. Association of America, LV, p. 628.

9 *La Chanson de Roland*, edited by Joseph Bedier, (Paris, 1992) lines 1470-1476.

The following is a translation by Miss Irma Smith in "Arte" (Milan, 1968, p. 106):

In front rides a Saracen, Abisme:
There is none more treacherous in the company.
He is filled with vices and great crimes;
He does not believe in God, the Son of Saint Mary;
He is as black as melted pitch;
More than all the gold in Galicia
He loves treachery and murder



Fig. 3 Archbishop Turpin Baptising Otnel, Museo Civico, Treviso (c. 1375-1400)

*La neire gent en ad en sa baillie
Granz unt les nes e lees les oreilles.¹⁰*

Even pictorially, one may find parallel scenes. At Treviso in Italy the archbishop Turpin is portrayed in the act of baptizing a Muslim, Otnel, depicted as a Negro. (See fig 3)

10 *Chanson de Roland*, vv. 1917-18.

If the mounted riders refer to Count Roger, Godfrey Malaterra and a Papal Legate, the big white horse is the famous *chinea* (in English hackney), which was the horse which every three years at first, and afterwards every year, had to be given to the Pope as homage for his giving as fief the South of Italy and Sicily to the Normans, as established in the Synod of Melfi in 1059 by Pope Nicholas II. This concession was made because Count Roger freed the South of Italy from the Schismatic Byzantines and Sicily from the Saracens. It should be noted that the horse had to be in an ambling posture, as, in fact, the white horse in the panel is portrayed.

My hypothesis may not be considered improbable owing to the fact that Malta's reconversion to Christianity is made to coincide with St Paul's conversion and the white horse connects and conveys convincingly these two conversions.

What is indeed intriguing is the reason for the Negroid figure being painted out. My guess is that the whole Norman exploit is to be viewed in relation to the Apostolica Legazia dei Normanni in Sicilia. In 1098 Urban II is said to have given to the Normans power over ecclesiastical affairs, especially regarding the election of bishops, endowments and the right to veto ecclesiastical councils. This Apostolica Legazia may not have pleased the Order of St John since, being a religious order itself, it foresaw a subordinate role to that of the Sicilian sovereign. In fact, Andrew Vella¹¹ refers to an episode in 1741 where the representatives of King Amodeo of Savoy were denied an official visit to Malta, on the grounds that Sicily could not consider Malta as part of its privilege deriving from the Apostolica Legazia.

What I infer is that a few years after the coming of the Order of St John, the political authorities brought pressure to bear on the ecclesiastical ones so that the latter would give Count Roger's exploit of 1091 a low profile because of its political implications. Indeed the Polyptych underwent a drastic renovation in 1539. Thanks to research by Prof. Stanley Fiorini, we now know that in that year, that is, barely nine years after the Order's coming to the island "major changes were carried out to the main altar and to the St Paul retable".¹² Professor Fiorini has found a document in the Mandati of the Cathedral Archives stating explicitly that payment was effected to the painter, Mastro Calcerano Orobello from Syracuse, "che pingi seu renova la cona di Sancto Paulo". The words "pingi" and "renova" do not imply restoration, but a radical painting out, as the recent

11 A. Vella, *Storja ta' Malta*, vol I, Malta, 1984, p. 76.

12 S. Fiorini, "Artists and Artisans at the Mdina Cathedral", *Melita Historica*, vol X, no. 4, 1991, p. 340.

cleanings have proved.¹³ That the Negro figure was painted out much before the last century is borne out by Canon Pullicino's statement of 1871 wherein he explicitly says that the riders were part of St Paul's retinue, and no mention is made of the Negro figure: "rappresentano essi i seguaci del medesimo, che lo guardano a terra caduto." Giuseppe Calleja's restoration in 1871 was probably limited to minimal cosmetic changes, leaving the superimposed layers as they were; his merit was that he did not add anything more. Canon Pullicino categorically states "senza aggiungere alcun nuovo colore".¹⁴

This "Count Roger" hypothesis might throw new light not only on the iconography but also on the style of the Conversion scene, as well as of the whole polyptych. First, it seems likely that the painter followed a particular ideological programme prepared most probably by others well versed in Malta's ancient and medieval history; in this way the polyptych was to be seen as a religious and historical manifesto. As long as Malta was Aragonese, the polyptych's ideological programme was praiseworthy; but, as soon as the Knights came, some aspects of it proved to be at best embarrassing and at worst to be condemned. It is indeed possible that the black figure was painted out to remove any possible link with the Apostolica Legazia. The 1539 "restoration" fits with this painting out.

Secondly, as the polyptych is now restored, one may better study its style. My conviction is that the artist has still to be better identified; it seems that he drew on various sources: the International Gothic; the Serra circle apart from the Louis Borassa one;¹⁵ Sicilian Byzantine art, such as is found in the Monreale fresco cycle (especially for the hieratic St Paul's central panel); Central Italian, especially Siennese painters, such as Ambrogio Lorenzetti. One should not leave out the Florentine intellectual approach, such as is found in Buonaiuti.

Certainly he was a fine painter who, notwithstanding his eclectic approach, amalgamated wondrously his sources and produced a masterpiece which we are lucky to enjoy up to this present day.

13 The repaintings of this artist point to an Umbrian, fifteenth century style, since certain superimposed architectural motifs seem to have been influenced by Giovanni Boccati, as well as by Van Eyck's perspective schemes. However it should be stated categorically that the original polyptych's style is to be sought in the late Trecento or early Quattrocento one, especially in the International Gothic.

14 P. Pullicino, *Antiche tavole altre volte componenti il principale Gran quadro della Chiesa cattedrale di Malta*, Malta, 1871, p. 4.

15 See G. Bautier Bresc. "The Paintings at Hal Millieri" in *Hal Millieri, A Maltese Casale: Its Churches and Paintings* (edit. A. Luttrell, Malta, 1976, p. 2)