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[p.9] New Light on Majmuna's Tombstone

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The only spectacular visual relic of the Islamic presence in Malta is undoubtedly the Majmuna tombstone, pride and joy of the Gozo Museum in the Citadel. If, that is, it was found in the Maltese islands at all.

So little is known about it. When was it found? When was it first published? Where was it discovered? By whom? Who deciphered it first? Who owned it? I hope to shed some new light on this wonderful artefact.

A local private collection includes an accumulation of manuscript scrapbooks put together by an inquisitive priest during the first half of the 19th century. Fr Giuseppe Carmelo Gristi gave vent to a manic lust for recording anything of interest by copying, in minute handwriting, the most diverse ancient and contemporary documents that he could lay his hands on. These ranged from early verse in Maltese to Italian songs of the most dismaying obscenity, from minute records of historical episodes to prurient contemporary gossip, from the accounts of old confraternities, to patriotic speculation.

The author's own index of that monumental miscellany shows that originally at least 146 scrapbooks existed, though there were certainly more. I have examined about 38 of them. Does any reader know what happened to the rest? No information about this author is available; he does not even get an honourable mention in Robert Mifsud Bonnici's biobibliographical dictionary.

Most infuriating about Fr Gristi's antiquarian treasure house is the fact that he hardly ever quotes the sources of his information and documents. Most of the time it is virtually impossible to establish whether a chapter in his scrapbooks has been composed by him, or copied from an earlier source, and if so, which.

One of the chapters in scrapbook No. 137 deals with Majmuna's inscription. This welcome information is characteristically sandwiched between two chapters of totally different weight and significance. Immediately preceding Majmuna is a secret and extremely detailed report by the Inquisition about the 1775 uprising of the priests, led by Don Gaetano Mannarino against the government of the Order. One of the rebels is named as Giuseppe Bonello (must be my ancestor) later described as an "*idiota*" (some other branch of the family).

Following the Majmuna note is a libel on the archpriest of St Paul's in Valletta, Fr Francesco Pullicino, accused with having in 1839 tricked a wealthy property owner, Margherita Pace, aged 80, into altering



Majmuna's tombstone, A.D. 1174, displayed at the Gozo Citadel Museum (Courtesy of the Director of Museums)

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Count Giovannantonio Ciantar's illustration of the Majmuna tombstone, published in 1772. Chev. Italinski blamed the errors in the illustrations for the difficulties encountered in transcribing it.

her will to the detriment of her family, and the enrichment of the archpriest.

Majmuna's tombstone had whetted the curiosity of many previous antiquarians. Recent authorities state, but incorrectly, that the inscription was first published in 1809.¹ Count Giovannantonio Ciantar had, in his notable 1772 work, already written at length about it and about his efforts to have it deciphered.² He had also illustrated it in a full page engraving.³

The title of Fr Gristi's study already provides some useful clues.⁴ The inscription is said to have been discovered 'in Malta' and was preserved in Baron Muscat's residence in Strait Street, Valletta.⁵ Depending on when this undated note was written, this could have been either Baron Claudio, or his son, Baron Diego Muscat. Diego was the uncle, by marriage, of Cardinal Fabrizio Sceberras. In 1839 the tombstone belonged to the Xara family⁶ from whence it passed to Baron Sir Giuseppe Maria de Piro, who in 1845 donated it to the Public Library.⁷

Count Ciantar, without mentioning names, had said that the inscription was walled up in the courtyard of a leading citizen's house.

Fr Gristi adds, in a sort of footnote, that although all the authors who had referred to this tombstone had been consulted, no information at all could be gleaned as to where it had been actually discovered. The truth is that, to date, there is absolutely no reliable indication at all as to its provenance being either Malta, Gozo or elsewhere. The inscription is carved on the back of a marble slab with Roman decorations, a common occurrence in North Africa. We have to make do with the flimsiest of topographical conjectures: an area in Gozo is called *Ta' Majmuna*.

Count Ciantar had already lamented plaintively the fruitless attempts he had made to have the inscription deciphered. Mgr Assemani had failed to respond, and Falconet of the Paris Academy had fobbed him off with the meagre titbit that the central part was the funerary epitaph of the daughter of one of the leading Arabs, while the surrounding inscriptions were verses from the Koran on the subject of death!

The Assemani who ignored Count Ciantar was Giuseppe Simonio Assemani, a learned Chaldean Monsignor who held a leading position in the Vatican Library and had recently published his renowned *Biblioteca Orientalis*. He was entrusted to deliver the opening sermon for the Conclave that followed the death of Pope Clement XI in 1721. Charles de Brosses, who heard it, dismissed the panegyric as "a totally boring rhapsody of platitudes in a language correspondingly ugly."⁸

Fr Gristi asserts that, after Count Ciantar had given up, many other erudite foreigners had a go at the inscription, but none came up with a complete translation that made any sense.

Then Providence struck, in a most unexpected way.

When the Maltese rebelled against the French in 1798, the intrigues of diplomacy started weaving nets of steel around this small island. The old Order, the King of the Two Sicilies, and the British all cast [p.11] covetous eyes on the insurgents, anxious to woo their sympathies. Not least the Czar, Paul I, whose mouth watered at the very thought of Malta becoming a Russian possession.

MAJMUNA'S TOMBSTONE

In the name of Allah, the most merciful and compassionate. May Allah shower his favours on the Prophet Mohammed and his followers and grant them eternal salvation.

To God belong infinity and immortality, and He has destined that what He created should perish. Of this the prophet of Allah bears witness.

Here lies the burial of Majmuna, daughter of Hassan, son of Ali al-Hudali, called Iben as-Susi. She died – may the mercy of Allah rest upon her – on Thursday, the sixteenth day of the month of Saban of the year 569, bearing testimony that there is only one God, without equal.

Behold with your own eyes: is anything on earth everlasting? Does anything ward off death or cast spells on it? Death seized me from a palace, and alas, no barriers or latches could save me. My deeds are my evidence, and they shall be counted. Only what I have abandoned behind, remains.

O you who look upon this sepulchre, know that I am already wasted inside it. Dust weights my sight and my eyelids. On this couch, in my abode of misfortune, there are only tears. Be this my admonition to you in the presence of my Creator. O my brother, fill your spirit with wisdom and repentance.

A new interpretation, by the author, of Majmuna's tombstone. Majmuna died on March 21, 1174, and her epitaph is engraved on the back of a marble slab previously used in Roman times.

The Czar hastily dispatched to Malta a reputable diplomat, Andrey Italinski, to deliver to the Congress of the insurgents a special communication from him. Italinski relayed the imperial message to the Maltese on December 30, 1799. He informed the Congress that Grand Master Hompesch had resigned, and that the Czar, as new Grand Master of the Order, had taken the Maltese under his protection and promised to support them in their rebellion against Napoleon's troops.⁹

It was to be the Czar's Ambassador, Chev. Italinski, who finally broke, if only partially, Majmuna's seemingly impregnable code. Gristi's explanation as to why Italinski was such a fine orientalist makes good sense: he was Minister Plenipotentiary to the Turkish Empire for His Majesty *Imperatore di tutte le Russie* from 1803 to 1806. Others only describe him as "Russian Ambassador to Naples." This was in 1799-1802.¹⁰

Chev. Italinski, at the insistence of some Maltese and foreign antiquarians, was induced "to occupy some of his hours of inactivity" in interpreting the 'impossible' inscription. He soon told the curious gathering why it had been "impossible to translate it." All the copies and illustrations that had been sent abroad were studded with errors. Despite his obvious mastery of Semitic and Kufic calligraphy, Italinski still found a few difficulties: either the letters had been harmed by time, or the strangeness of some of the characters hindered complete legibility, and his translation is far from perfect. It is obvious that Italinski studied the actual tombstone. This means that it had, some time before the Maltese rebellion, been

transferred from the Muscat palace in besieged Valletta to some other place in the country. It is inconceivable that Italinski would have ventured to break the blockade to examine the tombstone in French-occupied Valletta.

How long Italinski stayed in Malta is difficult to establish. In January and February 1801, he was still writing officially about the island to Sir Augustus B. Paget, but from Palermo.¹ Italinski later published the Majmuna inscription and his translation of it in a reputable *melange* in Vienna.²

When Ottorino Respighi, the leading Italian symphonic composer of this century, visited Malta in December 1933, he was taken round the island by my father, with whom he had established a solid friendship.¹⁶ Among other things, father showed him the Majmuna tombstone with its Italian transcription. Respighi instantly fell in love with its intense poetry and took the lyrics home with him to set to music.

Fr Gristi reproduces Italinski's transcription in Italian, a highly poetic and evocative rendering which corresponds only partially with the later ones prepared by Amari,¹¹ Rossi,¹² and fr Gabriele D'Aleppo.¹³

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The same death which had savaged young Majmuna, weighting her eyelids with dust, mowed down Respighi shortly later. Majmuna's lament did not join his [p.12] beguiling *Ancient Airs and Dances*. Perhaps it was best so. Only harm comes from spreading honey over nectar.

Acknowledgements

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[GIOVANNI BONELLO]

Notes and References

- ¹ *Gozo, The Roots of an Island*, 1990, p. 44.
- ² *Malta Illustrata*, Book I, No. 9, p. 691, para. 16.
- ³ Fig. 17.
- ⁴ *Traduzione d'una antica iscrizione sepolcrale araba scritta con caratteri cofici trovata in Malta esistente nella casa di pertinenza del Barone Muscat situata in Strada Stretta.*

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- 5 This house, situated in Strait Street, corner with Britannia Street, was the
property of Baroness Parisi and was in 1839 leased to Judge G.B. Satariano.
6 (“Badger,” *The Malta Penny Magazine*, October 19, 1839).
Ibid.
- 7 Ettore Rossi, *Le lapidi sepolcrali Arabo-Musulmane a Malta* in *Rivista di*
Studi Orientali, 1929, xii, p. 432.
- 8 Charles de Brosses, *Viaggio in Italia*, Rome, 1992, p. 687.
- 9 Italinski’s speech is reported, apparently verbatim, in Baron Vincenzo
Azopardi’s *Giornale della Presa di Malta e Gozo*, 1836, together with the
reply of the Maltese representatives (pp. 147-150). Baron Azopardi always
refers to the envoy’s name as Italiski, but this is obviously wrong.
- 10 Andrew P. Vella, *Malta and the Czars*, 1965, p. 44.
- 11 Michele Amari, *Le Epigrafi Arabiche in Sicilia*, 1971, pp. 218-236.
- 12 Ettore Rossi, *op. cit.*
- 13 *Melita*, 1925, pp. 2-3. Reference kindly supplied by Fr Frangisk Azzopardi
O.F.M.Capp.
- 14 *The Paget Papers*, London, 1896, Vol. I, p. 30, Vol. II, pp. 20, 42.
- 15 *Mines d’Orient*, Vienna, 1809, Vol. I, p. 397-399.
- 16 Ottorino Respighi, Bologna 1879 - Rome 1936. Known mostly for his still
popular symphonic suites *Roman Festivals*, *Pines of Rome* and *Fountains of*
Rome, and his ballet orchestration of Rossini’s musical morsels in *La Boutique*
Fantastique.