

VASSALLI'S BURIAL PLACE

1. Sur Editur,

M'ilux fegġ appell biex iċ-ċimiterju Anglikan fuq is-sur biswit il-Bibljojoteka ta' Beltissebh jiġi restawrat għax hemm midfun M.A. Vassalli.

Dan mhux eżatt għax dan iċ-ċimiterju beda jintuża fl-1839, għaxar snin wara li miet Vassalli fl-1829. Vassalli aktarx, kwazi żgur, difnuh f'ċimiterju iehor, li illum jinsab mirдум taht il-Hotel Excelsior (Ara Edgar G. Montanaro: "God's Acre: Msida Bastion Cemetery", *Civilisation*, n. 6, pp. 722-728).

CARMEL SANT (*Il-Hajja* 20/11/86)

2. Sir,

It is generally wrongly held that M.A. Vassalli was buried at the Msida Bastion Cemetery. This is impossible because Vassalli was already ten years dead when the cemetery was inaugurated in 1839. Most probably he was buried at the Quarantine Bastion cemetery, where the Hotel Excelsior stands today.

This is what Mr Edgar G. Montanaro has to say on the subject:

"The truth is that Vassalli must have been buried in the Quarantine Bastion. He died on January 12, 1829 and he was buried on the following day, as attested by the following entry in the Burial Register of St. Paul's Anglican Cathedral in Valletta: 13th January, 1829. On this day was (sic) interred the remains of Michele Antonio Vassalli supposed to be about 64 years old by me (Sg) John Clough, Chaplain to Government", *Civilization*, No. 26, p. 728.

The Msida Bastion Cemetery should be fully restored, not because of Vassalli, but because of the many prominent English and Maltese persons, including Vassalli's wife, Catherine de Fremaux, buried therein.

Yours truly

CARMEL SANT (*The Sunday Times*, 23/11/1986)

3. Sir,

I am indebted to the Rt. Revd. Professor Mgr. C. Sant whose letter to *The Sunday Times* (November 23) on the subject of M.A. Vassalli's burial place prompts me to add a few more notes on the matter to which Mgr. Sant referred in his letter. I am also grateful to Professor V. Griffiths, who drew my attention to two important points of my article (*Civilisation*, No. 26) in his letter to me dated March 3, 1986.

The date of the opening of the Msida Bastion Cemetery is an old and complex question which has given rise to a riddle that has not been solved so far. G.P. Badger on page 202 of his "*Description of the Maltese Islands*" strongly suggested the year 1828 as the correct date and during the second half of the 19th Century this assertion was never challenged.

Captain Charles Zammit in his admirable Survey of the Cemetery in 1930 shows much earlier burials, namely in Zone A, one in 1812, two in 1818, one in 1821, one in 1822, one in 1824 and seven in 1828. In Zone B, there were none prior to

1828, but in Zone C there was one in 1809, one in 1810, one in 1813, one in 1814, one in 1818 and one in 1826. Why were the people concerned buried at Msida Bastion when there must have been ample accomodation at the Quarantine Bastion?

In the Quarantine Bastion Cemetery, my collaborators in research, the late Colonel Victor P. Vella, the late Captain Trapani and the late Dr John Gerald Cutajar Beck, MD, were very much surprised to find that quite a number of graves of privates and riflemen of the 95th (2nd The Sherwood Foresters), the 73rd (2nd The Black Watch) and the 2nd Battalion The Rifle Brigade bore on their tombstones dates ranging from 1829 to 1832. There was also quite a fair number of burials of privates of the 5th 1st Northumberland Fusiliers, 60th The King's Royal Rifle Corps, the 47th 1st Loyal (North Lancashire) Regiment and the 54th 2nd Dorsetshire Regiment with the year 1939 shown as the year of their burial. Why were these soldiers buried here and not at the Msida Bastion Cemetery which had long been opened?

The Senior Citizens of Floriana were several times consulted on this matter. They strongly held the view that the Msida Bastion Cemetery was never a *new* Cemetery but only an *extension* of that at the Quarantine Bastion adding that the Authorities of the time had in mind the idea of taking over the two intervening fields thereby linking in the course of time the two Cemeteries to form one large Memorial Park. No documentary evidence has ever been found for this view.

Thus writers' opinions became divided on the subject of the date of the opening of the Msida Bastion Graveyard, some were led or misled into believing that the year was 1828, others held that it was 1839, basing their belief on the fact that burials at the Quarantine Cemetery did take place as late as that date. The first three decades of British Rule witnessed conflicting interests battling for mastery and it is sad to see that this period of confused policy was extended even to the realm of the departed!

With regard to Vassalli's grave, there were great hopes that during Captain Zammit's Survey, some trace of this grave would be found. Unfortunately no unmarked graves were found there, but Senior Citizens often stated to have seen three or four graves with plain tombstones at the Quarantine Bastion near the north-western wall. The German air-raids of 1942 reduced this beautiful gem of a Cemetery to a shambles. The Hotel Excelsior was later built on a large part of the site, but a small area is still extant. Perhaps the descendants of the Hon. John Hookham Frere, Vassalli's great benefactor, may be in possession of papers formerly belonging to this scholar and statesman, which may throw more light on Vassalli's final resting-place. *Quod est in votis*.

In my article on the Msida Bastion Cemetery, the date for the opening of Ta' Braxia Cemetery was twice shown as 1886. This date should of course have read 1856. This was due to a typing error on my part when transcribing from my notes. My thanks are due to Professor Griffiths who drew my attention to the point. The Ta' Braxia Cemetery was completed in 1856 as shown in the Register of Burials existing there.

Yours truly,

EDGAR G. MONTANARO, (*The Sunday Times*, 30/11/1986)

4. Sir,

I was interested to read the letter in your issue of November 23 from Mgr. Professor Sant on the subject M.A. Vassalli and the Msida Bastion Cemetery. Particularly welcome is his support for the idea of restoring this cemetery.

However, it is not correct to say that Vassalli was already ten years dead when this cemetery was inaugurated in 1839. After all, Sir Henry Hotham, Vice Admiral of the Red and Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Station, was buried in this cemetery in 1833. His monument can still be seen there today in the lowest part of the cemetery surrounded by a circular railing. Elizabeth Jemima, Dowager Countess of Erroll and wife of the Rt.Hon.John Hookham Frere was buried in the Msida Bastion Cemetery on January 24, 1831 –and there were many, many more during this period.

The implication that the Msida Bastion Cemetery was not in existence when Vassalli died in 1829 is also incorrect. By way of illustration I list below the names of three persons known to have been buried in this cemetery in 1828: July 19: Georgina Sarah Franks; September 24: Emma Maria Grant, wife of Charles David Grant; December 26; John Robert Diston.

All these names are listed in the Report on the Msida Bastion cemetery prepared in 1930 by Charles Zammit for the Museum Department. This means that the monumental inscriptions relating to these burials were read at that time. Furthermore, I have been able to verify the correctness of all the above dates of burial by tracing the appropriate entries in the Register of Burials at St Paul's Anglican Cathedral. Even today, after all the devastation caused in this cemetery since 1930, one can still identify the monumental inscription of Emma Maria Grant.

It is therefore quite clear that when Vassalli was buried on January 13, 1829, the Msida Bastion Cemetery was already in use. It is therefore very likely, to put it no higher, that Vassalli was buried in this cemetery. It would therefore seem appropriate for a memorial tablet to be erected in this cemetery recording his death and setting out his achievements. Such a tablet could be erected on the high wall at the back of the lowest section of the cemetery, which has previously been used for just such a purpose. It is probable that we shall never be able to establish for certain the exact place where Vassalli is buried. I therefore suggest, to cover all eventualities, that the wording on the tablet should begin –“In or near this place lies buried....”

I entirely agree with Mgr. Professor Sant that, wherever Vassalli is buried, it is highly desirable that action should be taken without delay to restore this cemetery. I know that *Din l-Art Helwa* has for some time been promoting the idea of turning the Msida Bastion Cemetery into an attractive garden of remembrance, while preserving several of the most important monuments. Let us hope that some action can be taken very shortly before it is too late.

Yours truly,

R.G. KIRKPATRICK (*The Sunday Times*, 14/12/1986)

5. Sir,

Comm. E.G. Montanaro (*The Sunday Times*, November 30) has written exhaustively and with authority on the vexed question of the date of opening of the sadly derelict Msida Bastion Cemetery, while on the contiguous and extinct Quarantine Bastion cemetery he gives interesting facts which we hope he will expand into a full account. Be it noted that the *Guida* published by Quintana (C. 1845) says of Protestant cemeteries: “*contiguo ad essi evvi il cimitero de greci scismatici.*”

I confirm that Charles A. Zammit's list of graves and monuments at Msida Bastion shows at least 24 burials prior to 1829 and 11 in that very year (Vassalli died on January 12, 1829). Perhaps the most notable of these was Walter Rodwell Wright (April 20, 1826). the President of the Malta Court of Appeal and first Provincial Grand Master (of Freemasonry in the Mediterranean) to whom a monument “in the bastion wall” with an English and Latin inscription by Hookham Frere was erected in 1840 (A.M. Broadley: *History of Freemasonry in the District of Malta*: 1880); the peregrinations of this monument are recorded in C.E. de Wolff's *Floreat Melita*, 1957. According to Zammit's list (but not his introductory note) the earliest burial at Msida Bastion was in 1808 and the latest in 1887.

Of course we have no evidence to determine whether Vassalli's burial, by Chaplain John Clough and on the initiative of Hookham Frere and G.F. Schlienz, was in the Msida Bastion or in the Quarantine Bastion Cemetery. However, by 1829 the latter site must have been fairly full, and one may note that in 1831 Hookham Frere buried his own wife on the Msida Bastion. G.P. Badger (*Description of Malta and Gozo*, 1838) seems to indicate the Msida Bastion as the third burial site “opened about ten years ago.”

Your readers will learn with indignation that this valuable historical relic continues to suffer the onslaught of vandals, robbers, bird-trappers and motor cyclists in spite of the efforts by *Din l-Art Helwa* to prod the authorities into some effort to save it.

Yours truly,

V.G. GRIFFITHS (*The Sunday Times* 14/12/1986)