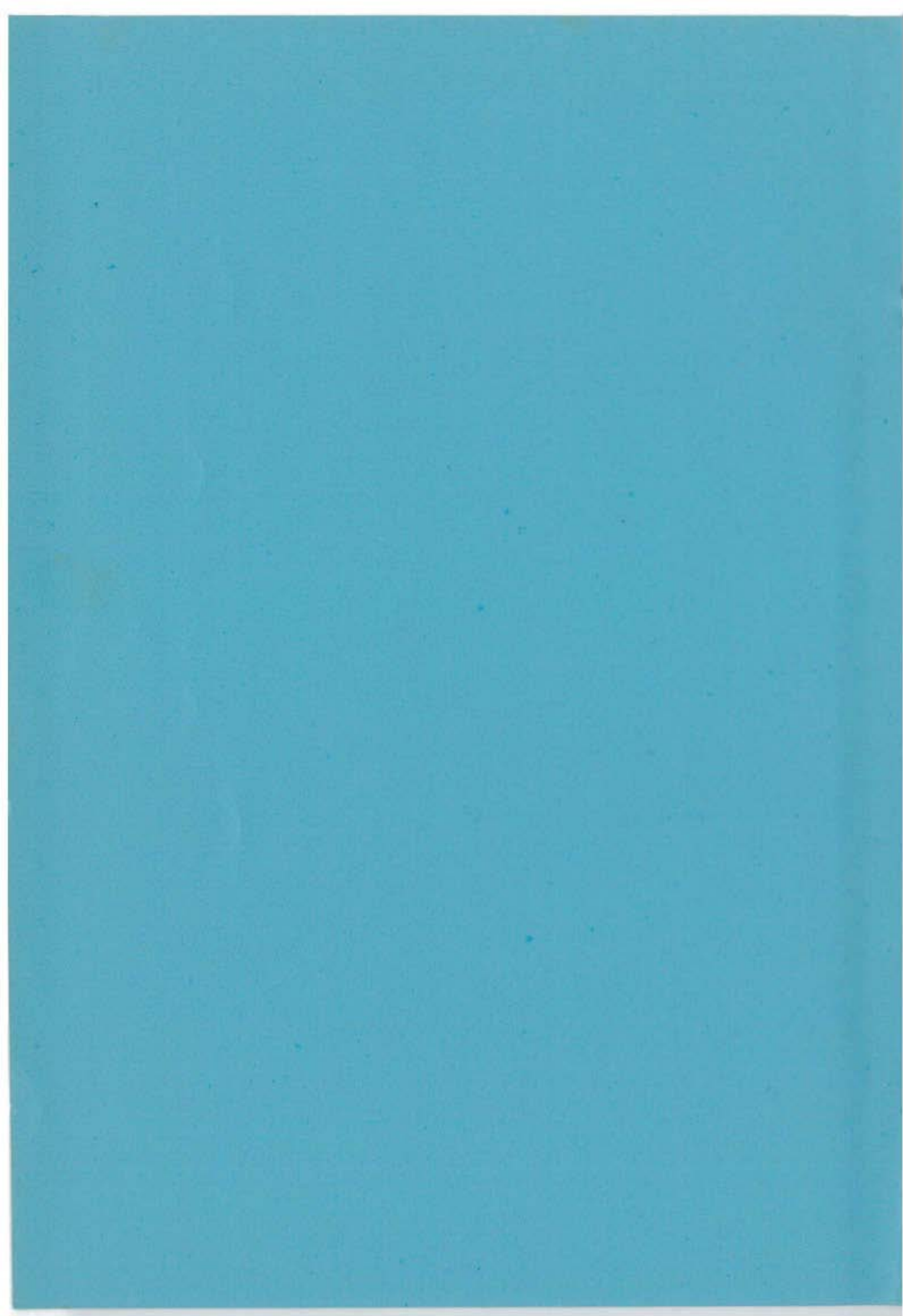


Offprint

ST. PAUL'S GROTTO, CHURCH and MUSEUM
at RABAT, MALTA.

(ed Can. J. Azzopardi)

Malta, Progress Press, 1990



VISITORS TO ST PAUL'S GROTTO IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

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1. Foreign visitors to St Paul's Grotto in the early seventeenth century

Geographically very near the centre of the Mediterranean, Malta has rarely in the past played any significant role in the affairs of the region¹. The Maltese archipelago, together with other islands in the channel between Sicily and Tunisia, were sparsely inhabited up to the coming of the Order of St. John, mainly owing to their size. The essential axis of the sea was and still is North/South from Sicily to Africa. Hence ships travelling from East to West passed through the straits of Messina if particular reasons did not direct them to the islands².

Malta was considered to be "off the beaten track"³, away from the coast-hugging trade routes. It is no wonder that her cultural tradition developed in relative isolation with prominent people like St Paul reaching the island by chance, when storm-driven off the usual course taken by merchant ships and galleys⁴.

Malta came to be nearer to Europe, simply because it happened to lie nearer to the communication-lane running along the southern coast of the continent⁵. A fact which led to the eventual establishment of intimate ties with Sicily⁶.

The granting of Malta to the Order of St John by Emperor Charles V in 1530 meant a radical

change in the position of the island in the eyes of her neighbours. The Order was able to transform the provincial character of Malta into a cosmopolitan state with an influx of diverse peoples and languages. The Order further played its part to translate its feudal charge of Malta into a *de facto* state of sovereignty which tendency became clearer after the sixteenth century⁷.

The fame and popularity of Malta was boosted by the great victory over the Ottoman Turks in the Great Siege of 1565. The upsurge of activity which followed, including the building of Valletta, led to more complex patterns of demand and to a steady influx of immigrants, both Maltese and foreign to the island⁸.

In an unpaginated manuscript at the Magna Curia Castellania, Reg. Revel. Mancip, 1588 - 1617 (the Grand Master's Law Courts), held in the Palace Archives, Valletta, one finds random lists of passengers that came to Malta at this time of great activity. Among the sparse documentation which exists for the period 1605 - 1617 one comes across references to various individuals who arrived in Malta as travellers.

1. D. Cutajar & C. Cassar, "Malta's role in Mediterranean Affairs 1530-1699", in *Mid Med Bank Report and Accounts* 1984.
2. F. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the Age of Philip II*, (trans S. Reynolds) Glasgow 1972, Vol. I p. 116.
3. *The Odyssey*, Chapter V.
4. *Acts of the Apostles*, Chapter XXVII lines 27 - 44.
5. F. Braudel, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
6. A. Luttrell, "Approaches to Medieval Malta", in *Medieval Malta*, ed. A. Luttrell, London 1975, p. 69.
7. D. Cutajar & C. Cassar, "Budgeting in 17th century Malta", in *Mid Med Bank Report and Accounts* 1983.
8. D. Cutajar & C. Cassar, *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 45.

Adi deuo
 Compare Joanne cané francese. et dice esser venuto hoggi
 da Messina con la barana di fr. Antonio per la de=
 uotione di s.^{to} Paulo —

Coem
 Compare Gioanne ~~o~~ ulpe Todeco d'età d'anni 20
 barbaudo da esser venuto sien da primo Perreno
 co' uno Caravana Carica di legno ~~per da primo~~
 per vedere la grotta di s.^{to} paulo et q.^{to} co' suo
 Giuramento ~

Aug 27. 1616.
 Compare Sylvestro Bene della Città di Vicenza et da esser venuto
 da questa matina da sicilia d'età d'anni 30. uiso al
 proposito di questa station et al tutto restor di esser
 venuto a visitare Grotta di s.^{to} Paulo

Extracts from *Registrum Revelationum* showing the arrival of pilgrims to St Paul's Grotto from:
 France — Joanni Tacie, 31 August 1613
 Germany — Giovanni Volpe, 14 September 1614
 Vienna — Sylvestre Bene, 27 July 1616.

Courtesy: National Archives.

These include a few who came to Malta out of their devotion for the island's connections with St Paul.

In his description of Malta written in 1536, Jean Quentin d'Autun refers to the devotion of St Paul and the crypt,

"Near the city there is a cave dug in a rock, with two altars within; they say St Paul was in custody in it for three months along with other prisoners, healing at the same time the islanders..."⁹

Quentin d'Autun further points out that,

"From that cave, ... pieces of stone are daily cut off by visitors who confirm openly throughout Africa, Italy and Rome that they are healed from the bites of serpents and scorpions through these stories"¹⁰

This was later confirmed by Mons. Visconti in his 'relazione' to the Pope, where he mentions the devotion to St Paul and especially to the crypt where he was told that St Paul had lived.¹¹

Between 1613 and 1616 travellers from all parts of Europe came expressly to visit the crypt presumably at the instigation of a Spanish nobleman, Jean Beriegos, who had revived veneration for this old Pauline shrine earlier in the century. In fact by 1607, Beriegos had obtained permission to look after the crypt by Pope Paul V, which Brief led to the separation of the crypt from the Church of St Paul in Rabat¹². The information given in the aforesaid manuscript is thinly scattered since only a few examples are available, nevertheless it serves as a good indi-

cation that by then the devotion to the crypt had spread.

The first traveller of whom we have evidence of his devotion towards St Paul arrived on 31 August 1613, the Frenchman Joanni Tacie. He was followed in September 14, of 1614, by the German Giovanni Vulpe who came expressly to Malta due to his devotion to St Paul and specifically to visit the crypt.

The visitors in the years that followed, 1615 and 1616, gave more explicit details about their visit. In fact all specifically referred the crypt and the Church of St Paul. Such was the declared motive of Pietro Steynert of Hungary who arrived in Malta on 18 March 1615. Amongst those who arrived at Malta in the following year (1616), an Italian from Bologna, Stefano Maccino arrived on 22 April, and two others, Sylvestro Bene from Vienna and Ulficano Neult of Styria (south east Austria), both arrived on 27 July of 1616.

The arrival of such pilgrims to Malta is in itself significant, as it also indicates the arrival of new ideas to the island and a break up of provincial society, at least in the central part of the Maltese islands. The crypt of St Paul was an important landmark of Maltese Christian devotion. Not without reason did the Cathedral Chapter of Mdina declare on 13 May 1617, that the Grotto of St Paul in Rabat is "the foundation stone of the Church in Malta". And it is therefore no wonder that the Chapter appointed Notary Andrea Allegritto as its delegate in Rome to defend the importance of St Paul crypt for Malta's Christianity¹³.

Carmel Cassar

9. J. Quentin d'Autun, *The Earliest Description of Malta* (Lyons 1536), (trans. H.C.R. Vella) Malta 1980, p.45.

10. *Ibid.*, p.47.

11. There at least three published versions of the "Relazione Visconti", one dated by C.A. Vianello to 1582 and published as "Una relazione inedita di Malta nel 1582", in (A)rchivio (S)torico di (M)alta VII, p.280-303 (Rome 1936); Other versions of the "Relazione" were published by P. Falcone, "Una relazione di Malta, sulla fine del '500, in A.S.M. IV, (Rome 1933) pp. 1-51; and L. Sandri, A.S.M. IX (Rome 1938). This "Relazione" also exists in ms. at the National Library of Malta, Valletta, Libr. 23 ff. 262-276, and published in the 19th century journal, *L'Ordine*, No. 18—26 April 1861. Furthermore one must note that the crypt had been mentioned by the Order's historian, G. Bosio, *Istoria della Sacra et Illustrissima Militia di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, Vol. III, Rome 1602, p. 95, and G.F. Abela, *Della descrizione di Malta isola nel mare siciliano con le sue antichità, ed altre notizie*, Malta 1647, p.222. Further one should note the "Relazione" published by G. Sernprini, "Malta nella seconda metà del Seicento", in A.S.M. IV (Rome 1933) pp. 97-112, in which we are told that "the stone (from the crypt) is sent to all parts of the world", p.103.

12. Can. J. Azzopardi, "St Paul's Grotto — History", in *Il-Festi Taghna*, Malta 1983, unpaginated.

13. *Ibid.*

2. Distinguished visitors to St Paul Grotto in the Caraffa decade (1680-1690)

In the minutes of the Council of the Order of St John, preserved in the National Library of Malta, amongst various entries, one encounters entries on the arrival of distinguished visitors in Malta. The protocol used on the occasion of their visit and other details connected with their visit are also registered in the same entries. During the Magistracy of Fr Gregorio Caraffa, three distinguished personages visited Malta and during their sojourn they visited St Paul's Grotto.

However the first important visitor to St Paul's Grotto, during the Caraffa decade (1680-1690), was the newly elected Grandmaster himself, Fra Gregorio Caraffa, who was elected to the Magistracy on 2 May 1680¹. It was customary for every newly-elected Grand Master to hold an installation ceremony in the old capital of the city Mdina².

Grand Master Caraffa chose the twenty-ninth June 1680, the feast of the apostles St Peter and St Paul, as the day for his installation at Malta. The minutes of the Council of the Order of St John inform us that on the said day the Grand Master, accompanied by the Inquisitor Mgr Giacomo Cantelmi, by nearly all the Grand Crosses, a large number of knights, and by nearly all the cavalry of the island, proceeded to

"Citta' Notabile". However before proceeding to Mdina, Grand Master Caraffa attended for the celebration of Holy Mass 'nella grotta di San Paolo'. Then, followed by the above mentioned entourage, and a large crowd of people, he proceeded on foot to the old city, where the traditional installation ceremony was held.³

In the following year (1681), the Marquis of Sclera, son of Conte di Santo Stefano, Viceroy of Sicily, paid a visit to Malta. Throughout his stay on the island, from 22 to 29 April, he visited the fortifications, 'La Grotta di San Paolo' and other places of interest⁴.

On the 25th February 1682, the Prince of Bufera and della Roccella accompanied by his consort, arrived in Malta to visit his uncle grand Master Caraffa. Throughout their stay on the island the two distinguished visitors 'visitarono la Grotta di San Paolo'. They departed on 17 March 1682⁵.

The last distinguished foreign visitor to St Paul's Grotto during the Caraffa decade was Monsieur Giardin, French Ambassador to Constantinople. He arrived in Malta on 20 November 1685 and departed five days later⁶.

Winston L. Zammit.

1. G.A. Vassallo, *Storja ta' Malta*, 1948, p.189.

2. This custom was introduced by Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam, who soon after his arrival on the Island took possession of the old capital on 13 November 1530. See G.A. Vassallo, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93.

3. AOM 262, f. 106 r.

4. *Ibid.* f. 125 v.

5. *Ibid.* ff. 139 v, 140 r, 140 v.

6. *Ibid.* f. 234 r.