

Book Reviews:

Mikiel Fsadni O.P., *The Girna – The Maltese Corbelled Stone Hut*, Dominican Publication, Malta 1992, pp. 120, illus.

The Maltese countryside shares in common with most other countries of the Mediterranean littoral, a rich heritage of drystone constructions which have, so far, largely escaped scholarly attention. Accelerated development and the sad absence of a sensitively planned strategy for the protection of the countryside have put this patrimony at very serious risk. A high percentage has already been lost and what survives is often in a state of complete neglect and fast becoming derelict. The need for a comprehensive gazeteer inclusive of site plans and detailed photographic documentation, which would provide the basis for a serious study is, therefore, a pressing need. Such an undertaking would require the services of a well equipped team of suitably trained field researchers and should preferably be co-ordinated by the Geography Programme of the University of Malta. Organizing it and seeing it through are not easy and are likely to create problems of logistics and finance. In spite of its desirability such a gazeteer seems therefore destined not to materialise for a long time to come. It is for this reason that books such as *The Girna* should receive the enthusiastic acclaim of all who have the study and continued existence of rural Malta at heart.

The book focuses attention on the corbelled stone hut and discusses its construction technology, typology, and distribution. The account is tinged with nostalgia for a rural, and especially agrarian, culture that has been superseded by development and industrialisation and now largely belongs to folk memory. This romantic element is however scholarly controlled and does not impinge on an otherwise scientific approach. The book is in many ways a watershed in Maltese rural studies and should serve as a stimulus to future monographic research on the various other related types drystone constructions which together combine to give the Maltese countryside its distinctive character. I would particularly like to encourage a study of the *migbañ* or drystone beehive which shares common characteristics with the *girna* but is less known and in greater danger of extinction.

The *girna* is a primitive hut, enclosing an oval or (approximately) circular space with a rudely corbelled roof. Structurally and architecturally it has a clear affinity with the dry stone buildings of many of the prehistoric communities of the Mediterranean littoral. It is, in fact, in many ways, their descendant. In Malta the few known Neolithic, Copper Age, and Bronze Age huts had largely analogous ground plans and dimensions, and used drystone at least for the lower courses, but they

apparently also made use of mud bricks and carried lighter wattle and daub roofs. The corbelled roof technique was, on the other hand, used with seemingly sophisticated ease, and on a quasi megalomaniac scale, in the great megalithic temple structures.

The Maltese *girna*-hut would, therefore, seem to be only superficially related to its prehistoric antecedent. Its origins are, I propose, rooted in the “African huts” recorded by Jean Quentin in 1536. These humble buildings dotted the island and, together with the rock-cut shelters, were often the only type of house found in the countryside. It is probable that they were used for the rearing of live stock as well as for human habitation and that they represented an early type of *razzett* or farmhouse.

Some of the corbelled huts discussed by Fr Michael Fsadni, such as the cluster at In-Nadur, limits of Bingemma, give the impression of *giren* developing into *razzett*-type buildings. Others preserve mangers and stable areas. The most impressive is the well known complex at Bahrija, where three *giren* huddle together to form a closely knit unit enclosed within a dry stone precinct wall. This is probably the closest one can get to the typology of the late medieval Maltese rural house.

Most of the corbelled huts discussed by Fr Fsadni are, apparently quite recent, and some were, in fact, built within living memory. The diminutive size of many of them would, furthermore, seem to exclude the possibility that they served any purpose other than providing temporary shelter from the inclemencies of the weather. They are, however, the product of an old tradition whose building techniques and idiosyncrasies were preserved over the passage of many generations by an insular rural society.

For many centuries, until the first decades of the twentieth century, the *girna* withstood the pressures of technological and social changes. Dating considerations are therefore difficult. Unless supported by documentary, or archaeological, evidence it is almost impossible to date a *girna*. The only significant change was probably in size. With the rapid expansion of the villages and rural towns in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the isolated rural communities were gradually abandoned. Farmers and stock breeders forsook their isolated *giren*-dwellings and built houses in the new urban cores. In other instances the *girna* was replaced by the *razzett* which besides being better built and more spacious could also offer greater comfort and security. I do not think that the *razzett*-type of building can be dated, at the earliest, to before the first decades of the seventeenth century. This was an important period of transition from a dry stone type of rural building to a more technologically advanced, ashlar orientated architecture. Once the *girna* had lost

its attraction as a dwelling-hut and started serving the humbler purpose of an animal pen or of a field tool-shed or temporary shelter, it probably underwent a change in scale. There was henceforth no need for large *girma* complexes. Smaller *giren* were just as adequate.

The book makes no pretence at comprehensiveness. There is quite obviously much more to learn and discover about these humble little structures that are so intimately interwoven with Malta's rural history. Their full story will probably never be known. The book has, however, given their study a very good start and no future researcher can afford to ignore it.

MARIO BUHAGIAR

Charles Cini (ed.), *The Art of the Medal / L'Arte della Medaglia*,

Published by The Cathedral Museum – Mdina, Malta 1993, Softbound, pp. 77.

Recently the Mdina Cathedral Museum has been the recipient of two important sets of donations: the Dr. John A. Cauchi Bequest of paintings and drawings, and a large and fine assortment of medals, the gift of the Associazione Italiana della Medaglia, Fr. Charles Cini SDB, and the Hon. Minister for Youth and the Arts, Dr. Michael Frendo. The medals were officially presented on the 12th November, 1993, on the occasion of the Cathedral Museum's twenty-fifth anniversary. This latter donation further enhances the already significant collection of coins and medals possessed by the Cathedral Museum. It is well to remember that The Central Bank of Malta, through the Friends of the Cathedral Museum, regularly presents to the Museum its current issues of coins and medals.

To coincide with the presentation, an exhibition of the medals was held in the Museum. The bilingual *The Art of the Medal / L'Arte della Medaglia*, partly sponsored by APS Bank and printed by Printwell, is essentially a catalogue of this bequest. The editor appears to have taken special pains to give everybody due credit so that the prelim section is somewhat overloaded by lists of members of the organising committees, a foreword, a preface, a presentation and an introduction.

The catalogue proper is in three sections. The first part illustrates the donation from the Associazione Italiana della Medaglia, the second part the medals presented by Fr. Charles Cini and finally part three records the gift made by the Hon. Minister for Youth and the Arts. The book is concluded by a list of artists and a contents page.

Although the entire collection is listed only a selection is actually reproduced in black and white illustrations.

The medals encompass a rich variety of themes and commemorate diverse events, organisations and personalities. Their size, medium, style and technique vary and so does their quality and artistic merit. They range from straight forward traditional designs to impressionistic, expressionistic and abstract renderings. Here craftsmanship often combines with creative artistry to produce masterpieces that surpass the constraints set by the medals' natural limitations and size.

Seen within this general context it is indeed a great pleasure to note what remarkable high standards our own medallist Noel Galea Bason has managed to attain. His dexterity and command of the medium combines with fertile creative powers and a strong personality. His oeuvre is outstanding, fears no comparison and is exceptionally beautiful.

Most of the medals are undoubtedly veritable works of art; a few less so. But, whatever the individual artistic quality or merit of the medals, the entire collection is representative of the current state of the medallists' art. It is a pity that this catalogue should lack a proper critical analysis of the collection as well as adequate biographical information on the artists whose works are here represented. Nonetheless it is a valuable guide to the collection, a fitting commemoration of an important and generous gift and a valuable tool to connoisseurs, numismatists and scholars.

The recto and verso of the medal, especially coined to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Cathedral Museum, respectively emblazons the front and back covers of this catalogue. This attractive and beautifully produced commemorative medal was designed by Claudia Pini and is available in either silver or bronze.

ANTONIO ESPINOSA-RODRIGUES