

***Distant Borders Confronted and Met Each Other  
Through Different Religious Identities:  
The Story of the Holy Crucifix at Ta' Ġiežu Church in Valletta  
and the threat of an Ottoman invasion against Malta***

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**Borders as an epitome of suffering**

In 1742, the Maltese Notary Francesco Dos recorded, in a deed, the history of a crucifix that is still to be found at the church known in Malta as Ta' Ġiežu, standing for Our Lady of Jesus. This church is in the capital Valletta. This crucifix became synonymous with this church and to this day is still known as the Crucifix of *Ta' Ġiežu*. In this deed, Dos stated that this crucifix:

*“was created by the hands of a master and an Italian national, a Reverend Father of the said Order, who happened to be in Malta in the company of another twelve friars of the said Order on their way to the Holy Land. This friar was held in high esteem and was respected by all for being an exemplary holy man.”<sup>1</sup>*

The notary does not disclose the name of the artist but relied on the information of an elderly person by the name of Francesco Romero. Romero was one of the old members of the religious confraternity that became the owner of this crucifix. This confraternity was set up for the veneration of the Holy Cross and thus, in Valletta, it came to be known as that of the Holy Crucifix. Romero was born in 1659,<sup>2</sup> and became a member of the confraternity in 1684, aged 25.<sup>3</sup> He was not a contemporary of the period when this crucifix was commissioned. Through the notarial deeds, it is known that this crucifix was commissioned in 1648. Furthermore, the deed reveals the names of the persons who had paid for it as well as Fra Innocenzo da Petralia, the artist involved.

Fra Innocenzo was in Malta around 1648 when he executed this crucifix.<sup>4</sup> This was not his sole artistic work done during this sojourn on the island. After finishing the first commission, he had to create a second crucifix that had been requested by the bishop. Having fulfilled his commitments, Fra Innocenzo returned to his base in Sicily where he died in an

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<sup>1</sup> NAM, Francesco Dos R/237, 9-ix-1742, f. 17r-v.

<sup>2</sup> AQUILINA, Ġorġ – MACALUSO, Guido – BUGEJA, Samwel (1986), *Il-Ġimgha l-Kbira tal-Belt*, Malta, 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> MERECIECA, Simon (2020), “A Saintly Sojourn, Frate Innocenzo da Petralia Stay in Malta,” in AT-TARD, Christian (ed.), *Ta' Ġiežu Crucifix, Faith, History, Iconography Conservation*, Malta, 39–46.

aura of sanctity.<sup>5</sup> Thus, these crucifixes were probably the last works of this great Sicilian artist whose contribution to the art world is currently being revitalized.



The crucifix of Fra. Innocenzo da Petralia at the Church of the Franciscan Minors in Valletta

By the mid-18th century, the name of this artist had been forgotten. What was recalled was the connection that existed between this crucifix and the city of Jerusalem. Mistakenly, it was thought that the artist was on his way to the Holy Land when he executed this crucifix rather than on his way back home. For sure, these references confirm that Fra Innocenzo stopped twice in Malta. Once on his way to Jerusalem and on his way back from the Holy Land. But why was such a connection remembered? Because by then, borders between Christianity and Islam became the essence of human suffering.

It should be noted that this crucifix belonged to a confraternity that was attached to the Franciscan Minors who till this day remain the custodians of the Holy Land. Their convent in Malta at that time acted as a stepping stone for all those who wished to reach Jerusalem. Fra Innocenzo resorted to make use of the amenities offered by his brethren in Malta to fulfil his dream of visiting the Holy Land. Crossing borders was never an easy task. The problem was not only one of distance linked to the hardship of undertaking a long voyage from the Central Mediterranean to the Levant on a sailing boat. There was also the peril of entering those areas that separated Christians from the Ottoman world. This needed special passes to cross what today can be described as war zones. Therefore, it was no mean feat to undertake a visit to the place where the man, Christians consider the Saviour of humanity, met his death.

Romero knew members within the same confraternity who on learning about the experiences of these brave men were enticed to cross over and visit the Ottoman regions. One cannot exclude that Romero himself must have heard similar tales from friars who had visited the Holy Land. This explains why a visit to the Holy Land that had taken place be-

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 42.

fore Romero was born became associated with other visits that had taken place during his life time. What Romero wanted was to recount the oral traditions that he had listened to concerning these long distant voyages made by Franciscan Friars Minor to visit the burial place of their Saviour. Their stories continued to reverberate in the convent at Valletta because these men infringed upon the invisible borders imposed by the ever-perennial war between the Cross and the Crescent. These were events worth remembering because they were about human suffering. Those who undertook these trips trespassed invincible parameters that were zealously protected.



The crucifix is taken out in procession on special occasions. It is still considered miraculous and is still venerated today

Since Francesco Romero recounted this tale when he was 83 years old,<sup>6</sup> he could have easily mixed up some of the facts and fused different stories into one. It is also possible that Notary Dos may have misunderstood him. What is certain is that Notary Dos was anxious to record what Romero had to say. In fact, Romero died the following year.<sup>7</sup> The question is why was Dos so anxious? Was Romero beginning to suffer from loss of memory; possibly suffering from what we now know as dementia, and Dos was keen to record what this man knew before it was too late?

If one studies these historical references within the context of their time, one understands why all the inaccuracies and interest in Romero's story. The reason for this confusion is to be found in the history of the crucifix itself and what it represented for believers in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is also to be found in the history of borders and how they impinged on the identities of those crossing them.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 8. Francesco Romeo died on the 8 May 1743 and was buried in the church of Saint Mary of Jesus in Valletta.

One needs to start by establishing that the artist of this crucifix, the Sicilian Friar, Innocenzo da Petralia, was not interested in portraying a realistic image of a crucified man. What Innocenzo da Petralia was seeking was an axiomatic representation of death. This is the main reason why da Petralia goes beyond the historical truth.

From the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards, in Italy and this includes Sicily, pictorial and sculptural realism were introduced. In the crucifixion, this realism reached its artistic zenith with a work that is attributed to Michelangelo Buonarroti – even though this is the work of another artist – who depicted a completely naked Christ crucified. But this representation had an impact on the way Christ was henceforth to be depicted on the cross. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, this model of human reality was adopted across Italy,<sup>8</sup> becoming part of the Christian identity. It created a symbiosis between earthly suffering and Christ's agony. There should be no doubt that Fra Innocenzo knew of these artistic expressions but wished to go beyond and depict an extreme reality, nearly anticipating contemporary hyper-realism. This became a form of new identity that linked the sufferings of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century Christian with the suffering of the Lord. But to render this representation even more enhanced, it needed to cross physical boundaries. Jerusalem was controlled by what the West considered the enemy of the Christian faith meaning Islam. This political reality increased, rather than defused this sentiment of suffering felt by those Latin Christians who wanted to visit Jerusalem. In order to see with their own eyes, the places where Our Lord met the end of his earthly life, they could only do so by crossing dangerous borders.

Writing about this crucifix, authors were being conditioned by the impact that existing boundaries in the Mediterranean, in the second-half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was having on the identity and the history of the Confraternity of the Holy Cross of Valletta in particular, and the Franciscan Minors, as custodians of the Holy Land, in general. What united these historical narratives was sufferance and the fact that Jesus Christ died on the cross in Jerusalem.

In turn, sufferance was enough to captivate the imagination of 17<sup>th</sup> century society as it formed part and parcel of a daily reality. Medical knowledge, at the time, had very few remedies for sufferance.<sup>9</sup> Literally, people had to suffer to die. The last days or hours on earth were times of agony. Thus, it was very easy for people then to relate to the image of an agonizing Christ. The more vivid and disproportionate was the representation of death, the more it struck a chord with the faithful. One just needs to remember that the crucifix was exhibited and given great prominence in places of suffering. For example, a large crucifix overlooked the main ward of the main hospital in Malta known as the *Sacra Infermeria* established by the Knights Hospitaller in Valletta.<sup>10</sup>

This presence of the hospital was not the only place where suffering and pain was being publicly exposed. Valletta was the area which had the highest number of sailors, including

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<sup>8</sup> DEBONO, Sandro (2005), *Imago Dei, Sculptured Images of the Crucifix in the Art of Early Modern Malta*, Malta, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Vide for example, CASSAR, Paul (1964), *Medical History of Malta*, London, 132–133.

<sup>10</sup> An engraving by Filippus Thommasinus (1588) depicts the main hall of the Holy Infirmary. Among others, this engraving records the presence of a big cross over an altar that was placed at the end of this hall. The presence of this altar is recorded by one of the contemporary travellers, the German Count George Albert of Erbach (1617). See. SAVONA-VENTURA, C. (2003), "The Valletta Sacra Infermeria in Travelogues and Art," *Treasures of Malta* 9, 2, 16–17.

corsairs.<sup>11</sup> This meant that this locality had also the highest number of residents who had fallen into slavery and were held captive in Ottoman land. The life of these slaves was one of continuous suffering as indeed was the life of all slaves.<sup>12</sup> Sufferance was not only linked to the fact that the poor slave was going to be deprived of his family, but slavery also meant a life of humiliation. Like Christ, the slave was stripped of clothing and exposed naked in the slave markets of Algiers and Tunisia for prospective buyers to personally examine whether their potential acquisition had any physical defects.<sup>13</sup> Like Christ, a slave can end up being tortured for perceived or real insubordination.



One of the many paintings executed in Early Modern Times depicting Christ scourged. Christ was depicted in a position intended to remind the viewer of the suffering of those Christians who had fallen into slavery. Courtesy Wignacourt Museum, Dun Ġwann Azzopardi

Should a slave stray afar, the whip was resorted to calling him back to discipline and fear.<sup>14</sup> Is not the representation of such excessive bloodshed on this corpse on the crucifix, a mirror of this reality? In this period, pictorial representations of Christ with his back scourged by the whip were also common. These images appealed to society because they reflected this reality. Besides, it became the expression of the agony of Jerusalem. But how?

The commission of this crucifix came at a particular moment in the history of Malta and the Mediterranean. It came at a time when, as a result of war, a number of Christian refu-

<sup>11</sup> MERECIECA, Simon (2018), “Hidden Echoes of Malta’s Maritime Past: Surviving Nineteenth-Century ex-Voto Paintings at the Parish Church of Cospicua,” in VASSALLO, Carmel – MERECIECA, Simon (eds.), *The Port of Malta*, Malta, 216–217.

<sup>12</sup> AQUILINA, Ġorġ (2011), *Il-Frangiskani Maltin (Ta’ Ġiezu)*, Malta, Klabb Kotba Maltin, 255.

<sup>13</sup> MERECIECA, Simon (2011), “I corsari e le loro vittime: l’emergere nel Mediterraneo di un’ industria fatta di schiavitù durante la seconda metà del Cinquecento,” in CINI, Marco (ed.), *Traffici commerciali sicurezza marittima, guerra di corsa. Il Mediterraneo e l’Ordine di Santo Stefano*, Edizioni ETS, 21–49; BONO, Salvatore (2016), *Schiavi. Una storia mediterranea [XV-XIX secolo]*, Mulino, 108–112.

<sup>14</sup> MUSCAT, Joseph (2006), *Galley Slaves at Work*, Malta, 22, 34–38.

gees were escaping from the Levant to the West.<sup>15</sup> Malta too started to receive her share of migrants, in particular, Greek Christians escaping from the island of Crete.<sup>16</sup> Crete was slowly being conquered by the Ottoman forces until finally succumbing to the Ottomans in 1669.<sup>17</sup> In 1645, a group of Latin Christians escaped from Candia; Crete's main town, which bore the same name as that of the island taking with them a crucifix they considered miraculous and brought it over to Malta.<sup>18</sup> This crucifix was donated to the church of Bormla.<sup>19</sup> Bormla is one of the harbour towns of Malta. Seventeenth-century records speak about pilgrimages from all around Malta going to Bormla's church to venerate this crucifix.<sup>20</sup> The final fall of Crete was considered an Ottoman retaliation for what appeared to have been unrestricted activities by Maltese corsairs.<sup>21</sup>

The arrival of this crucifix from Candia triggered a new religious devotion in Malta and increased the interest in the passion of Christ. It was on this basis that the Conventual Chaplain, Fra Marco Rosset, commissioned this crucifix for the Valletta church of the Franciscan Minors. But this Knight Hospitaller stipulated one important condition. He wanted this crucifix to be donated to the Confraternity of the Holy Cross of which he was a member.<sup>22</sup> But why was Rosset so adamant that this crucifix had to be given to this church? Perhaps one could be tempted to think that these friars had already begun organizing Lenten celebrations, including those of Holy Week, with processions.<sup>23</sup> This may be an explanation. But there is more to it. The church chosen, where Rosset wanted this crucifix placed in perpetuity,<sup>24</sup> was in the hands of the same monastic order that held custody of the holy place where Christ had been crucified. The Valletta convent, as early as the 1630s, held the office of the Custody of the Holy Land.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>15</sup> MERCECA, Simon (2002), *Community Life in the Central Mediterranean. A Socio-Demographic Study of the Maltese Harbour Towns in Early Modern Times, Bormla 1587–1815*, unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, Paris, University of Paris IV- Sorbonne, 235.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 249.

<sup>17</sup> MALLIA MILANES, Victor (1992), *Venice and the Hospitaller Malta 1530–1798. Aspects of a Relationship*, Malta, 164.

<sup>18</sup> DEBONO, *Imago Dei*, 19–22.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> MERCECA, Simon (2011), “Il-Kurċifiss Mirakuluż u l-Vero Ligneo Prezzjuż ta’ Bormla. Tagħrif meħud miż-Żjajjar Pastoral tal-Isqfijiet Astiria, Molina, Cocco Palmieri u Gori Mancini,” in *Programm tal-Festi tal-Gimgha Mqaddsa fil-Belt ta’ Bormla 2011*, Malta, 6–35; “Il-Kappella tal-Kurċifiss ta’ Kandja u r-Relikwija tas-Salib Mqaddes fiż-Żjajjar Pastoral tal-Isqof Alpheran de Busan,” in *Programm tal-Festi tal-Gimgha Mqaddsa fil-Belt ta’ Bormla 2012*, Malta, 7–31.

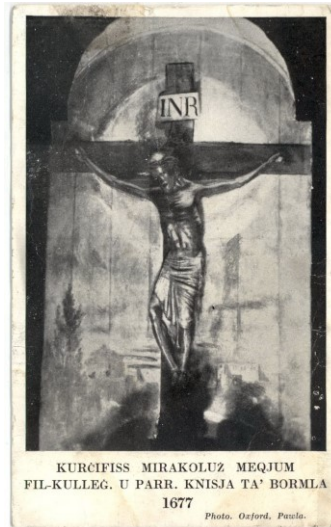
<sup>21</sup> ROSSI, Ettore (1935), *Storia della marina dell’Ordine di S. Giovanni di Gerusalemme, di Rodi e di Malta*, Rome, 68–76.

<sup>22</sup> NAM, R468/4, Notary Andrea Vella, 21 February 1648, ff. 302-304v; AQUILINA, *Il-Frangiskani Maltin*, 502–505.

<sup>23</sup> AQUILINA, *Il-Frangiskani Maltin*, 229.

<sup>24</sup> NAM, R468/4, Notary Andrea Vella, 21 February 1648, f. 257v.

<sup>25</sup> AQUILINA, *Il-Frangiskani Maltin*, 119–128.



An old Holy Picture showing the crucifix that was brought to Malta from Candia and placed in the Church of Bormla. As this Holy Picture shows, this crucifix was considered miraculous and carries the year 1677. However, local archival sources confirm that it was brought to Malta around three decades previously, i.e. circa 1645

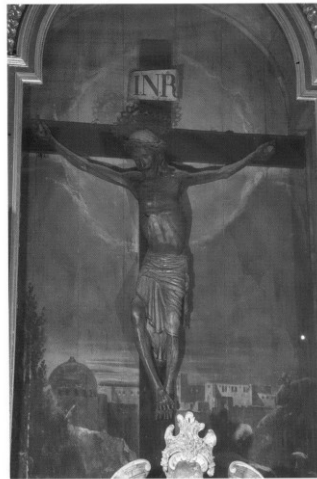


Plate 11. Polychromed Wood Crucifix, Cretan School, Cospicua Collegiate Parish Church, Cospicua.

The Candia Crucifix acquired by Bormla's parish church. It has a backdrop with a view of the city of Jerusalem. The Temple Mount takes centre stage and was executed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century

The history of this custody in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries is one of suffering and political intrigue.<sup>26</sup> The shifting of territorial borders, caused by the gradual loss of Candia, were

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 119–132.

impinging on the Maltese way of life. This crucifix became a *par excellence* representation of the artist's empathy with the sufferance that such political changes were causing to Christians. From the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, the procurator responsible for the Custody of the Holy Places, had repeatedly requested the Knights of Malta to guarantee safe passage for western pilgrimages to Jerusalem.<sup>27</sup> The procurator was always appointed from the Franciscan Minors.<sup>28</sup> In response, the Knights of Saint John stopped cruising in the Levant to prey on Ottoman and Muslim ships,<sup>29</sup> but Maltese-licensed corsairs were not always ready to respect these self-imposed restrictions.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Michele Zammit, a Franciscan Friar Minor, was assigned to the Holy Land where he also served as custodian of the Franciscan mission in Jerusalem. Fr. Zammit was so well-versed in Arabic that he translated sermons from Arabic into Italian and Latin. These sermons were about the life of the saints.<sup>30</sup>

The second proof of the connection with the Holy Land is to be found during the week the islands of Malta were plagued by insects.<sup>31</sup> According to Francesco Caruana Dingli, millions of locusts infested the islands and the inhabitants had to go out and about with sticks to shoo them away from their faces. The outcome of this attack was that many Maltese took a vow that if they were spared, they would go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This infestation was viewed as a manifestation of God's anger towards a highly sinful and lustful society. Jerusalem appeared as the ideal place for the redemption of one's sins.<sup>32</sup>

There are two other references that inadvertently link the creation of this Holy Crucifix with events in Jerusalem that were taking place around the year 1700. It should be pointed out that at least two historical documents erroneously link the creation of this crucifix around this date.<sup>33</sup> Since the data contained in these documents is not historically correct, these sources were not considered credible. The first one is by the already mentioned erudite priest Francesco Caruana Dingli. In his manuscript of Maltese biographies, he mentions Fra Innocenzo da Petralia. He states that da Petralia was in Malta but then, for an unknown reason his entry carries on with military preparations that took place in Malta in the year 1700 when an Ottoman attack on Malta was feared imminent.<sup>34</sup>

The second reference is by Notary Francesco Dos himself.<sup>35</sup> Dos relied heavily on Francesco Romero (1659-1742), who insisted with him that this crucifix was made in the year 1700. But why was Dos, like Caruana Dingli, so keen to focus on the year 1700? Was it the case that the inhabitants at the time believed that this crucifix had delivered them from an Ottoman attack? And here the issue of borders comes into play once again.

<sup>27</sup> AOM 258, ff. 102-102v; AOM 264, f. 187; AOM 505, f. 111.

<sup>28</sup> AQUILINA, *Il-Frangiskani Maltin*, 117–119.

<sup>29</sup> QUINTANO, Anton (2003), *The Maltese-Hospitaller Sailing Ship Squadron 1701–1798*, Malta, 226–7.

<sup>30</sup> Vatican Archive, 414.

<sup>31</sup> CAUCHI, Mark – MERCIECA, Simon (2019), *Laudemus Viros Gloriosos Patrijiet Agostinjani li Ghamlu Isem*, Malta, 79.

<sup>32</sup> NLM, Lib. 1142, no. 765.

<sup>33</sup> MERCIECA, Simon, "A Saintly Sojourn: The Stay and Works of Frate Innocenzo da Pietralia in Malta". This paper is being published in this same book.

<sup>34</sup> NLM, Lib. 1142, no. 1142, no. 624.

<sup>35</sup> NAM, R/237, Notary Francesco Dos, 9 September 1742, vol. 9, ff. 16-17v.



Perhaps, one could link these references to what came to be known as the two campaigns in Morea. The first one is known as the War of Morea that took place between 1684 and 1699 and the second one, called the War of Corfù, raged between 1714 and 1718.<sup>36</sup> In the second campaign, the Turks started attacking Corfù, which was under Venetian rule. This caused Austria to react and entered the fray. The Ottomans were defeated at the battle of Petrovaradin in 1716. This defeat was followed by the Treaty of Passarowitz in 1718. Grand Master Ramon Perellos sent troops in what came to be known as the campaign of Morea in support of Austria and Venice.<sup>37</sup> The Order's participation in this war brought on the fear of an Ottoman reprisal against Malta.<sup>38</sup>

What united these three campaigns is the fact that whenever a war broke out in the East, it generated fear of an imminent Ottoman attack on Malta.<sup>39</sup> It should also be noted that the confraternity of the Holy Cross was set up at the church of Saint Mary of Jesus in Valletta a year after war broke out in Candia in 1645. Three years later, as already explained, this holy crucifix was donated to this church of *Ta' Ġiežu* in Valletta. These facts explain why 18<sup>th</sup> century members of the confraternity linked this crucifix with events in the Levant but confused the war of 1645 with those wars that had taken place between 1684 and 1716!

Frans X. Cassar discovered Arab references related to these events. These documents confirm the fear experienced by early 18<sup>th</sup> century contemporaries regarding a possible attack on Malta. They also explain why the date when the crucifix was made and why Fra Innocenzo da Pietralia's visit to Malta were ascribed to the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century rather than to the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century by both Notary Dos and Francesco Caruana Dingli.

### The Situation in Jerusalem

At the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jerusalem was not the best place for a Christian to visit. It was in the hands of the Ottoman Empire and the Maltese were hated for their corsairing activities. The Arab historian and writer, Ibn Kanān (محمد بن عيسى بن محمود بن محمد بن كنان) (1663–1740) wrote about this turbulent relationship caused by the illegal activity of Maltese corsairs who infiltrated the invisible boundaries that were set up in the Levant beyond which the Maltese corsairs were not expected to plunder. Ibn Kanān hailed from Damascus. He wrote about matters that he had personally witnessed and heard. He was the author of

<sup>36</sup> MALLIA MILANES, *Venice and the Hospitaller Malta*, 164.

<sup>37</sup> ROSSI, *Storia della marina*, 85.

<sup>38</sup> QUINTANO, *The Maltese-Hospitaller Sailing Ship*, 226. Quintano speaks about the general preparations for the Morean campaign in 1718. He focuses on the naval aspect, but it also involved precautionary measurements against the fear of an Ottoman reprisal against Malta. Unpublished history notes by Walter Ganado. These notes are currently being edited, with the help of students following the BA History course for eventual publication.

<sup>39</sup> According to Alison Hoppen, the first years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century “were relatively peaceful” and there was no need of any works of the fortifications, implying that works on the forts were associated with times of military tensions. In fact, in reading through her text, this comment is made because this period was sandwiched between two periods of great tensions and fear for the Order of Saint John because of its naval participation in the wars in Morea. In fact, after 1708, works started in earnest on the fortifications of Sta Margerita and those of the Cottonera, in a clear indication that Malta was again in times of military tension. HOPPEN, Alison (1999), *The Fortifications of Malta by the Order of St. John 1530–1783*, Malta, 138–148.

several books including *يوميات شامية* 'yawmiyat shamiya' [*Oriental Journal*] wherein he mentions the island of Malta three times.

The crucifix is not mentioned but what is mentioned is the custody of the Holy Land. Due to the Malta's corsairing activities in the Levant, Ibn Kanān speaks about the pressures that Ottomans and Muslims were putting on the Ottoman sultan and the governor of Jerusalem to do something about these corsairing activities. Jerusalem was considered an open city and all its inhabitants were to be protected and not to be attacked by any nation. Each time that this code was broken by Maltese corsairs, the Muslim congregation asked for revenge on – and retribution from – the community of Christians living in the Holy Land. What is even more revealing is that the church of the Holy Sepulchre was targeted by the Muslims each time that a member of the Ottoman community was depredated by Maltese corsairs.

The first reference to Malta regards the bread riots that took place on 28<sup>th</sup> January 1713 in the city of Jerusalem. These riots were the result of food shortage that hit the region back then. The Arabs still refer to Jerusalem as *Al Quds*, meaning the sacred [city]. An interesting fact in Ibn Kanān's text is that the church of the Holy Sepulchre is called in Arabic, *Al-Qamāma*. Christians called it *Al-Qiyama*, which means the church of the Resurrection. There is here a play on words. In Arabic *Qamāma* means dung. Thus, this church was being referred to as a dunghill. Most probably, the name *Al-Qamāma* was given to this church by Arab Muslims in retaliation for the desecration of the Temple site at the time of the crusades.<sup>40</sup> In itself, such a negative label exposes the type of identity that Muslims at the time imposed on the fellow Arab and Latin Christians living in Jerusalem.

At the same time, the presence of this Christian church served the Muslim as a good bargaining tool to extract concessions from the Christian rulers in the West. The Arab historian Al-Maqrīzī gives his own version why this Christian church in Jerusalem was never turned into a mosque or a place of prayer for Islam, as was the case with other sacred places in this city, which were sacred to both Jews and Christians, such as the Temple Mount.<sup>41</sup> Al-Maqrīzī's text in part explains why the Arab and Muslim accepted that this place should be in the hands of Christians. Then, it was the Papacy in the Late Middle Ages that decided to favour the Franciscan Minors, after it had been for a short time in the hands of Observants and before them, the Augustinian friars.

*“Christian historians mention that Emir Al Muminin ‘Umar Ibn Al Khuttāb, may Allāh be pleased with him, when he conquered the city of Jerusalem, gave protection to Christians, their children, women and property. Their churches were not to be demolished or occupied. He sat right in the centre of the church of Al-Qamāma. When it was time for prayer, he went out and prayed outside the church on the doorstep on his own. Then, he sat and told the Patriarch: ‘had I prayed inside the church, Muslims would afterwards start saying that ‘Umar prayed here.’ He issued a decree, forbidding Muslims to pray there on the threshold, if not one by one and that Muslims were not to gather nor pray inside or on the threshold. Neither could*

<sup>40</sup> Goldein, Shlomo D. (1989), “Jerusalem in the Arab Era,” *The Jerusalem Cathedra* 2.

<sup>41</sup> Al-Maqrizi, “Al Qamāma,” [المقرزي] in [المخطوط والآثار] 1273.

*the call to prayer be made from there and the patriarch suggested to him to take the site of the rock to be used as a mosque.*"<sup>42</sup>

This explains why the Pasha would use, at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the church of the Holy Sepulchre as a bargaining tool in his diplomatic dealings with the Knights of St. John. During the month of Muharram 1125, that is 28<sup>th</sup> January 1713, the Pasha met a group of merchants from the city of Jaffa, who had gone to visit him after their ships had been depredated by corsairs flying the flag of Malta. This fact was understood as an act of treachery by the people of Malta as it broke the understanding that was reached by which Maltese corsairs were not to prey in the Levant, in particular on merchants from the city of Jerusalem and the whereabouts. In retaliation, the Pasha went to Jerusalem and ordered that firewood be placed inside the church of the Holy Sepulchre in order to set it on fire. According to Ibn Kanān, the Pasha was recorded saying that, "*My wish is to burn Al-Qamāma and its people*". However, the reader is informed by Ibn Kanān, that "*the people of Al-Qamāma*", meaning the Arab and Latin Christians living in Jerusalem came down on him and their leader approached the Pasha as the latter was entering the church of the Holy Sepulchre. This prevented the Pasha from setting fire to the building. Instead the Pasha ordered them to write to Malta with the request that the ship with all its belonging be returned. He also gave them a letter with all the names of the people who were enslaved in that skirmish and insisted that they were to be freed and allowed to return as free individuals to Jerusalem. To pacify him, the Christians had also to pay a hefty sum of money and it was only upon receiving the money, that the Pasha was placated. It was after this event, that the Pasha aired the idea that Malta should be attack. "*We must sail and go to Malta and take it from their hands and give it to the Sultan Ibn al 'Uthmān*", he was recorded saying. He even exclaimed, "*How could it be that a country be against Muslims living within the Holy Lands?*" Clearly, he was bluffing about organizing an attack on Malta but was showing his disappointment that individuals living in a city which was sacred to the three main religions suffered from such an unwarranted attack. However, reading Ibn Kanān's narrative, one forms the impression that the Pasha was more interested in the reparation money than anything else.

The desire to attack and take Malta followed the plundering by Maltese corsairs of Ottoman and Muslim ships belonging to Muslims based in Damascus and Palestine resurfaces again in another part of Ibn Kanān's text. This time round, the story concerns a rebellion that took place in Al-Karak castle in 1714 – now to be found in present day Jordan.<sup>43</sup> Faced

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. ويذكر علماء الأخبار من النصارى أن أمير المؤمنين عمر بن الخطاب رضي الله عنه، لما فتح مدينة القدس كتب للنصارى أماناً على أنفسهم وأولادهم ونسائهم وأموالهم وجميع كنائسهم لا تهدم ولا تسكن، وأنه جلس في وسط صحن كنيسة القمامة، فلما حان وقت الصلاة خرج وصلى خارج الكنيسة على الدرجة التي على بابها بمفرده، ثم جلس وقال للبطريرك: لو صليت داخل الكنيسة لأخذها المسلمون من بعدي، وقالوا ها هنا صلى عمر، وكتب كتاباً يتضمن أنه لا يُصلي أحد من المسلمين على الدرجة إلا واحد واحد، ولا يجتمع المسلمون بها للصلاة فيها، ولا يؤذنون عليها، وأنه أشار عليه البطريرك باتخاذ موضع الصخرة مسجداً

<sup>43</sup> Kerak Castle (قلعة الكرك) is one of the largest crusader castles in the Levant, not to be confused with Crac de Chevaliers, is a large Crusader Castle located in Al-Karak, Jordan. Construction of the castle over an area of 25,300 square meters and rising about 1000 meters above the sea surface began in the 1140s under Pagan and Fulk the Amir of Jerusalem. The Crusaders called it *Crac des Moabites*, colloquially referred to as *Krak of the Desert*. Salāh Al Din Al Uyūbi was able to wrest it in the aftermath of the battle of Hittin. The rule of the citadel was later transferred to the Mamluks and then the Ottomans.

with this rebellion, the Pasha decided to blockade the fort. After forty days without granting anything to the besieged, the latter were forced to surrender. What made them surrender was the Pasha's decision to put mines underneath the fort's walls. This led the men inside the fort to surrender. Ibn Kanān narrates how the women, the girls and the men came out and the Pasha showed kindness in sparing the lives of the women and children. These were placed in tents next to him, but all the men were killed. After killing the men, some of the women and girls were auctioned to the highest bidder among his men as a reward. The rest were sold in Damascus, except for those who were ransomed by their relatives at a very high price. It was while selling the poor women and children as slaves that the Pasha remembered the plight of Muslim slaves taken by Maltese corsairs. Thus, he renewed his vow to take revenge on the church of the Holy Sepulchre. It seems that the Grand Master of Malta, who at the time was still Ramon Perellos (1697–1720), refused to return the captured slaves and merchandise to the Pasha. Once again, the Arab and Latin Christians of Jerusalem and the surroundings areas had to appease him with money, which Ibn Kanān insisted filled around a hundred pouches.

More importantly, this text shows that by the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Knights of Malta and the people living on the island of Malta were considered to be one and the same by Muslims, to the extent that the Muslim population that lived within the Karak citadel was compared to and identified with the islanders of Malta. There was a political reason why the Pasha wanted to identify the rebels with the Maltese people. This revolt came about after the bread riots that took place at the same time in the Maghreb and in Syria. This must have been a difficult political period for the Ottoman Sultan. The area was a hive of social unrest. Therefore, the Pasha needed a political scapegoat and proposed once again an attack on Malta to mitigate the situation.<sup>44</sup> Undoubtedly, the Christian origins of the Karak citadel continued to haunt the Muslim psyche.

It is clear from Ibn Kanān's text, that Muslim chroniclers continued to remember the fact that the Karak citadel had been, many centuries before, in the hands of the Knights of St. John, from where they were expelled in 1271. Even though this event did not mark the end of the presence of the Christian crusaders in the Holy Lands, it helped in creating new borders in the Levant. At the same time, the memory of the presence of the knights in this fort continued amongst the new Muslim occupiers and in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was still remembered as the place that was once occupied by the Knights. This is why the rebellious inhabitants were compared to the Knights and the people of Malta. It was on the basis of this past and distant victory that Ibn Kanān continued to voice the idea that the Muslims and the Ottomans should capture the island of Malta from the Christians. He continued to expand on this theory and used it as a case study to boost Muslim morale so that they could defeat the Knights of Saint John and expel them from Malta as they had done in the 13<sup>th</sup>

<sup>44</sup> اشة جدة في دمشق

جمادى الأولى. دخل كبخية ناصيف وهو خليل، باشة جدة، كافلاً لجدة، وبلغ أن النصارى جاؤوا لابن عثمان بمفاتيح القلاع التي وقع الصلح عليها، ودفعوا مال الفكاك ومال الجزية، أما مال الفكاك فهو مقدار ما تكلفه السلطان في هذه السفارة، وبلغ أن المشيخة الإسلامية صارت إلى عطا الله زاده.

محرم الحرام سنة 1125

م 28-1-1713

الحكومة

وسلطان الممالك الرومية وبعض العربية والعجمية السلطان أحمد بن محمد خان. والقاضي شبيخي زاده. وناصيف كافل دمشق بالحج الشريف. والمفتي محمد أفندي العمادي. والمدرسون والناس على حالهم.

century, when they were expelled from the Karak castle. Always according to Ibn Kanān, it was only the death of the Pasha that spared Malta from being attacked and taken once again. According to Ibn Kanān, the Pasha was killed in the Arab town of Qalansua (قلانسوة), which today is a district in central Israel.

But succeeding pashas and qadis of Jerusalem continued to mount pressure on Malta. Ġorġ Aquilina mentions the fact that on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1720, a tartana with three Franciscan Minors arrived early in the morning in Malta, captained by Monsù Portali. These friars were coming from Jerusalem and informed Grand Master Perellos that the Sultan demanded the release of 150 slaves in exchange for granting permission to restore the dome of the church of the Holy Sepulchre and the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.<sup>45</sup>

According to Ibn Kanān, the people of Malta were at the time afraid of the Sultan. It seems obvious that the news had reached the Levant that the inhabitants of Valletta were fearing a Turkish attack on their island.

Ibn Kanān's stories appear to be corroborated by an independent English source. In 1774, George Lord Lyttelton published the story of a female slave, that Lyttelton states was the lover of the ruling Grand Master in Malta.<sup>46</sup> Lyttelton does not give the name of the Grand Master, by the local Maltese historian, Giovanni Bonello, states that she was owned by Grand Master Perellos and became his secret mistress.<sup>47</sup> According to Lord Lyttelton this lady, by the name of Zoraide, was the sister of Zelis. She hailed originally from Cyprus but married a rich merchant from Aleppo and after marriage went to live in Aleppo, the area, were all these international tensions developed due to corsairing. Zoraide was captured during this period, roughly in 1713, while on a ship, travelling from Aleppo to Cyprus to visit her relatives.

It was within this context that devotion to the Holy Crucifix increased. It was a past society where violence, sex and religion were three basic instincts that formed the identity of man and had a direct impact on borders. At least, Notary Dos inadvertently collocates the increase in the devotion to the Holy Crucifix within this background and fears, circulating between 1684 and 1718, of an attack on Malta. From time to time, desires were harboured in the Levant to attack Malta. Around 1714, these desires were mulled over following the capture of what appeared to have been a prominent lady, whom the Grand Master had no wish to return to her home country in the East due to his close relationship her. This brought about an increased tension in Jerusalem which revolved around the church of the Holy Sepulchre.

These fears or threat of attacks used to reach the island through these Franciscan Friars Minor. On their way to or from Malta, friars stayed at the convent of the Franciscan Minors in Valletta.<sup>48</sup> These friars were joined by other pilgrims, who too passed through Malta on their way to or from Jerusalem, driven by a desire to redeem their sins of lust and greed. Others were motivated by pious devotion. Thus, distant borders were being bridged. It was

<sup>45</sup> AQUILINA, *Il-Frangiskani Maltin*, 130.

<sup>46</sup> *Letter LXXVIII. Seljm to Mirza at Ispahan. From London, Persian Letters. The works of George Lord Lyttelton; Formerly printed separately, and now first collected together: With some other Pieces, never before printed.* Published by George Edward Aysgough Esq., London, 1774.

<sup>47</sup> BONELLO, Giovanni (2004), *Histories of Malta – Reflections and Rejections*, Vol. 5 (Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti), in particular the article “Knights in Slavery Captivi in manibus infidelium.”

<sup>48</sup> AQUILINA – MACALUSO – BUGEJA, *Il-Gimgha l-Kbira tal-Belt*, 8–9.

within this scenario that the devotion, as attested by Dos, increased and it was because of this fear and what appeared to have been a providential deliverance that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the impression was formed that this crucifix was made around the year 1700 by a holy man, who was part of a group of Franciscan friars on their way to Jerusalem. It was imperative for 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century chroniclers to emphasize that the artist of this crucifix was a holy person to distinguish him from the habitual pilgrim who went to Jerusalem either to redeem a sin or to fulfil a vow.