

THE VERNACULAR WAYSIDE CHURCHES OF THE MALTESE ISLANDS (AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH)

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Abstract

The existence of Christianity in the Maltese Islands traces back its roots to practically the Apostolic Age. From an archaeological perspective, however, the earliest evidence of Christianity dates to a relatively later period, with the earliest underground necropolis, known as *hypogea* or *catacombs*, being ascribed to the early fourth century. With the Arab conquest of Malta in the late 9th century Christianity apparently went into decadence as the natives, now under Semitic influence, adopted Islam instead. When Malta came politically, economically and culturally closer to Europe, following its occupation by the Normans, the Angevines and the Aragonese, Christianity was reintroduced as an organized establishment under the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Since late Medieval times the Maltese Islands were divided into several parishes each headed by a parish priest to assist, in the name of his bishop, the different local village and town communities. The historical, archaeological and ethnographic evidence demonstrates that the people's Catholic beliefs are manifested in the great number of monumental parish churches that dominate most of the village or town centres, of which constitute a masterpiece in their own right. However, even the islands' rural landscape is characterized by many wayside churches, which collectively constitute a vernacular expression of a people's religious faith, traditions, and cultural legacy. Rather than focusing on the art and architecture of these vernacular structures, the present study exploits the available material evidence from an anthropological perspective to explore the nexus between religion, culture and Malta's ethnic peasant community through time.

Key words – Malta, Christianity, Roman Catholic Church, vernacular wayside churches, parish churches, rural landscape, anthropology.

Christianity in the context of Malta's vernacular heritage

The Christian cultural legacy of the Maltese Islands, situated as they are in the central Mediterranean Sea, is manifested in the hundreds of churches and

religious monuments that dominate their towns, villages, hamlets and numerous remote uninhabited areas. There is no place in Malta and Gozo where the inhabitants did not leave behind them some vestiges of their Christian faith through the ages, from the earliest centuries of our Era to contemporary times. These include rock-hewn subterranean cemeteries, troglodyte (or semi-troglodyte) monasteries and churches, masonry churches in all towns, villages and hamlets, statues and monuments of Christian saints or holy figures, niches on house and other building façades dominated by effigies of saintly figures, and so on. The list is much more extensive if one had to add the thousands of unique artistic masterpieces and treasures which are exhibited or conserved in several museums as well as in many local Catholic churches, namely the imposing parish churches, which even today still dominate most town or village centres¹.

However, the historical and archaeological evidence demonstrates that this material manifestation of local Christian art and architecture goes beyond the limits of the established settlements and parishes. Apart from the diverse examples of vernacular architecture characterizing Malta's rural landscape, such as the *razzett* (farmhouse), the *girna* (corbelled stone hut), the hybrid hovels, troglodyte dwellings and windmills², there are also hundreds of wayside churches (masonry or rupestrian) dedicated to various saints or Our Lady. Collectively, these religious structures also form a significant portion of Malta's ethnic culture and identity.

While some of them are still in use today, even if occasionally, a substantial number of others, despite their architectural beauty, are in a derelict and perilous state, having through time suffered severe structural damages (fig. 1). Nevertheless, one should also commend the initiatives taken in the last half a century or so by the State, the Church, religious organizations, NGOs and private owners to restore and curate some others to their former glory. The late Medieval church of the Annunciation at the hamlet of ̡al Millieri (in the parish of ̡urrieq) and that of Bir Miftuħ (in the parish of Gudja), datable to the same period, are two notable examples (fig. 2)³.

The preponderance of the wayside churches belongs to Malta's Diocesan Church or to one of the local religious orders, such as the Dominicans, the Franciscans or the Carmelites. Others are State property or form part of private estates.

For a long time, academics and experts have studied these vernacular religious structures from a purely architectural and artistic perspective, often over-

¹ Quentin Hughes 1986, 41-124, Azzopardi 2006, Freller 2010, 189-191, Sciberras 2010, 61-130, Said-Zammit 2020, 294-295.

² Said-Zammit 2016, 179-194, 2022, 223-243.

³ Farrugia Randon 2002.

looking the fact that they also served the religious and spiritual needs of various peasant communities. Focusing only on their material characteristics and features, as if these churches were only a relic of the past, a lifeless structure or a museum would certainly provide us with a partial picture. These churches – whether rupestral or masonry – need to be appreciated within a broader framework. The anthropological approach employed in the present paper aims to explore in more detail their human dimension, hence the nexus between these churches and the various peasant communities they served. Above all, taken together these churches are intrinsically related not only to the Catholic Church and religion in Malta, but also form a key aspect of a nation's identity. Apart from being monuments encompassing a long period of time since the late Medieval period, they are likewise a material manifestation of human expression, whether architectural or artistic, religious or spiritual, formal or vernacular.

The roots and expansion of Christianity in the Maltese Islands

According to Chapter 27 (v. 1-44) and Chapter 28 (v. 1-11) of the *Acta Apostolorum* the first traces of Christianity in Malta seemingly date back to as early as the Apostolic Age. What apparently triggered the foundation of the new Religion on these islands was St Paul's *miraculous* shipwreck, which may have occurred around AD 60. The Apostle's unexpected stopover on these islands lasted for approximately three months, from where he resumed the voyage to his ultimate destination, Rome. From this short yet interesting narrative, the following four main observations can be made:

- a) the chief of the island, possibly a Roman governor, was called Publius
- b) the natives were very hospitable towards the Apostle and the castaways. The author tells us that the chief of the island (πρώτος τῆς νήσου) hosted St Paul at his residence for three days (*Acta* 28:7)
- c) the author's emphasis in this narrative is the miracle of the snake (*Acta* 28: 3-6)
- d) St Paul performed a number of healing miracles which also included Publius' own father.

Even though this account provides some remarkable clues about the possibility that St Paul may have established the earliest local Christian community, archaeological explorations carried out thus far in the Maltese Islands, including underwater excavations, have not yet unearthed the existence of any local *ecclesia* dating back to this period. Consequently, the effects of his three-month sojourn among the islands' natives are still shrouded in mystery. In the absence of further scientific evidence, it is difficult to affirm whether the most primitive Christian community in Malta was actually founded at this time. Of course, there may have been a group of natives who adopted Christianity, were baptized and

led a Christian life, however there is nothing to substantiate that there was an organized local church.

From an archaeological perspective the evidence demonstrates that the introduction and propagation of Christianity in Malta was apparently a much later phenomenon, datable to at least the early fourth century⁴. Knowledge about earliest Christianity in Malta and Gozo emanates from the substantial number of subterranean burial grounds, known as *hypogea* or *catacombs*, many of which are located in the Rabat area (roughly in central Malta), close to where the main Roman town of *Melite* was situated (fig. 3). The evidence suggests that certain complexes were shared by Christians, pagans, and the local Jewish community⁵. That many of these underground necropolises were utilized by a native Christian community is corroborated not only by the type of graves that the *fossore*s assiduously excavated, but also by the iconographic symbolism often associated with this religion. These include the cross, the fish, the *chi-rho* (☩), the dove and the scallop shell.

Portions of these Christian *hypogea* were apparently used for religious rituals and, later on in the Byzantine period, were converted into rock-cut churches for the celebration of Mass; this is archaeologically corroborated by the presence of rock-hewn altars and frescoes depicting Christian saints and figures. The catacombs of St Agatha in Rabat are a clear example of this notion. In Medieval times part of another cemetery complex in the same area, known as L-Abatija tad-Dejr, was seemingly converted into a church and monastery⁶. Other explorations have unearthed the remnants of other early Christian churches, such as that of Tas-Silġ in the parish of Marsaxlokk⁷. Despite these material remains the available historical evidence fails to establish whether there was in Byzantine and early Medieval Malta a truly organized Church.

What seems to have altered the local religious situation was the Arab conquest of the Maltese Islands in 870, because apparently Islam became the dominant, if not the exclusive, religion⁸. This can be testified archaeologically through the number of Muslim graves and Saracenic tombstones, with some dating back to the twelfth century, which were discovered in Rabat (close to Mdina, Malta's main town till then) between 1881 and the 1920s. This is a clear attestation that, even when the Maltese Islands became a Norman dominion, Islam was still prac-

⁴ Bonanno 2005, 262.

⁵ Bonanno 2005, 265-266, 268-269.

⁶ Buhagiar 2002, 15, Bonanno 2005, 270.

⁷ Bonanno 2005, 271-272.

⁸ Wettinger 1986, 87-104, 1989, 24.

ticed among the natives, with the available evidence demonstrating that apparently it was still the faith of the majority than of a small native community.

It was later in the Middle Ages, following the re-Christianization of the Islands, that a local organized Church was apparently established. The first bishop of Malta, who administered his flock from Sicily, was appointed in 1272. The first local bishop to lead the Church from Malta was appointed in 1341 who, according to historical records, resided at his palace in Mdina. This bishop, Henry of Cefalù, died and was buried in Malta.

The consolidation of the Church's authority in Malta occurred from the early fifteenth century onwards, as testified by the available late Medieval historical sources. By 1436 the Maltese Islands had already been divided into several parishes, each of which was headed by a parish priest (or archpriest)⁹. He was the main priest of a town, village, or a settlement cluster, and was principally responsible for the spiritual needs of the flock entrusted to him by his bishop. Apart from the Cathedral canons and the diocesan clergy, there were also the religious orders which were established locally from the second half of the fourteenth century onwards in Mdina, Rabat, and Birgu (fig. 4)¹⁰.

The Catholic Church in Malta intensified its authority and influence on the inhabitants by the sixteenth century, when in 1530 the Islands became the possession of the Sovereign Hospitaller Order of the Knights of St John. The second half of the same century the Maltese Islands witnessed the establishment of the Inquisition as well, a tribunal empowered by the Church in Rome to deal with cases involving transgressions of the Catholic faith or the Church's official teachings. In his capacity as Apostolic Delegate, the Inquisitor was empowered to interrogate those who were accused of black magic, witch craft, sorcery, simony, heresy, amongst others¹¹.

Therefore, from the second half of the sixteenth century onwards, until the Knights of St John were ejected, and the Tribunal of the Inquisition abolished, by the French in 1798, the Maltese Islands were led by three autonomous jurisdictions (the Order, the Catholic Church, and the Inquisition), yet this power triad was subordinated to the authority of the Roman papacy¹².

The Catholic Church in Malta and its impact on the inhabitants

It is within this temporal and spatial framework that one can get a more comprehensive picture of the proper value and meaning of religious architec-

⁹ Fiorini 1993, 111-114.

¹⁰ Dalli 2006, 212, 238.

¹¹ Ciappara 2001, 145, Cassar 2002.

¹² Cassar 2008, 305-310.

ture in the Maltese Islands. The historical evidence reveals that, once the Roman Catholic Church in Malta assumed *plena potestas*, especially from the second half of the sixteenth century onwards, the predominant part of the local population came under its direct or indirect influence, so much that a person's life and *modus vivendi* were practically regulated by the Church *a cunis ad sepulcrum*, from the initial rites of baptism to the burial of the dead. Whether one got married or received holy orders was also corroborated by its direct involvement.

The observance of all religious feasts and Church practices was expected to be followed by the faithful *ad litteram*¹³. Whatever their social status, people were encouraged to donate money and real estate to the Church to the extent that through time it accumulated huge amounts of material wealth¹⁴. The faithful's quotidian life was synchronized with the church clock and the church bells, the latter also serving as time-tellers, starting with the *Pater Noster* (Our Father) at four in the morning to mark the inception of a new day, and ending with the *Angelus* (a Marian prayer) and the *Salutazione dei Defunti* (a prayer for the dead) in the evening to signal the return of the peasants to their home¹⁵.

Through the local notarial records we learn that since the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century it became customary for Catholics to include the Church (for instance, the bishop, the parish priest or a clergyman) in their will. It was considered a privilege for a person to be buried in the church, hence the faithful were encouraged to bequeath a sum of money to the Church to this particular end. Moreover, the testator often left an additional sum of money (bequest or *donatio*) to the parish priest to defray other expenses, such as church maintenance works, the celebration of Mass, and the purchase of candles¹⁶.

Perhaps the most notable attestation of such Christian devotion and Church influence in the Maltese Islands constitutes the large number of churches erected in all local towns and villages as well in several hamlets. Away from the settlements, and apart from the various examples of other vernacular structures, the islands' rural landscape is characterized by a large number of wayside churches (masonry or rock-hewn) dedicated to Our Lady or particular saints. It is calculated that locally there are three hundred and fifty-nine churches spread in different urban and rural areas. Mathematically, this implies that there is approximately one church for each day of the year.

¹³ Buttigieg 2003, 17-18.

¹⁴ Said-Zammit 2022, 15.

¹⁵ Ciappara 2001, 7, Cassar 2005, 45-47.

¹⁶ Ciappara 2008, 675.



Fig. 1. The wayside church of the Annunciation at Is-Salib tal-Għolja in the parish of Siggiewi showing clear signs of severe structural damages



Fig. 2. The wayside church of the Annunciation at Ħal Millieri in the parish of Żurrieq



Fig. 3. Part of an early Christian family *hypogeum* within the complex of St Paul's Catacombs, Rabat



Fig. 4. The church and monastery of Il-Lunzjata in the parish of Rabat where in the late Medieval Period the Carmelite friars established themselves



Fig. 5. The hybrid church of Is-Simblija in the parish of Dingli which forms an integral part of a cave-settlement



Fig. 6. The late Medieval church of the Assumption at Hal Xluq in the parish of Siggiewi with an open-air parvis (*zuntier*)



Fig. 7. The church of San Francesco da Paola in Marzamemi, Syracuse, Sicily



Fig. 8. The church of Santa Maria a Palmas Vecchio, San Giovanni Suergiu, Sardinia



Fig. 9. An example of a local village *fešta*



Fig. 10. An example of a corner niche with a statue of Our Lady on the façade of a village house at Hal Xluq, Siggiewi

Historical records demonstrate that the majority of the churches, including the wayside chapels, were built as a place of veneration for the various communities or parishes that developed and flourished here since the late Middle Ages. However, a number of filial or wayside churches were erected as ex-votos in thanksgiving for a grace or favor received from Our Lord, St Mary or a specific saint. This explains why in Malta one finds a substantial number of churches dedicated, for example, to St Roque, the protector against infectious diseases including the plague, or St Leonard, the patron saint of captives and slaves¹⁷.

Another reason explaining the extensive number of churches in Malta and Gozo was their use as a burial ground. Those that were privately owned gave the founders and their families the right to be buried inside them, what was legally and officially known as the *ius sepulturae*¹⁸. However, the owners or founders of these churches were committed by several obligations which concerned, *inter alia*, the celebration of Masses and the singing of vespers on feast days¹⁹.

One has to consider as well that, since in the past nearly all the peasants toiled their fields and dwelt in small village clusters with poor road links, it was easier for them to attend churches built close by²⁰.

Alain de Lille's renowned twelfth century statement '*mille viae ducunt homines per saecula Romam*' (all roads lead to Rome) applies to the Maltese parish churches too. The centrality of the parish (or main) church in almost every local town, village or hamlet is still a typical characteristic of many Maltese settlements. Apart from the fact that, due to their size, height and prominent position, these imposing structures are visible from practically everywhere, the majority of the town or village streets led, directly or indirectly, to the main church and square (*piazza* or *misraħ*)²¹. From an anthropological perspective, one can consider the parish church as the settlement's main artery or magnet that integrated the inhabitants of a town or village in a single community. This sense of kinship and unity is further testified by the religious celebrations that the parochial community, under the leadership of its parish priest (or archpriest) and his presbytery, lead and celebrate throughout the year. These include special occasions like Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and *Corpus Christi* (Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ).

Another distinctive symbol of parish community, still held today in most local towns and villages, is the village *fešta*, a traditional religious manifestation

¹⁷ Said-Zammit 2021, 215.

¹⁸ Arthur 2012, 561.

¹⁹ Said-Zammit 2016, 182.

²⁰ Buhagiar 1984, 17-19, 2000, 1-17.

²¹ Said-Zammit 2020, 294.

held annually, usually in summer, to honour the titular saint of a specific settlement. The highlight of the *festa* is the street procession with the life size statue of the patron saint (*vara*) that passes through several streets, symbolically to bless not only the village or the visitor as an individual, but the entire parish community. This religious manifestation, accompanied by melodious band music (*marċi*) and pyrotechnic works (*logħob tan-nar*), sees the active participation of the parish clergy and of various religious and social organizations such as the confraternities and band clubs²².

Moreover, certain towns and villages still organize the Good Friday procession, a long religious pageant with life size statues and hundreds of costumed actors to commemorate the passion and death of Jesus Christ. Nearly all of these take place on Good Friday afternoon and, circulating through the main town or village streets, usually take about three hours to finish. These manifestations are not only popular among the parish community, but also among many Maltese and foreigners²³.

In the hamlets and remote rural areas religious celebrations were held too, particularly Holy Mass on Sundays, but apparently were simpler in form and more vernacular in character. Apart from their small-scale population, these communities did not have the financial means or human resources to organize religious manifestations on a grand scale like what occurred in the major settlements²⁴.

The wayside churches: their main physical characteristics

Locally the vernacular churches fall under three main categories or types:

- a) the troglodyte,
- b) the semi-troglodyte (or hybrid), and
- c) the masonry churches.

The majority, though, pertain to the third type. The three categories are spread in several parts of Malta and Gozo, but the rock-hewn churches generally occur wherever the islands' geological setup and the local limestone (Malta's primary terrestrial natural resource) permit the presence of natural caverns or the excavation of manmade ones. Hybrid churches usually consist of two portions: a natural (or artificial) cave with sections there of being finished in dressed limestone.

Wayside churches often occur as isolated, free-standing structures, however some others are located in clusters of two or three abutting churches. For instance, the church of the Annunciation at Ħal Millieri adjoins that of the Visita-

²² Said-Zammit 2016, 188-189.

²³ Said-Zammit 2016, 190.

²⁴ Buhagiar 2000, 21.

tion, while the church of St Basil in Mqabba borders with that of St Michael²⁵. Some troglodyte churches, like that of Is-Simblija in the parish of Dingli and that of San Niklaw in the parish of Mellieħa, form an integral part of two separate cave-settlements (fig. 5)²⁶.

These ethnic religious structures follow more or less the same architectural style and construction methods. Masonry churches often have a rectangular plan and are small in size that could accommodate limited congregations, possibly a few hundred persons or even less. Generally, they have an area hovering between 80 to 160 square meters. Usually they have a flat ceiling, with others having a slightly pitched roof. Internally, the ceiling rests on a set of five or six thick transverse arches with either a semi-circular or a pointed keystone. The space between these sustaining arches varies between 90 and 120 cm, depending on the structure's dimensions. On the other hand, rupestral counterparts are either circular or irregular in plan; their form and size were determined by the cavern's peculiar shape and the hardness of the rock.

The built churches are distinguished by their nondescript and austere façade, with apertures and architectural or sculptural embellishments being kept to the barest minimum. The main façade usually has a single door surmounted by a circular or rectangular window exactly above it, instrumental to provide light and ventilation to the building's interior. Dominating the façade's top centre, the stonemason oftentimes added a small bell-cot (or belfry) where the church bell (or a set of bells) was hung. Access to the building's main door was usually through a small open-air parvis (*zuntier*), which sometimes also served as a burial ground (fig. 6)²⁷. The façade of troglodyte churches generally consists of a simple dry-stone wall with the structure's interior being reached through a low entrance with a timber gate or door.

Regarding the interior spaces of the masonry churches, simplicity and austerity are again the two principal ingredients, like their outer shell. The internal walls are generally left bare and devoid of any architectural or sculptural decorations. Nevertheless, exceptions exist too. For instance, the late Medieval church of the Annunciation at Ħal Millieri and the coeval one of Bir Miftuħ in the parish of Gudja are internally adorned by fresco cycles illustrating diverse saints and holy figures²⁸. In the case of the latter the archaeological evidence unearthed portions of a fresco portraying scenes of the Last Judgement.

²⁵ Said-Zammit 2016, 181-182.

²⁶ Buhagiar 1997, 131-138, Saliba, Magro Conti and Borg 2002, 25-29.

²⁷ Wettinger 1990, 135-140, Buhagiar 2000, 178-179.

²⁸ Blagg, Bonanno and Luttrell 1990, 127, Said-Zammit 2016, 185.

The internal space of most of these churches consists of an open space, hence of a single nave. The main element of the church's interior is, as expected, the masonry altar on which Mass was celebrated. This was located opposite the main door of the building and usually dominated by a small painting (canvas or fresco) depicting the titular saint to whom the church was dedicated. Sometimes, the space between the abutments of the arches was utilized as a seating area for the congregants. Here one can find masonry benches (locally known as *dkieken*, plural of *dukkien*) which were permanently affixed to the side walls²⁹. Thus far it is unclear whether the *dkieken* were intended to accommodate the general congregation or else were reserved for some distinguished persons.

The built churches were often complimented with an additional room, abutting one of the building's sidewalls or back wall. This served as a sacristy where sacred vestments, furnishings and objects were stored and in which the clergy put on their robes to say Mass.

The wayside churches: an anthropological perspective

The final section of this study explores the local vernacular churches from an anthropological perspective to comprehend in a better way the relationship they had to the congregants who frequented them on a regular or sporadic basis. In the absence of such analysis, these ethnic structures will remain lifeless, meaningless, and just a relic of the past.

To understand the meaning of vernacular religious architecture from an anthropological viewpoint, one has first to define the meaning and scope of religion, whatever the denomination. Away from what people believe in and practice, in general terms one can define religion as a belief in and the veneration of a superhuman controlling power and its effect on humans.

Following the seminal studies of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber³⁰, social anthropologists regarded religion as one of the fundamental components of a society's culture, asserting it as a pattern of beliefs, actions and values that members of a group acquire through time. As an ordered system of meanings, values and beliefs religion defines our place and role in the world. The human capability to develop and use symbolic thought in quotidian matters is a crucial element of culture³¹. Each social group is characterized by its own symbolic system that individual members learn and eventually practice in life. Man's capacity to con-

²⁹ Buhagiar 2005, 85.

³⁰ Durkheim 1912, 48-55, Weber 1922, 23-24.

³¹ Deacon 2010, 495.

struct meaningful symbols motivates religious thought and expression. It is through ethnography that anthropologists seek to describe cosmology and ritual action³².

From an anthropological perspective the wayside churches of the Maltese Islands entail to be considered within the wider framework of vernacular architecture. Besides, for a more complete picture of their significance and real meaning to humans and social groups, they have to be contextualized as well within the historical and cultural background discussed in the foregoing sections of this paper. Wayside churches cannot be studied in isolation for the simple reason that they form an integral part of the wider ethnic heritage, habitat and culture of the Maltese Islands. Hence, the presence of so many wayside churches in nearly all parts of Malta and Gozo, their form, style and physical (external and internal) characteristics, internal space networks, as well as their other material possessions (such as paintings, frescoes, and furnishings), are a clear reminder not only of Malta's distinctive historical and ethnic past, but also of their centrality within a wider Mediterranean and European historical and cultural milieu. The evidence demonstrates that similar (if not identical) examples of wayside rupestral and masonry wayside churches exist in different parts of the Mediterranean region, including Sicily, Sardinia, Andalusian Spain, the Balearic Islands and Greece, this being a further testimony of this collective Mediterranean vernacular cultural idiom and identity (figs. 7 and 8). *Rebus sic stantibus*, and within this historical and cultural framework, therefore, it can be argued that the local wayside churches have indeed a Maltese-Mediterranean character.

Collectively, the rural churches of Malta and Gozo uncover the underlying social, cultural and economic character of the ethnic peasantry through a period of more than seven hundred years of history. Apart from their eclectic stylistic elements that these buildings embrace, mainly Sicilian, South Italian, Spanish and, of course, Maltese, they are a *quidem* witness of the intimate connection that the devout peasants had with the spiritual and metaphysical world, how they perceived God and the saints, practised their religion and religious beliefs in public and in private, and how faith and tradition often become not only interdependent but also indistinguishable.

The evidence shows that one of the main sources that triggered the formation of this peculiar peasant island identity was the Catholic Church: the presence of its clergy in all towns and villages, its influence (if not indoctrination) and *plenitudo potestatis* on the local population, its physical visibility and centrality in terms of parish churches, filial churches, wayside churches, monasteries and religious monuments, as well as the fact that for more than two and a half centuries this country was technically ruled by three separate authorities –

³² Tomasevic 2019, 50-52.

the Order of St John, the Catholic Church and the Tribunal of the Inquisition (also known as the Holy Office or *Sanctum Officium*) – all of which fell under the direct supremacy of the *Romanus Pontifex*.

The presence in churches of a baptismal font and, due to the fact that in the past many churches, comprising the vernacular ones, served as a burial place for the town or village community as well, is yet another indication of the Church's impact on the faithful, essentially from birth to death. The seven Sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church (Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage and Ordination) together express the principal milestones of a person's Christian journey through life, from infancy to adulthood to senility. It is also a clear reminder of the Church's direct and active role in all stages of a believer's life. Understandably, the Christian flock did not consider this as indoctrination, but as a spiritual blessing and protection that brought them even closer to God.

The presence of the clergy in the towns, villages and hamlets was crucial. At a time when many people were illiterate or only had a basic level of education, the priest had a far more reaching role than he has today. Apart from celebrating Mass as well as various religious services and functions along the liturgical year, the peasants often sought his personal advice to read or write private correspondence on their behalf; similarly, priests were sometimes instrumental to provide some type of basic education to the peasant children³³.

The wayside churches also elucidate the peasants' level of economic wealth and *modus vivendi* through time. Their humble style and architecture, austere façade and spartan interior, in concomitance with other ethnic structures like the *razzett* and the *girna*³⁴, are a testament of the peasants' modest life and subsistent economy. They did not have the financial means to erect churches that could reach the same architectural or artistic finesse of their urban counterparts.

Furthermore, one has to view these churches as a place of collective and private worship. It was here where the Christian community congregated on a regular basis (perhaps daily or weekly) for the celebration of Mass and the Eucharist, apart from other religious services organized along the liturgical year, such as Good Friday, Easter, and Christmas. But the church was also a place of private veneration and devotion.

The evidence demonstrates that, like the church, the house was also a place of prayer; at the domestic level the family's beliefs in the spiritual world and religious observance are further substantiated by a variety of personal possessions of strictly religious devotion, for instance statues of saints or holy figures, icons,

³³ Said-Zammit 2021, 17.

³⁴ Said-Zammit 2022, 230-232.

and crucifixes. This is another affirmation of the inevitable and intimate nexus that the house as a place of human habitation had with the village church as a place of 'human' worship and religious devotion³⁵.

The final point to be discussed in this section concerns the relationship between religion and popular culture. This is an intricate area of study because in almost every religion the connection between these two aspects is often exhibited in the provocation and manifestation of cultural expression. While culture conveys how people experience and comprehend the world around them, religion constitutes a substantive way in which they experience and understand the world³⁶. In this context, religious expression and motivation are both crucial since they can stimulate cultural expression, where culture becomes an agent through which the faithful can manifest the objective and meaning religion gives them.

The native wayside churches, like all the other local churches dispersed in the different settlements, offer an insight into this close connection between religion and culture. One has to bear in mind that the Catholic faith has the tendency to be extrovert, where the community manifests its beliefs and devotion through what is physically visible to the naked eye and materially tangible. This is the reason why religious processions with the presence of statues of saints and holy figures, along with the active participation of the clergy, religious groups and the faithful, are so popular in Malta. Religious feasts (*festi*) to celebrate the patron saint of a town or village or an important moment in the Church's liturgical calendar, such as Good Friday, Easter and *Corpus Christi*, still occur locally. These celebrations are not only religious in character, in the sense that they commemorate a peculiar saint or holy figure through several liturgical celebrations, but also cultural in expression (fig. 9). The participation of musical bands, fireworks, appropriate decorative street lighting, flags, banners and other ornaments meant for the occasion, even on the façades of houses and other secular buildings, the costumes used for the religious procession and the entire pageantry involved, all exemplify this collective popular culture, where it becomes extremely difficult to dichotomize culture from religious faith. The level of complexity of these religious-cultural manifestations hinges on the community's aspirations and economic level of wealth to organize such events on a grand or humble scale. The presence of religious statues during these processions and other pageants or manifestations along the town or village streets is perhaps a clear reminder that the faithful are graced by the Lord's or the saint's spiritual blessing and protection. This is corroborated by the number

³⁵ Said-Zammit 2016, 295.

³⁶ Adams 1993, 193.

of religious statues and niches one can still observe in the town or village streets or even on the façades of houses and other secular edifices (fig. 10).

Consequently, the anthropological significance of the Maltese wayside churches lies in the fact that together they not only express the religious sentiments and beliefs of the ethnic peasantry through the centuries, under the influence and authority of the local Catholic Church, but also the social and cultural island identity of an entire community which, after all, constitutes a fundamental element of a nation's legacy which is widely Mediterranean and European but distinctly Maltese.

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**ՄԱԼԹԱՅԻ ԿՂԶԻՆԵՐԻ ՃԱՄՓԵՁՐԵՐԻ ԵԿԵՂԵՑԻՆԵՐԸ
(ՄԱՐԴԱԲԱՆԱԿԱՆ ՀԵՏԱԶՈՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ)**

Ջորջ Ա. Սաիդ Ջամիթ

Ամփոփում

Մալթայի կղզիներում քրիստոնեության ակունքները ավանդաբար տարվում են մինչև վաղ քրիստոնեական ժամանակներ: Սակայն, ըստ հնագիտական տվյալների, քրիստոնեության մասին ամենավաղ վկայությունները վերաբերում են ավելի ուշ ժամանակաշրջանին՝ IV դ. սկզբներին (փաստված են ստորգետնյա դամբարանների՝ հիպոգեաների կամ կատակոմբների առկայությամբ): IX դ. վերջերին, արաբական նվաճումների հետևանքով, քրիստոնեությունը անկում ապրեց Մալթայում, քանի որ բնակիչներն ընդունեցին մահմեդականություն: Նորմանների, անգլիկանների և արագոնացիների կողմից Մալթայի օկուպացիայից հետո կղզիներն ավելի մերձեցան Եվրոպային՝ քաղաքական, տնտեսական և մշակութային առումներով. դրա շնորհիվ քրիստոնեությունը վերածնվեց Հռոմի կաթոլիկ եկեղեցու իշխանության ներքո: Ուշ միջնադարից ի վեր Մալթայի կղզիները բաժանված էին մի քանի ծխերի, որոնցից յուրաքանչյուրը գլխավորում էր ծխական քահանան՝ իր եպիսկոպոսով: Պատմական, հնագիտական և ազգագրական վկայությունները ցույց են տալիս, որ Մալթայում քրիստոնեական համակարգում մեծ դեր էին խաղում ժողովրդական հավատալիքները, որոնք դրսևորվում էին հատկապես գյուղերում և փոքր քաղաքներում գերակշռող մեծաթիվ ծխական եկեղեցիների կյանքում: Մասնավորապես, Մալթայի կղզիների գյուղական լանդշաֆտը բնութագրվում է ճամփեզրի (ճանապարհների հանգուցակետերին կառուցված) բազմաթիվ եկեղեցիներով, որոնք միասին ներկայացնում են ժողովրդի կրոնը, հավատքը, ավանդույթները և մշակութային ժառանգությունը: Սույն հոդվածի սահմաններում հեղինակը կենտրոնանում է ոչ թե ժողովրդական կառույցների արվեստի և ճարտարապետության խնդիրների վրա, այլ առկա մարդաբանական տվյալներն օգտագործում է ուսումնասիրելու կրոնի և մշակույթի ազդեցությունը Մալթայի էթնիկ գյուղացիական համայնքի վրա:

Բանալի բառեր՝ Մալթա, քրիստոնեություն, Հռոմի կաթոլիկ եկեղեցի, ճամփեզրի եկեղեցիներ, ծխական եկեղեցիներ, գյուղական լանդշաֆտ, մարդաբանություն:

**ПРИДОРОЖНЫЕ ЦЕРКВИ МАЛЬТИЙСКИХ ОСТРОВОВ
(АНТРОПОЛОГИЧЕСКОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ)**

Георг А. Саид-Заммит

Резюме

Начало распространения христианства на Мальтийских островах восходит к раннехристианскому периоду. Однако, согласно археологическим данным, самые ранние упоминания о христианстве относятся к более позднему исто-

рическому отрезку – к началу IV в., что подтверждено наличием подземных некрополей – катакомб. В конце IX в., в результате арабских завоеваний, христианство на о. Мальта пережило упадок, поскольку жители острова приняли ислам. После оккупации норманнами, ангевинами и арагонцами Мальта в значительной степени европеизировалась как в политико-экономическом, так и культурном плане, благодаря чему христианство, под эгидой римской католической церкви, возродилось. Начиная с позднего средневековья мальтийские острова были разделены на несколько приходов, каждый из которых возглавлял приходской священник и их епископ. Исторические, археологические и этнографические данные подтверждают, что в жизни мальтийцев важную роль играли народные верования, что проявлялось особенно в деревнях и небольших городах. В частности, сельский ландшафт о. Мальта характеризуется наличием множества церквей на стыке дорог, что является отражением религии, веры, традиций и культурного наследия народа.

В настоящей статье автор рассматривает не архитектурные особенности народных строений, а на основе антропологических данных исследует влияние религии и культуры на представителей сельских общин острова в целом.

Ключевые слова – Мальта, христианство, Римско-католическая церковь, придорожные церкви, приходские церкви, сельский пейзаж, антропология.