

The 1763 Writings and Drawings of the Shrine of Our Lady of Mellieħa by Padre Pelagio

Padre Pelagio Mifsud Gauci Piscopo (1708-1781), a Capuchin priest and a former diocesan priest from Haż-Żebbuġ, Malta,¹ is remembered for his keen interest in local history,² though few are aware that he was also an art lover as manifested in a number of sketches which he had drawn. Even though these cannot be considered as outstanding works of art, some of these sketches are of great relevance since they are the only extant artistic impressions recorded by this Capuchin friar. These sketches include site plans of different places in Malta and Gozo, a small map of the Maltese islands, portraits, and other drawings illustrating various coats of arms which Padre Pelagio reproduced from various tomb inscriptions.

* Martin Micallef studied at the University of Malta, graduating S.Th.B (Melit.) and pursued his postgraduate studies in Sacred Scripture at the University of Oxford, where he obtained a Masters in Theology (M.St Oxon.). In 2009, at the University of Malta, he successfully defended his doctoral thesis (S.Th.D.) with a study on the importance of “Seeking/zeteo” in the Gospel of John. He was subsequently appointed Head of the Department of Sacred Scripture, Hebrew and Greek at the Faculty of Theology, University of Malta, a post which he held until 2014. He lectures biblical sciences mainly New Testament exegesis. He has a great interest in Maltese History and he has published a number of books and articles on the subject.

¹ See Vincent Borg, *The Maltese Diocese During the Eighteenth Century*. Melita Sacra IV, Part Two (Malta: Metropolitan Cathedral Chapter, 2002), 632-634.

² See Frans Ciappara, *Enlightenment and Reform in Malta 1740-1798* (Malta: Midsea, 2006), 1-20. See also, Martin Micallef, “L-Ghejun Bijografiku u Biblijografiku tas-Seklu 18 dwar Patri Pelagju Mifsud minn Haż-Żebbuġ,” in *Speciosa Città Rohan: Haż-Żebbuġ – aktar fuq ġrajjetu u niesu*, eds Philip Balzan, Evelyn Pullicino, Joseph Ciantar (Malta: Gutenberg Press, 2021), 381-385.

This study deals with Padre Pelagio's writings and artistic impressions related to the shire of Our Lady of Mellieħa. We will dwell on the sketches of this shrine drawn by Padre Pelagio in 1763, with the additional historical information that he furnishes about this holy place of national interest. In doing so, we will highlight Padre Pelagio's great interest in Maltese history and how his writings and drawings depicting various sites in Malta and Gozo, make him stand out as one of the foremost eighteenth century historians of the local scene.

The Sketch of the Mellieħa Shrine

Among Padre Pelagio's sketches are those of the rock-cut church, better known as *trogloidyic* church,³ situated at Mellieħa. This church is famous for its icon depicting Our Lady which according to an ancient legend, was painted by St Luke the Evangelist at the time he was in Malta with St Paul.⁴ In his *Uomini illustri di Malta*, Padre Pelagio himself writes about St Luke as the painter of this holy image.⁵

The friar's sketches of the Mellieħa Shrine are found in two different manuscripts of his. In MCAM, Misc. 56, ff.95r-110r he provides a series of 5 *Notizie* on this place, with an additional number of diagrams of the place. Then, in MCAM, Misc. 54, he inserts a number of other sketches of the same place together with a write-up corresponding to these sketches, as part of the information which he gives about different convents and friaries located in Malta

³ For further studies on these types of churches in Malta see, Aldo Messina, "Trogloditismo medievale a Malta," *Melita Historica* 10, no.2 (1989): 109-120.

⁴ A number of publications discuss the relationship of St Luke to this holy image. See, for example, Giovanni Francesco Abela, *Della descrizione di Malta isola nel mare siciliano, con le sue antichità ed altre notizie* (Malta: Paolo Bonacota, 1647), 371; Vincenzo Caruana dei Conti Gatto, *Malta artistica illustrata*, Parte 1ma Pittura (Malta: Tipografia della Casa di San Giuseppe, 1905), 8-35. For scientific arguments which counter the idea that this is a first-century icon, see Mario Buhagiar, *The Iconography of the Maltese Islands 1400-1900 – Painting* (Malta: World Confederation of Salesian Past Pupils of Don Bosco – Lions Club Malta, 1987), 10; Vincent Borg, "Harsa ġdida lejn l-ikona tal-Madonna," in *Il-Mellieħa mal-milja taż-żmien*, ed. Joe Catania (Malta: Kunsill Lokali Mellieħa, 2002), 77-78.

⁵ See N[ational] L[ibrary] of M[alta], Libr. MS. 1123, *Uomini Illustri di Malta*, ff.3-5. The original manuscript written in the eighteenth century by an anonymous Capuchin friar was later transcribed by Count Saverio Marchese (1757-1833). A number of entries indicate that the anonymous Capuchin friar was none other than Padre Pelagio. This conclusion is reached by examining and comparing the internal evidence of this manuscript, which includes a number of details about Haż-Żebbuġ, the native town of Padre Pelagio, with similar references in *Componimento Storico*, compiled by the same Capuchin friar.

and Gozo at that time. In this study we will focus on the information found in MCAM, Misc. 54, "Pianta della Capella della Madonna della Mellehha 1763."⁶

Folio 175v which is divided into two, depicts Padre Pelagio's sketch of the shrine (right-hand side), while on the other side he uses the same method which he used in other similar sketches, marking with different letters of the alphabet the various locations of the site plan. He starts by the sign of the '+' and then he proceeds to the letter 'B' ending with the letter 'T', and an additional explanation to each letter.

Corresponding to the mark of the '+' is the site of the main altar which was made up of coloured marble.⁷ Corresponding to the letters 'BB' he mentions a pedestal for the columns on which rest the white marble statues representing St Paul the Apostle and St Luke the Evangelist.⁸ Corresponding to the letters 'CC' he refers to a passage that joined the sacristy to the chapel.⁹ Corresponding to the letters 'DDD' he locates a passage that joined the sacristy to the chapel, which according to Padre Pelagio was hewn in the year 1747 for the occasion of the Consecration of this chapel.¹⁰ Corresponding to the letter 'E' we read about one of the chapel's doors that was made anew.¹¹

Corresponding to the letters 'FF' the Capuchin friar then indicates the first arch on the altar, with nine silver sanctuary lamps hanging on this arch.¹² At this point, Padre Pelagio inserts a note corresponding to the letters '*FFF' to mark the remaining old circumference of the cave.¹³ Corresponding to the letter 'G' he denotes the chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary.¹⁴ Corresponding to the letter 'H' he writes a note about another door overlooking the square in front of the chapel, as in the case of letter 'E'.¹⁵ Corresponding to the letters 'I I' he pinpoints

⁶ See M[etropolitan] C[athedral] A[rchives] M[dina], Misc. 54, f.175r.

⁷ "+ Altare con sua nicchia tutto di marmo di vario colore." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

⁸ "BB. Pedicini delle colonne sopra delli q[ual]i posano due statue di marmo bianco rappresentanti S[an] Paolo Ap[osto]lo, e S[an] Luca Evangelista." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

⁹ "CC. Passagio dalla Sacristia alla Capella." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

¹⁰ "DDD. Andito e passagio dalla Sacristia alla Capella scavato l'an[no] 1747 in occasione della consacraz[i]one della med[esim]a." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

¹¹ "E. Una delle Porte della Capella novam[ent]e fatte." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

¹² "FF. Piede del primo arco che forma Presbiterio, e da cui pendono nove lampadari di argento." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

¹³ "*FFF. Il rimanente della circumfurenza antica della Sac[ra] Grotta." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

¹⁴ "G. Capellina della Madonna del S[antis]s[imo] Rosario." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

¹⁵ "H. Altra Porta della Capella riguardante la gran platea come la pred[ett]a E." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

the location where the second arch ended.¹⁶ Corresponding to the letters 'KK' Padre Pelagio mentions the place which was reserved for the confessionals.¹⁷ Corresponding to the letters 'LL' he points out the two marble inscriptions placed on the same wall, commemorating the Consecration of this chapel.¹⁸

Corresponding to the letter 'M' he refers to the door of the sacristy.¹⁹ Corresponding to the letter 'N' he refers to a form of an altar on which the priest could put on or take off the sacred vestments before and after Mass.²⁰ Corresponding to the letter 'O' Padre Pelagio indicates the place where the priest could prepare himself before celebrating Mass.²¹ Corresponding to the letter 'P' Padre Pelagio writes how till recently during his time, there was still a passage located in this place which was close to the other place marked 'Q.' Then, he alludes to a room in which the priests could spend time in silence to prepare themselves for Mass. At this point, Padre Pelagio refers to Don Aloysius Gauci²² who had barred this door in order to place a beautiful marble *lavatorio* - a wash-hand basin - in the wall so that the priests could wash their hands before celebrating Mass. In addition, Padre Pelagio comments on the nearby room which served other purposes.²³

Corresponding to the letter 'R' we read about the exterior door of the room marked by the letter 'Q.'²⁴ Corresponding to the letter 'S' we learn that in the midst of the two doors and in the midst of the façade overlooking the square, there was a niche with a stone statue representing St Paul the Apostle.²⁵

¹⁶ "II. Piedi dell'altro arco." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

¹⁷ "KK. Luogo adatto alli Confessionali." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

¹⁸ "LL. In questo muro di rincontro si vedono attaccate due iscriz[i]oni in marmo esprimenti la memoria della Consacraz[i]one." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

¹⁹ "M. Porta della Sacristia." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

²⁰ "N. Luogo formato a modo di altare ove si vestono e si spogliano li sacerdoti celebranti." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

²¹ "O. Preparatorio per li sacerdoti celeb[ran]ti." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

²² For biographical details about Don Aloysius Gauci (1698-1765) see Borg, *The Maltese Diocese During the Eighteenth Century*, 2:490.

²³ "P. Qui poco tempo fa vi era un passaggio per vicina Q. Stanza che serviva di comodo da ritirarsi i R.R. sacerdoti per quietam[ent]e prepararsi alla S[anta] Messa; quale porta il R. Don Aloisio Gauci la chiuse, e dentro il muro formò un galantino lavatorio di marmo; e la vicina stanza la riserbò appartata per altri usi." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

²⁴ "R. Porta di fuori della stanza Q." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

²⁵ "S. Qui in mezzo alle due porte evvi in mezzo al frontispizio verso la gran platea una nicchia con dentro una statua di pietra nostrale rappresentante l'Apost[o]lo San Paolo." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

Corresponding to the letters 'T T' we read about the church's belfry in the form of a tower, whose door is marked by the letter 'T'.²⁶

A 1760 Description of the Mellicha Shrine

Once Padre Pelagio finishes off with the plan of this chapel, he proceeds to the next folio to furnish a detailed description of the items found in this holy place, together with those of its sacristy and a cave beneath it. The information that he provides here dates to 1760, the year when Padre Pelagio was writing.²⁷

He describes the main altar of the chapel as one covered with colourful marble and beautifully decorated.²⁸ It is here that the image of the Blessed Virgin, under the title of the Nativity of our Lady, is venerated. This image, painted in oil on red brass, depicted Our Lady holding the Child Jesus in her right hand. According to Padre Pelagio, this painting was of the same size of a niche enriched by other golden and silver ornaments, together with other precious gifts.²⁹

He adds that behind it, in the rear of the niche hewn in the rock, there was the icon painted by the glorious St Luke the Evangelist. It represented an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary, painted in Greek style. Underneath, written in Latin, there was a devout prayer addressed to the Blessed Virgin, in praise to her Nativity, who according to the Capuchin friar, it was mistakenly believed to have been written by St Augustine. This prayer translated into Latin and written in golden letters upon the paint, lay underneath the image of the Virgin on a white marble. The inscription stated: "Let us celebrate the birth of the Blessed Mary so that she herself may intercede on our behalf to Our Lord Jesus Christ. In the year of the Lord 320." This prayer was put in place in 1744 with great piety in the presence of many testimonies.³⁰

²⁶ "TT. Torre, ò sia Campanile della Chiesa con sua T Porta." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175r.

²⁷ "Descrizione distinta e minuta di tutto quanto contiensi in questa Santa Cappella, nella Sacristia, e nella Grotta sotteranea, quale si trova nel presente stato del 1760." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175v.

²⁸ "La macchina dell'altare maggiore è tutta di marmo di diversi colori assai galantam[ente] artificciata, e vistosa." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175v.

²⁹ "Ivi per tutelare si venera la B[eatissima] Vergine sotto tit[olo] della Lei Gloriosa Natività, dipinta ad oglio col S[anto] Bambino in braccio destro, sopra lamina di rame rosso della grandezza tutta della nicchia delineata fornita di lamine d'argento e di altri adornamenti di oro e di argento, e di altri preziosi donativi." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175v.

³⁰ "Dietro a questa nel fondo della nicchia scavata nella rocca viva, si conserva dipinta dentro una nicchia scavata nella rocca viva intonacata dal Glorioso S[an] Luca Evangelista l'effigie della med[esima] B[eatissima] Vergine Maria delineata alla Greca; con al di sotto scritta in Idioma Latino una divota Orazione diretta ad essa B[eatissima] V[ergine] in lode della sua Natività

Next to this icon and inscription fixed on the wall, Padre Pelagio mentions two coats of arms. The coat of arms on the right-hand side belonged to the Bishop of Malta, Fra D. Bartolomeo Rull, while the one on the left belonged to the Inquisitor and Apostolic Delegate, Mgr D. Gregorio Salviati.³¹ Above the mentioned icon, newly framed in white marble, there were three engraved Greek letters, which Padre Pelagio notes were written differently in the writings of Count Abela.³²

On either side of the altar, the Capuchin friar writes that there were two pedestals on which two statues were venerated and wrought in white marble, of very fine workmanship. The one on the right, represented St Paul the Apostle, with an inscription beneath it, stating that it was made by the Venerable Bailiff Fra Don Ferdinandus Correa in 1733. The statue on the left-hand side represented St Luke the Evangelist, with a 1753-inscription beneath it, recalling the Benedictine Nuns of the City of Notabile and other pious persons who had undertaken to have this statue made in the year 1753.³³

creduta per errore composta già, e formata dal S[anto] Padre e gran Dottore S[an] Agostino; quale Orazione fù trasportata all'Idioma Latino, e scritta parimente sopra l'intonicato a caratteri dorati col mordente, come si vede sotto la Madonna ed trasposta in una tavola di marmo bianco, e si ammira posta sotto il quadro esteriore in piano della nicchia, ed è dal tenore qual siegue =

NATIVITATEM B. MARIAE CELEBREMUS, UT [...] PRO NOBIS INTERCEDAT AD DO[...]M JESUM CHRISTUM: A[.]NO DNI. CCCXX.

Il trasporto seguì nel 1744 con tutta fedeltà avanti testimoni." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175v. In expanded form, the above inscription would read: NATIVITATEM B[EATAE] MARIAE CELEBREMUS, UT [IPSA] PRO NOBIS INTERCEDAT AD DO[MINU]M JESUM CHRISTUM: A[N]NO D[OMI]NI CCCXX.

³¹ "Accanto della quale Tavola ed Iscrizione alla destra si vede attaccata l'arma gentilizia del moderno Vescovo di Malta Fra D. Bartolo[meo] Rull ed alla sinistra quella di Monsig[nor] Inq[uisito]re e Delagato Apost[oli]co D. Gregorio Salviati." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175v.

³² "Sopra il d[ett]o Quadro e sua rinnovata sua cornice in cartello di marmo bianco si vedono oggidi segnate in Greco queste tre lettere ò Zifre =

MP	AMV	QU
MHTHP	AVE MARIA VIRGO	QEYOY

che il Command[atore] Abela lib.3. not.4, p.371 la riporta così =

MP QU - *mitir Theu*." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175v.

³³ "Alli lati dell'altare sorgono uno per parte due piedistalli sovra delli quali si veneravano alzate due statue di marmo bianco di assai gentile lavoro: una alla destra rappresentante l'Apost[ol]o S[an] Paolo con al di sotto questa iscrizione =

VEN[ERABILIS] BAIVLIVVS F[RATER] D[OMINUS] FERDINANDVS CORREA FIERI FECIT AN[NO] D[OMI]NI 1733.

L'altra alla sinistra rappresentante l'Evangelista S[an] Luca con al di sotto la memoria qual siegue =

At this point, Padre Pelagio repeats the same mistaken information recorded by his ancestors, namely, that this place had been consecrated by a number of bishops who on their way to Africa to convene an Ecumenical Council, stopped at this sacred shrine in Malta.³⁴ The Capuchin friar notes that this event was marked by a number of paintings on the rocky walls which were still visible during his life, and are also mentioned by the Maltese historian, Abela.³⁵

Padre Pelagio then testifies that the Maltese people had since time immemorial shown devotion to this shrine, and due to this great manifestation of piety, Bishop Alpheran saw it fit to have this holy place consecrated. This event was held with great solemnity on 22nd May 1747 in the presence of countless people. This is attested by an inscription engraved on the front of the main altar, stating that during the rite of consecration, the bishop placed the relics of the martyrs Saints Boniface, Pius, Victoria and Candida in the altar.³⁶

Facing the main altar, placed against the wall, and corresponding to the bell-tower, Padre Pelagio describes two marble inscriptions, above which lay the coat of arms of the same bishop, Alpheran de Bussan sculpted in marble. In the right-hand inscription one reads: "The effigy of the Mother of God having been painted by St Luke, our ancestors have thrice embellished this naturally excavated cave under its glorious title. Thus enriched, thus protected, and

MONIALES S. BENEDICTI CIVITATIS NOTABILIS ET ALIAE PERSONAE PIAE F[IERI] C[VRA]VERVNT ANNO 1753." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.175v.

³⁴ On this tradition see, Carlo Cortis, *Is-Santwarju u il-Madonna tal-Mellieha. Miġjub bil-Malti minn Dun Ġużepp Farrugia*. It-Tieni Edizzjoni (Malta: G. Muscat, 1923), 8; Ġanni Mifsud, *Il-Madonna tal-Mellieha* (Malta: Parroċċa Mellieha, 1987), 17-18. For counter-arguments calling this tradition as 'legendary' see, Stanley Fiorini, "Il-Parroċċa tal-Mellieha fil-Medju Evu," in *Il-Mellieha mal-milja taż-żmien*, 2:36.

³⁵ "Che questa Ven[eranda] Cappella, e divotiss[imo] Santuario sia stato altre volte consacrato, e che in essa si tenne una Con[gregazio]ne Conciliare ed Ecumenica di molti SS. PP. Cattolici, unitam[ente] alle rispettive vestigia che tuttavia si venerano nella rocca viva sovra l'intonicato, corse in tutt'i secoli passati e persevera sino a tempi nostri costante Tradizione, al intorno a questo fa parola il Com[mendatore] Abela nella sua *Malta Il[ustrata]*, lib. 3 not. 4, pag. 372." MCAM, Misc. 54, ff.175v- 176r.

³⁶ "In sequela di tanti monumenti di cristiana pietà dei Maltesi in ogni tempo rimostrati verso questo Santuario, in pegno dell'ardente sua divozione, ed a fine di vieppiù accrescere la venerazione l'Il[ustrissim]us et Rev[erendissim]us Mons[ignor] Vescovo di f.r. Fra Paolo Alferan de Bussan, Arciv[escovo] di Damiata l'Anno 1747 con sollemnissima pompa e concorso di gente senza numero attese tutto giulivo a consacrarlo e di ciò vi è uno attestato inciso nel frontispizio attorno la sacra Mensa di d[ett]o Altare Maggiore, ed è del tenore seguente = *Il[ustrissim]us et Rev[erendissim]us D[omi]nus Fr. D. Paulus Alpheran de Bussan Archiep[iscop]us Damiatae Ep[iscop]us Meliten[sis] die 22 Maij An[no] 1747 sollemniter consecravit hoc altare, in quo posuit Reliq[uias] SS. Bonifacij, Pij, Victoriae, Candidae Martyrum.*" MCAM, Misc. 54, f.176r.

afterwards made illustrious by its traditions, their descendants, earnestly striving, famously rendered this shrine into a temple and by the kindness of the Ever Virgin, this monument, thriving for the past seventeen centuries through the greatest piety of those who congregated here, has been preserved and they have made its veneration everlasting.”³⁷

The inscription located on the left, recalls the memory of the Consecration of this church, stating: “This Sanctuary, worthy of worship by so many memorable events, adding a new reason for its veneration, the Most Illustrious and Most Reverend Lord Fra Paolo Alpheran, Archbishop of Damiata and Bishop of Malta, has consecrated with solemn rite on the 22nd day of May in the year 1747, whose remembrance every year he ordered to be held on the 7th day of September and by Apostolic Authority he marked it out perpetually with a plenary indulgence.”³⁸ Padre Pelagio adds that around the chapel, on its rocky walls, one could still see the paintings representing the Melevitan Council of

³⁷ “Di rimpetto all’Altare Maggiore in dorso del muro, che corrisponde al Campanile, attaccati si vedono due cartelli di marmo sovra delli quali parim[ent]e allogata vi stà in marmo l’Arma Gentilizia dello stesso Vescovo Alferan in un delli due cartelli alla destra si legge inciso come segue =

SPECUM INCAVTE EFFOSSUM
D. LUCAS EFFIGIE DIEIPARAE DEPICTA
MAIORES TER GLORIOSO EIUS NOMINE CONDECORARUNT:
SIC DITATAM, SIC MUNITAM, DEIN ILLUSTRATAM TRADITIONIBUS
AEDICULAM, POSTERITAS AEMULA IN AEDEM CONCINNAVIT:
SED PERENNIS VIRGINIS BENEFICENTIA, MONUMENTUM SERVATUM
CONFLUENTIUM SUMMA PIETAS POST XVII SAECULA EXCRESCENS
EIUS VENERATIONEM AETERNARVNT.”

MCAM, Misc. 54, f.176r.

³⁸ “Nel cartello della parte sinistra si legge memoria della riferita Consagrazione corrispondente alla preaccennata ed è di questo tenore =

SANCTUARIUM HOC
TOT MEMORABILIBUS MONUMENTIS VENERABILE
NOVUM VENERATIONIS ARGUMENTUM ADIICIENS
ILL. ET REV. D. F. PAULUS ALPHERAN ARCHIEP. DAMIAT. EPUS MELIT.
SOLEMNI RITU CONSECRAVIT XI KAL. IUNIJ ANNO MDCCXLVII.
CUIUS MEMORIAM QUOTANNIS RECOLENDAM
PRAESCRIPSIT DIE VII SEPTEMB. ET DE APOSTOL. AUCTORIT.
INDULGEN. PLENARIA IN PERPETUUM INSIGNIVIT.”

MCAM, Misc. 54, ff.176r-176v.

Bishops, together with some painted crosses recalling the first consecration of this chapel by these bishops.³⁹

Here, the Capuchin friar includes a number of references to his first site-plan of the shrine by the use of some letters of the alphabet, by which he indicates particular sites in this holy place. He writes that on the left-hand side of the main altar there was a door marked by the letters 'CC' indicating a passage that leads from the sacristy to the chapel.⁴⁰ On the right-hand side, he mentions a door, marked by the letter 'F' which gives light to the chapel.⁴¹ He then turns to an arch neatly hewn in the rock, from which hang nine silver sanctuary lamps, and which were always lit before the image of the Virgin Mary. On the right-hand side of the arch, he mentions another small door, marked by the letter 'D'.⁴² Here the author is repeated in other words what he had already said on f.175r.

Immediately, beside this door, there was an altar dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary with a painting reproduced in oil by a gifted artist. At the rear of this same painting, Padre Pelagio notes the coat of arms of the Benefactor.⁴³

He also reproduced a sketch of this coat of arms divided into three sections. On the upper part there is the Cross, indicating that the benefactor might have been one of the Knights of Malta. The lower part is an empty semi-circular form. The centre part depicts a griffon and appears as part (quarters 2 and 3) of the Castelletti emblem, referring to the female side of the family.⁴⁴ This may indicate that the benefactor of this painting is a member of the Castelletti family with some connection with the Order of St John.

³⁹ "D'intorno la Capella nel muro della rocca viva, come si disse, tutta via si ravvisano in buon essere le pitture rappresentanti i Padri del Concilio Melevitano, ed alcune Croci parim[ent]e dipinti indicanti la rispettiva primiera Consagrazione." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.176v.

⁴⁰ "Alla mano sinistra accanto l'altare maggiore vi è la porta CC. dell'andito, ò sia passaggio dalla Sacristia alla Cappella." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.176v.

⁴¹ "Alla mano destra evvi la Porta F. che rende la Cappella assai illuminata e vaga." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.176v.

⁴² "Immediatam[ent]e succede un arco pur di rocca viva, ma positam[ent]e arteficiato da cui nel mezzo pendono nove lampadari di argento che di continuo ardono in onore della B[eatissi]ma Vergine. Appresso il zoccolo del d[etto] arco alla sinistra vi è l'altra Porticella D." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.176v.

⁴³ "Ed immediatam[ent]e un'altare dedicato alla stessa B[eatissi]ma Vergine sotto titolo del Rosario, dipinta ad oglio di buona mano, e nel fondo di esso quadro si ravvisa dipinta l'Arma Gentilizia del Benefattore." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.176v.

⁴⁴ See Charles A. Gauci, *The Genealogy and Heraldry of the Noble Families of Malta*, 2 vols. (Malta: Gulf, 1981; PEG, 1992), I:272. "Castelletti: Quarterly, first and fourth: Gu a castle of three towers Or. second and third: Az a griffon sergeant Arg. Worth noting is that both the Inguanez and the Castelletti were Barons of *Dejr il-Bniet* (together with Apap-Bologna-

Bernardine Scicluna, in her MA dissertation includes a footnote on this coat of arms stating: "In AAF VP Buenos (1667 - 1668), Volume XX, f. 757v, one reads that the Rosary altar was founded a few years before 1668. The coat-of-arms of the benefactor, who was a member of the Order, appears at the bottom right-hand corner of this altarpiece, which, according to ACM Misc. 56 *Notizie Miscellaneae*, f. 109r, belongs to a certain 'Sig. Don Ignazio Enguanes.'" ⁴⁵

On the other hand, Padre Pelagio informs the readers that for the benefit of all those who recite the rosary in front of the image of the Holy Virgin, His Excellency Don Ignatius Inguanes, under the date 7th June 1669, procured the granting of the indulgence through Mgr Pietro Maria Passionei, Procurator and General Vicar of his Order, who happened to be in Rome. With regards to this Indulgence, Padre Pelagio states that there was a memorial hanging on a wall granting the permission to erect a confraternity of the Holy Rosary on the said altar. ⁴⁶

The Capuchin friar then refers to another arch, similar to the previous one, under which there were two confessionals, one bearing the coat of arms of Bishop Gori Mancini, and the other the coat of arms of the reigning bishop Mgr Rull. In addition, he writes that on the back wall, there were two inscriptions, and how one can exit from this place to the square through a door marked by the letter 'H.' ⁴⁷

Looking up to the main altar, towards the middle of the arch, Padre Pelagio records a wooden inscription placed over the sanctuary lamps. The wording of the inscription, on oil painting, stated:

Sceberras and D'Amico, as appears in the coat-of-arms of the barony (Gauci, Vol.II, pp. 3-4). The Inguanes emblem is: Gules tree pallets wavy Or." The author is grateful to Prof. Stanley Fiorini for providing him with this information.

⁴⁵ Bernardine Scicluna, *A Stylistic Analysis of Stefano Erardi's Painting*. A Dissertation presented to the Faculty of Arts in the University of Malta, October 1997, p.185, no.344.

⁴⁶ "A beneficio sp[ettan]te di chiunque reciti tutta la corona del Rosario ad onore di Maria S[antis]sima l'Ill[ustriss]imo Sig[nor] D[on] Ignazio Inguanes, sotto li 7 Giugno 1669 ottenne Indulgenza dal R[everendiss]imo Pr[ocurator]e G[eneral]e delli Domenicani il P[ad]re Pietro Maria Passionei Procuratore e Vicar[i]o G[enerale] del suo Ordine, e di ciò tuttavia conservasi appesa nel muro memoria autentica. (*il q[ua]le trovandosi in Roma ottenne Indulto che in d[ett]o altare si potesse erigere una Conf[raterni]tà del Rosario)." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.176v.

⁴⁷ "Succede n'altro arco simile al prede[tt]o entro il cui vano ve ne sono alloggiate due sede confessionali uno coll'Arma del Vescovo Gori Mancini, l'altro coll'Arma del regnante Monsig[nor] Rull, e nel muro dorsale le sovrannotate due Cartelli colle rispettive Iscrizioni; ed appiè ed accanto di questo arco verso la Platea si esce fuori per l'altra Porta H." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.176v.

Ancient tradition and monuments bear witness that formerly, very many bishops, while speaking against Pelagius, had consecrated this chapel of the Blessed Mary of Mellicha in the year of the Lord 409. Famous historians say that this same Council, commenced under the most blessed Popes Sylvanus and Augustinus, the enemy of Grace, was condemned.

The ancient awe of this temple terrifies the Turks and entices the faithful, and an abundance of new graces are obtained. O faithful reader, worship the honey-flowing Mother and you shall be awash with grace from a copious fountain. (This ancient inscription was related in the acts of Bishop Michele Balaguer, 1644).⁴⁸

Then, on the next folio, Padre Pelagio refers to another door situated on the right-hand side and marked by the letter 'D', through which one could enter into the sacristy from a new passage hewn in the rocks. Immediately after these details, the Capuchin friar describes the items that adorned the sacristy of this shrine. First, he mentions a *Cassarizzo*, that is, a form of a wooden case for church's vestments, situated on the right-hand side, in the form of an altar table with a

⁴⁸ "Di quindi rivolgendo l'occhio verso l'Altare Maggiore, e guardando in sù verso la metà dell'Arco maestro in un cartello di legno che vi stà attaccato e sovrasta alli lampadari si legge scritto ad oglio la memoria del tenore seguente =

CAPPELLAM B. MARIAE DE MELLEHA
PLURIMOS EPISCOPOS CONTRA PELAGIUM
SUPRA APPELLANTES ANNO DOMINI 409 CONSECRASSE
VETUS TRADITIO, ET MONUMENTA TESTANTUR
IN EODEM CONCILIO INITO SUB SYLVANO
ET *AUGUSTINO* SANCTISSIMIS PONT[IFICIBUS]
INIMICUM GRATIAE FUISSE CONDEMNATUM
AIUNT HIST[ORICI] *NON IGNOBILES.*
TURCAS TERRET, FIDELES ALLICIT
PRISCA TEMPLI REVERENTIA,
ET REGENTIUM COPIA GRATIARUM *SEQUUNTUR*
MELLIFLUAM LECTOR MATREM DEVOTUS ADORA,
ET TIBI DE PLANO GRATIA FONTE PLUET
(*INSCRIPTIO ANTIQUA IN ACT. EP. MICH. BALAGUER*
1644 COMMEMORATA)."

MCAM, Misc. 54, ff.176v-177r. Words in italics were omitted by Padre Pelagio; supplied from the Acts of Bishop Balaguer 1644 to which the inscription particularly refers. See AAM, VP 15 (Balaguer), f.290. The whole inscription must have been copied from an ancient inscription and then recorded in the pastoral visit of Bishop Balaguer done on the 18th November 1644. Today the inscription has been replaced by a modern tablet which contains that inscription described in Balaguer's Pastoral Visit of 1644. It seems that in order to give it authenticity and strengthen its source, the reference to the pastoral visit was added to the inscription. Probably the ancient one was no longer completely legible.

platform.⁴⁹ Above the back-wall, there was a niche in which a statue representing the Holy Virgin with the Child Jesus in her right arm was venerated. This stone statue was seven palms high,⁵⁰ bearing an inscription recalling how it was donated by Wolfgang Philip Guttenberg in the year “17-04.” In between the numbers of this date, Padre Pelagio sketches the coat-of arms of this benefactor.⁵¹

Walking towards the right-hand side of that same wall, the Capuchin friar refers to another door which originally led to a small room for the use of the priests to prepare themselves before celebrating Mass. In this room there was a simple marble water basin. From here, Padre Pelagio writes how one could walk towards a door of this sacristy, marked by the letter ‘M,’ leading to the outer square.⁵² On the right-hand side of this door, there was a small door marked by number ‘1’ leading to a room marked by the letter ‘Q,’ which was once used by priests to prepare themselves before Mass. According to Padre Pelagio, this place was destined for other uses by the recent Procurators of the Sanctuary.⁵³ Next to this room, on a higher level, there was a hole from which the pilgrims who visited this holy place, could fetch water from a common well. They used to do so nearly every day, as a means of devotion towards this sanctuary.⁵⁴

The Exterior of the Mellieħa Shrine

Padre Pelagio mentions how on the right-hand side of the aforementioned door marked by number 1’ there was an arch built during the time of Bishop Fra

⁴⁹ “Piegando da quindi il pie alla destra, per la Porta *D* si entra per un andito nuovam[ent]e scavato nella rocca viva nella Sacristia, ove a primo giungersi di fianco destro si tocca un Cassarizzo formato a modo di mensa di altare con sua bradella ò sia pedana e serve per commodo da riporvi dentro, ed esporvisi sopra gli utensili sagri da dire la santa messa.” MCAM, Misc. 54, f.177r.

⁵⁰ One palm (Maltese *xiber*) is equivalent to 10.3 inches or 0.26 metres.

⁵¹ “Al di sopra in dorso del muro in una nicchia si venera una statua di pietra nostra rappresentante la B[eatissi]ma Vergine col S[anto] Bambino allo braccio destro, alta settipalmare, e nel seguente tenore = *F. Wolffangus Filippus L.B.D. de A. Guttemberg S.Io. Hier. Bajulius Brandeburgensis Germaniae Anno reparatae salutis 17 .. 04 =.*” MCAM, Misc. 54, f.177r.

⁵² “Volgendo il camino per il destro fianco in quel muro entro il vano di certa porta (che altre volte comunicava con un Camerino formato per Preparatorio appartato per li Sacerdoti) si vede formato un semplice Lavatorio di marmo. Appresso si volti il passo per la Porta *M.* di essa Sacristia, e riesce alla gran Platea.” MCAM, Misc. 54, f.177r.

⁵³ “Alla destra di questa porta uscendo a mano destra a cui la Porticella *I.* della Stanza *Q.* altre volte destinata per Preparatorio dei R[everendi] Sacerdoti, ma dalli moderni Procuratori riserbata, e destinata per altri usi e commodi loro proprii.” MCAM, Misc. 54, f.177r.

⁵⁴ “Appresso a questa più in sopra evvi il buco, ò sia commodo da tirare l’acqua dal pozzo commune per uso di quanti vi concorro, quasi giornalm[ent]e, per divozione del Santuario.” MCAM, Misc. 54, f.177r.

Davide Cocco Palmieri, on which one could still see his coat of arms. On the right-hand side of the same wall or on the exterior frontispiece of the chapel, one could appreciate the beautiful symmetrical architecture made up of two doors marked by the letters 'E' and 'H.' In between these doors there was a beautiful and fine façade, built and paid for during the reign of Grandmaster Antonio Manoel de Vilhena and Bishop, Fra Paolo Alpheran, with their respective coats of arms showing. In between, there was a niche with a stone statue of St Paul the Apostle.⁵⁵

Padre Pelagio then informs the reader that besides the door of the church, marked by the letter 'H' there was a tower, better known as a belfry, built during the same period, with three bells. The largest one was donated by the aforementioned bishop Alpheran in the year 1733. The smallest one was donated by a benefactor in the year 1755. An engraving on the bell stated that it was donated to Our Lady in that year 1755 by Francesco Spagnolo, of Maltese nationality. The middle one was donated by the contemporary Grandmaster, Emmanuel Pinto in 1759.⁵⁶

At this point of his writing, Padre Pelagio inserts a rather long note marked by the symbol #, written on another smaller folio inserted on the other side of f. 177v. Due to the sequence of thought it would be profitable if we refer to this note later on.

The Capuchin friar then testifies that close to the belfry, there was a covered lodge for the use of the pilgrims. There was also a niche in which a sculpted statue representing Our Lady was venerated. This statue was commissioned by

⁵⁵ "Alla sinistra parte della d[ett]a Porta, che fù fabbricata al tempo di Monsig[nor] Vescovo Fra Davide Cocco Palmieri, di cui pertanto al di sopra l'arco si ravvisano l'Armi Gentilizie del Med[esim]o, alla parte destra dell'istesso muro, ò sia frontispizio del vano della Cappella si vedono in concertata simetria d'architettura al di fuori formata le due Porte *E* et *H* con in mezzo una galantina prospettiva, e finimento, fatti fabbricati a tempo ed a spese della divozione del Sereniss[im]o Principe Frà D. Antonio Manoel, e del religiosissimo Vescovo inanzidetto Frà D. Paolo Alpheran, di caduno delli quali a quest'effetto si ravvisano le Armi Gentilize, con in mezzo entro una Nicchia una Statua di pietra nostrale rappresentante l'Appostolo S. Paolo." MCAM, Misc. 54, ff.177r-v.

⁵⁶ "Appresso alla Porta della Chiesa *H*. immediatam[ent]e siegue congiunta la Torre, ò sia Campanile fabbricato nello stesso tempo ove si ammirano tre Campane, la più grande donata dal de[tt]o Monsignor Vescovo Alferan l'Anno 1733. La più piccola è dono di un benefattore seguito l'Anno 1755 in cui evvi scritto così = 1755. Francesco Spagnolo di nazione Maltese la diede alla Madonna = La Mezzana è dono del regnante Sereniss[im]o Principe Frà D. Emmanuele Pinto nel 1759." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.177v.

the famous Guttenberg.⁵⁷ Subsequently, on the other part of the open space, facing towards the East, Padre Pelagio refers to a number of rooms built to house freely those families who went there, with an additional residence for the priest who lived there as a Chaplain and Confessor.⁵⁸ On the other corner of the open space overlooking the South, there was nothing else to add, if not a plain wall, with a common door guarded by a heavy wooden gate, while in the middle of the open space there was a water fountain.⁵⁹

This information then continues on f.185r where Padre Pelagio refers to the water of this fountain that reached through hidden canals from a cistern situated above the hill overlooking the Sanctuary, and where the rain water was collected.⁶⁰ Surmounting the fountain there was a stone statue of Our Lady with the Child Jesus in her arms. The statue was made during the same time when the frontispiece of the shrine was built. Padre Pelagio adds that the first-time that water gushed out from this fountain was on the occasion when Grandmaster Manoel de Vilhena, after ordering works on the road leading to the Sanctuary making it suitable for carriages to travel along, brought precious gifts in the year “17 ... [omissis].”⁶¹ In the open space, Padre Pelagio notes how one could enjoy the shade of the many trees planted there which rendered the place rather pleasant and delightful.⁶²

⁵⁷ “Attaccato al Campanile si vede un Loggiato coperto per comodo uso dei concorrenti, e quivi sotto il d[ett]o ripostimento in una Nicchia si venera una statua della Madonna fatta scolpire, ed espostavi dal prelodato Guttenberg.” MCAM, Misc. 54, f.177v.

⁵⁸ “Successivam[ent]e nell’altro quarto della Platea verso Levante evvi una tirosa di stanze fabbricatevi per comodo e gratuito uso delle famiglie di riguardo che concorrono, e per abitazione ordinaria del R[everendo] Sacerdote, che ivi indispensabilm[ent]e risiede in grado di Capellano e Penitenziario.” MCAM, Misc. 54, f.177v.

⁵⁹ “Nell’altro angolo della Platea che riguarda a mezzodi non vi è altro di presente, se non semplice muro, colla Porta commune fornita di forte Grate di legno. In mezzo alla Platea si gode alzata una Vasca con suo finimento a modo di fontana, che sponde dell’acqua a placito di chi.” MCAM, Misc. 54, f.177v.

⁶⁰ “[che sponde dell’acqua a placito di chi] tiene la cava, l’acqua proviene per via di canali occulti derivata da una Gebia, ò sia conserva d’acqua piovosa a tall’effetto scavata sopra il poggio, o sia monte, che sovrastra allo Santuario.” MCAM, Misc. 54, f.185r.

⁶¹ “Fà finimento alla vasca una statueta della Madonna col S[anto] Bambino in braccio scolpita in pietra nostrale, artefatta nello stesso tempo, che fù fabbricato il Frontispizio della Cappella, e la p[rim]a volta che si lasciò spandere dell’acqua fù in occasione che il Sereniss[imo] Principe Manoel (fatta accomodare tutta di lungo la strada, e renduta carozabile) vi si portò a venerarla e l’arricchì di molti doni, locche segui l’Anno 17 ... [omissis].” MCAM, Misc. 54, f.185r.

⁶² “Per la Platea si gode l’ombra di diversi alberi a tall’effetto ivi piantati, che rendono il luogo assai ameno e delizioso.” MCAM, Misc. 54, f.185r.

Coming out from the door of the open space and proceeding further on, the Capuchin friar mentions a staircase that descended to a big underground cave, situated between the fountain and the rooms built above. Facing you as soon as you make your way, one can admire a lavabo or trough for running water which flowed continuously from the rocks. Padre Pelagio describes this water as sweet, fresh and light.⁶³

He then states that around this cave, one could see various niches, in each of which in the past there were statues for veneration, made of local stone, seven palms in height, representing various saints. He adds that during his time, due to the negligence of the gentlemen Procurators, one had to put up with the bad behaviour of certain troublesome individuals which led to a state of total disarray and ruin. Padre Pelagio then adds the date when he was visiting this place, namely 29th and 30th August 1763.⁶⁴

The Capuchin friar then acknowledges his custom of searching for some inscriptions that were still legible. He writes how all around this cave several niches could be seen and in each of them, in times gone by, statues representing saints, hewn out of local stone and reaching up to seven palms in height, used to be venerated here.

Owing to the laissez-faire attitude of the procurators, these statues fell into a pitiful state of utter dilapidation. He attests that on the 29th and 30th day of August 1763, he found himself among these niches, and was gripped by an ardent curiosity, if he, by chance, could recognise anything about their original condition. Exerting all his knowledge on the subject, he recognized one of these statues, although it was in a horrible state and headless. On its huge pedestal he could make out this inscription: "In Thee, O Lord, I have placed my trust"; a coat of arms was also inscribed followed by some loose letters "DE ... DIT" and the words "D[omino] Joanne Iacobo La Fiol – the latter was the son of Signor Giovanni Fiol, the Secreto of Grandmaster Niccolo Cottoner, the husband of Catarina Calleia. He then refers to the Epitaph of the Fiol family in the Collegiate Church of St Paul at Valletta, in Mifsud Saverio, page 143. He then adds that in

⁶³ "A [prim]o incontro ed in frontispizio si ammira una vasca, ò sia recipiente di acqua corrente che continuo scorre da dentro la viva Rocca, assai dolce fresca, e leggiera." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.185r.

⁶⁴ "Attorno a questa Grotta si vedono diverse nicchie, ed in cadauna di esse ne' trasandati tempi si veneravano delle statue sette palmari di pietra nostrale rappresentante diversi Santi. Oggidì per la dissattenzione delli Sig[nor]i Procuratori, supposta la indevozione di alcune persone moleste, che ivi capitino, si deplorano tutte rovvinate, e in gran parte disfatte. Tra queste nel corrente anno 1763, e di 29 e 30 Agosto." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.185r.

the midst of the inscription there were the remnants of the benefactor's coat of arms, but they were so worn out by the humidity and the decay, that he could not recognize their details.⁶⁵ At this point, Padre Pelagio sketches a frame for the coat of arms of Fiol, although he left this frame empty, probably because the coat of arms was not legible anymore.

Afterwards, Padre Pelagio acknowledges that he tried to look with the same enthusiasm for some other information regarding the other statues, which were all broken, without a head, and lying on the floor and uncared for. Among these, he managed to find just one, laid in a corner hiding loathsome activities, because it served those who, knowing no fear of God, used it as a place to empty their stomachs. On its pedestal there was written the following inscription: Ioseppe Cilia, with a coat of arms in the middle. Contrary to the previous one, Padre Pelagio manages here to draw the referred coat of arms made up of five crosses: two on the upper part with the other three beneath them. He then states that underneath the coat of arms, there was inscribed the name of St Joseph. He therefore concluded that the dilapidated statue represented precisely this great saint, so badly mistreated.⁶⁶

Padre Pelagio then passes on to recount a number of stories related to this holy place which are known from other sources. Among these he refers to what

⁶⁵ "Ritrovandomi colà mi sono mosso in ardente curiosità in di riconoscere, se per sorte mi fosse riuscito, la qualità, e la condizione di alcuna di quelle, e con tutta l'attenzione adoprato mi è sortito di arrivare a riconoscere una tuttavia riposta nella sua nicchia, non già di quel Santo ella sia, per essere assai maltrattata, e senza capo, pur pure nel piedestallo a gran stento ravvisai che ve ne sia questa Iscrizione =

IN TE DOMINE CONFIDO de <stemma> ...DIT D[OMI]NO JOANNE (questo era Secreto dell' G.M. Frà Nicolò Cottoner, sepolto in S. Paolo della Valletta con epitaffio) Iacobo, La Fiol = In mezzo vi è il vestigio dell'Arma Gentilizia del Benefattore ma più essere sfatta dall'umido, e dalli maltrattamenti, non ho potuto ricavare l'impresa; questo era figlio del Ill. Sig. Gio. Fiol Secreto dell'Emo F. D. Niccolo Cottoner, marito di Catarina Calleia. Vide Epitaphi Familae Fiol in Eccl. Colleg. S. Paoli Valletta, Mifsud Saverio, pag. 143." MCAM, Misc. 54, ff.185r-185v.

⁶⁶ "Con uguale impegno mi sono industriato ricavare qualche altro vestigio nelle statue dell'altra banda, che tutte le deplorai trabalzate a terra, enormemente, sconciate, rotte, tutte senza capo, ed alcune indegnam[ente] non curate; ma frà queste mi riuscì di scoprire una, che stava in un cantone e faceva riparo ad usi li più stromachevoli, perche serviva apunto di riparo a quel tanto li non timorosi di Dio ivi scaricavano le stomaco; ed in rivolendo questo busto per riconoscerlo, mi è sortito di ravvisare nel piedistallo scritto ed inciso come siegue = Ioseppe la Cilia = un' Arma Gentilizia in mezzo: così = e sotto l'Arma, inciso come siegue = *Sancte Ioseph* = donde evidentem[ente] diducosi che quella è una figura del Patriarca S. Gioseppe; e che un tale e tanto Santo trovasi per dissattenzione in tale guisa non curato, anzi malissimam[ente], trattato." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.185v.

happened in 1614, when sixty Turkish galleys landed in Malta and attacked this shrine, while they also harmed the Icon of Our Lady with strokes of military instruments.⁶⁷ He then refers to a certain benefactor who decorated and rebuilt a beautiful fountain at his own expense.⁶⁸ The Capuchin friar then, mentions how for the same church and with great faith, many islanders have contributed to show their gratitude to Our Lady. Among these he refers to the year 1640 when in the midst of a period of drought, the people prayed for rain. The grace they so ardently prayed for was conceded by the Blessed Virgin Mary. It rained heavily some time after, and on the 1st of May of that year, many people went to venerate Our Lady.⁶⁹ Padre Pelagio follows this story with another one that took place in 1645, during which many people hailing from different towns and villages of Malta went to his holy place by holding a universal procession, similar to that of 1640, begging Our Lady's intercession to free them from the Turkish invasion.⁷⁰

Padre Pelagio also refers to the story of what happened towards the end of the month of September 1600, when one of the Chaplains of the Order of St John went there with all his family. When they drank from the fountain of this holy place, which purportedly out to have produced the most fresh water in Malta, his mother and his two brothers and others died. Many attributed the death to the poor quality of this water.⁷¹

The Plan of the Two Grottos Adjacent to the Shrine and the Northern Flank

At this point we can recall the note that Padre Pelagio inserts as part of his description of the Mellicha Religious complex. This note is marked by the # symbol. It is written on both sides on a smaller folio and inserted on the other side of f.177v. On the front page, top right-hand, there is the enumeration "178." On the back page – without any enumeration (for the sake of clarity, we will refer to the back page as 178v) – Padre Pelagio furnishes another plan related to this holy site.

This second sketch consists of a plan of the two grottos adjacent to the Mellicha Shrine, and its northern flank. In this plan, Padre Pelagio once again uses a number of letters taken from the alphabet – namely, from 'A' to 'H' – to

⁶⁷ See MCAM, Misc. 54, f.185v.

⁶⁸ See MCAM, Misc. 54, ff.185v-186r.

⁶⁹ See MCAM, Misc. 54, f.186r.

⁷⁰ See MCAM, Misc. 54, ff.186r-186v.

⁷¹ See MCAM, Misc. 54, ff.186v-187r.

which he adds more information of the place that corresponds to each letter of the alphabet.

The note on f.178r starts with a reference to the lower part of the belfry. He writes that coming down from the belfry, and coming out from a door, marked by the letter 'A' and going towards the left side under the first portico, one exits through the door marked by the letter 'B,' leading to a side courtyard marked by the letter 'C' situated behind the belfry marked by the letter 'D,' and the shrine marked by the letter 'E' whose façade faces West. Here there were two doors marked by the letters 'FF' which secured the two grottos. One of these grottos, which is smaller than the other, contained a kitchen for use by the general public who visited this place. The other grotto situated next to the shrine, is marked by the letter 'G.' This grotto in bold red, was circular in shape, hewn in rock, both from the back and from its front. Upon careful inspection one can tell that it was very old, and not hewn by hands by the first Christians who went to stay there, that is the Augustinian friars. These friars established their first residence in Malta, and made use of a cemetery. Looking around him, Padre Pelagio states how one could clearly notice some ancient tombs hewn in the rocks. In order to render this place more comfortable for those who visited this place and spent the night there, in the year 1630, the Bali of Brandenburg of the Order of St John, Frà Claudio di Rosenbac, sponsored a project which consisted of the enlargement, the cleaning, and the necessary embellishment of the place which served as a lodge for pilgrims. At the end of the folio, Padre Pelagio states how all of this was documented.

On the other folio, the Capuchin friar goes on to say that this documentation was inscribed on white marble fixed to the wall above the door of this area. Here one could also notice the family coat of arms of this benefactor, as well as other memories in conformity of what Padre Pelagio adds, namely a design of the coat of arms of the Bali of Brandenburg of the Order of St John. At this point of his writing, the Capuchin friar sketches this inscription together with the respective coat of arms of the Bali of Brandenburg. The sketch of this coat of arms is located on the left-hand side of this small folio.

Hail, Mary, Hail.

In the year of our Lord 1630, the 9th day of August.

<coat-of-arms>

Fra Corrado of Rosenbac,

Bailiff of Brandenburg.⁷²

⁷² “# Calato giù dalla Torre, ed uscito per la porta *A*, volgendo il camino d'intorno la med[esim]a a mano sinistra, e camminando in piano per sotto il primo porticato, si esce per una Porta *B*, in un appartato Cortile *C* esistente dietro d[ett]a Torre *D* e la Chiesa *E*, in prospettiva dello quale

Then, on the right-hand side of the sketch of this inscription, Padre Pelagio provides the sketch of the two grottos together with their northern flank of the Shrine, using a number of letters from the alphabet to explain the exact locations he was referring to. Thus, corresponding to letter 'A' is the door of the belfry.⁷³ Corresponding to the letter 'B' is the door of the courtyard.⁷⁴ Corresponding to the letter 'CCC' is the courtyard.⁷⁵ Corresponding to the letter 'D' is the back wall of the belfry.⁷⁶ Corresponding to the letter 'E' is the back wall of the shrine.⁷⁷ Corresponding to the letter 'FF' are the doors of the divided grotto.⁷⁸ Corresponding to the letter 'G' is another back wall of the shrine.⁷⁹ There is no information corresponding to the letter 'H,' though on the upper part of the site plan, the Capuchin friar inserts the letters 'Hh' and beside them he writes "48 palmi."⁸⁰

guardando verso Ponente si vedono due Porte *FF* che chiudono due grotte; una, ch'è più piccola dell'altra, osservasi accomodata per uso comune di cucina in servizio del pubblico di tutti li concorrenti, l'altra esistente accanto della Chiesa *G* è molto rossa, di figura circolare, tutta per intiero ad ante scavata nella rocca viva, ed a bene osservarla è antichissima scavatasi senza mano dalli primi Cristiani abitatori di quella Parrochia, ò meglio dire dalli primi Religiosi Agostiniani risoluti di stabilirvi loro primiera residenza; e ne facevano uso di Cimiterio: ravvisandovisi tuttavia d'intorno patenti le vestigia delle sepolture antiche, formata nella rocca viva, che in appresso, ad ogetto d'ingrandirla, e rendela più comoda per l'alloggio di pernottari dentro le genti, che vi concorrono, la pietà del religiosissimo Sign[or] Balì di Brandenburg dell'Ord[in]e Gerosol[imatano] Frà Claudio di Rosembac l'anno 1630 a proprie spese la rese più polita, più vaga, et fornita de' necessarij comodi da dormire, e di cio rende irrefragabile testimonianza una lapida tripalmare di bianco marmo ingastata nel muro sopra la Porta della med[esim]a, in cui si ravvisano incisa l'Armi Gentilizie di esso Ill[ustrissi]mo Benefattore, ed alcune memorie nella conformità si dà qui sotto delineata =

VIVE M[ARIA] VIVE
ANNO DO[MINI] 1630 A DI 9 DI AGOSTO
<STEMMA>
ILL^{MO} SIGNOR FRÀ CORRADO
DI ROSENBAC
BAGLI DI BRANDEMBURG."

MCAM, Misc. 54, f.178v.

⁷³ "A. Porta della Torre." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.178v.

⁷⁴ "B. Porta di questo Cortile." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.178v.

⁷⁵ "CCC. Cortile." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.178v.

⁷⁶ "D. Dorso della Torre delle Campanie." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.178v.

⁷⁷ "E. Dorso della chiesa." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.178v.

⁷⁸ "FF. Porte delle divisata Grotta." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.178v.

⁷⁹ "G. Altro dorso della chiesa." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.178v.

⁸⁰ "Hh. palmi 48." MCAM, Misc. 54, f.178v.

On f.184r Padre Pelagio provides a list of the chaplains and rectors of the Mellicha Shrine, starting with the first one who goes back to the year 1436, and reaching to the last one mentioned in the year 1703. In between the information on the Mellicha Shrine and this list, the Capuchin friar furnishes a site plan of what he calls: “Pianta del antichiss[imo] Palaggio Batteano nella Mellicha.”⁸¹

The Value of Padre Pelagio’s Drawings of the Mellicha Shrine

Padre Pelagio’s information and drawings about the Mellicha Shrine reveal how this holy place continued to be embellished and restored even till the very day when he was writing.⁸² The site plans of the Mellicha Shrine drawn by Padre Pelagio do not feature in the publications post-dating his writings.⁸³ As far as we can say, it is a booklet about the Mellicha Shrine published for the occasion of Pope John Paul II’s visit to Malta in 1990, that includes the site-plans of this place drawn by the Capuchin friary.⁸⁴ Raymond Saliba, in his “Il-Madonna tal-Mellicha,” then includes a reference to Pelagio’s writings on the Mellicha Shrine, as part of a note in his bibliography on the Marian icon that makes this place so special for the local church.⁸⁵

This omission probably reveals that Pelagio’s Manuscript - MCAM, Misc. 54 - which includes all this information, is unknown to many local historians.

⁸¹ See MCAM, Misc. 54, f.180r.

⁸² For more recent publications dealing with the history of this place and how it continued to be decorated see, Vincent Borg, “Marian Devotions in Malta,” in *Marian Devotions in the Islands of Saint Paul (1600-1800)*, ed. Vincent Borg (Malta: The Historical Society, 1983), 41-42; Raphael Bonnici Cali, *Our Lady of Mellicha - Malta* (Malta: Progress Press, 1952).

⁸³ See for example one of the oldest publications about the Mellicha Sanctuary by Carlo Cortis, *Il Santuario e la Madonna tal Mellicha. Descrizione storica con note illustrative dalla storia di Malta* (Malta: Tipografia G. Muscat, 1921), which omits to mention Padre Pelagio’s description of this place. Carlo Cortis republished this book two year later. Carlo Cortis, *Is-Santwarju u l-Madonna tal-Mellicha, miġjub bil-Malti minn Dun Ġużepp Farrugia. It-tieni edizzjoni* (Malta: G. Muscat, 1923).

⁸⁴ See Vincent Borg, “Il-Madonna tal-Mellicha – The Mellicha Madonna,” in *Iż-żjara tal-Qdusija Tiegħu il-Papa Ġwanni Pawlu II fis-Santwarju tal-Mellicha – 26 ta’ Mejju 1990. Programm ta’ Tifkira*, 7-28.

⁸⁵ “Il-biblijografija dwar din ix-xbieha hi vasta. It-tagħrif l-aktar antik u importanti jinsab f’arkivji Ekkleżjastiċi, u l-aktar fid-deskrizzjonijiet li kienu jhallu l-isqifijiet waqt iż-Żjarat Pastoralni u fil-korba ta’ l-amministrazzjoni tas-santwarju. Tagħrif ieħor f’manuskritti, bħal dawk ta’ Patri Pelagju (1722-1773) [sic], f’arkivji pubbliċi jew privati fihom bażikament bħaż-żjarat imsemmijin jew minn korba ppubblikati fis-sekli sbatax u tmintax, aktar b’rabta ma’ l-aspett devozzjonali milli artistiku.” Raymond Saliba, “Il-Madonna tal-Mellicha,” in *Il-Mellicha mal-milja taż-żmien*, 220, no.22.

Nevertheless, these sketches together with his historical information, are of great historical importance as they can help us to establish the structural modifications of this holy place and gain more information about this national shrine.

Rev. Prof. Martin Micallef
Department of Hebrew, Greek, and Sacred Scripture
Faculty of Theology
University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080
Malta

martin.f.micallef@um.edu.mt