
MALTA'S PAUL

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When Oliver Friggieri wrote the text for the Oratorio with music composed by Charles Camilleri that has now been accepted as almost a classic statement of Maltese identity, he deliberately turned around the conventional description of Malta as the island of St Paul and entitled his polyphonic poem *Paul of Malta*. He took it for granted that there is a Paul who belongs to Malta as there is a Malta that belongs to Paul.

There can be no doubt that there are many Pauls, ownership of whom has to be attributed to as many groups – for instance, Lutheran Protestants or Counter-Reformation Catholics. Indeed, there can hardly be a historical character who has been understood in as many different ways as Paul – probably even at the time when he was still alive. A distinguished Pauline scholar has published a book in which he argues that two distinct pictures of Paul developed in the early years after his death: one is set out in the so called *Acts of Paul* depicting him “as an apocalyptic sectarian who preached manumission and sexual equality”; the other, contained in the Pastoral Epistles, depicts him as much more disposed to look favourably upon cultural accommodation, for instance, marriage.¹

The *Acts of Paul* are deemed apocryphal;² the Pastoral Epistles have been accepted in the Canon of the New Testament. It is yet the case that the generally accepted account of the Apostle's martyrdom comes from the *Acts of Paul* and most depictions of it in art assume the book's authenticity. It is also most probably from it that the generally accepted image of Paul as bald, stodgy, somewhat bow-legged etc is derived, although many have suspected that this physiognomy and physique are just the stereo-type of a Semite in Greco-Roman culture, while others have even argued that the description could be deduced from his Epistles.³

While these iconographical elements are present in practically all extant Pauline imagery, perhaps the clearest expression of the different Pauls that have appeared in Christian history is provided by the artists who have portrayed Paul in different ages and following different schools of thought.

An interesting question that could be kept in mind as one views an exhibition of Maltese works of art with Paul as their subject could be whether there is in fact a Maltese Paul who emerges from our local tradition of representing him in images. In order to carry out this exercise, it is of course useful to be able to refer mentally at least to the main prototypes of Pauline imagery as it has taken shape over the centuries and in the various traditions.

In a short space, I only intend here to suggest some points to look out for that pertain mainly to the fact that the bulk and almost staple form in which St Paul has been pictured in Malta are related to the presence of the Order of St John here in the period which coincides with the aftermath of the Reformation.

The earliest imagery of Paul that has come down to us from very early times tends to show him as counterpart to Peter and therefore immediately to raise the issues concerning the nature of the Church and the functional exercise of authority within it that were contested between Reformers and Counter-Reformers. One of the most famous of these images is that of the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (c. 359) at the Vatican. There is an evolution in the iconography from the Catacombs onwards that culminates in St Peter being shown receiving the keys and St Paul appearing in the garb of a philosopher/pedagogue. This presentation of Peter as embodying authority and Paul as preacher of the Word





Caravaggio, *Conversion of St Paul*, Collezione Odescalchi, Rome

implies that they are complementary and not contradictory of each other.⁴

The Catholic side continues to present the two apostles as a tandem even in the 16th century. For instance, Michelangelo painted *The Crucifixion of St Peter* and *The Conversion of St Paul*, with both images conveying the same essential message: the turning upside down implied by adherence to Christ. The same can be said for Caravaggio's treatment of the theme of Peter and Paul as the founders of the Roman Church. On the contrary the artists who were Protestants present the two apostles in contrasting mode. For instance, Dürer in his *Four Apostles* now in Munich, but originally a gift in 1526 by the artist himself to the City of Nuremberg which had turned Protestant the previous year, shows Paul in the forefront and Peter half-hidden in the background. Moreover Dürer clearly intended the four apostles to represent the four psychological types, or humours, into which Renaissance thinkers no less than the ancient classical writers thought that mankind was naturally divided. Paul is made to represent the melancholic type and hence his representation as an individualist genius that became commonplace in the Romantic Age began to take shape. Peter with shifty eyes looks almost apathetic by comparison.⁵ Fortunately, the other great Protestant painter, Rembrandt, depicts Paul (sometimes a self-portrait) with



Caravaggio, *Conversion of St Paul*, S. Maria del Popolo, Rome

sunken eyes and feverish flush on his cheeks, in meditation and prayer and not generally in contrast with Peter.

Notably, however, Crivelli (c. 1435-c.1494), a Catholic, in a painting now at the National Gallery in London, "offers us a delightful vignette of these two great apostles not quite at odds with each other but not wholly in sympathy either. St Peter is rather distractedly searching for a proof in his bible, while St Paul awaits his vindication ... they were not kindred spirits".⁶ It would be most surprising if one were to find any similarly slightly humorous representation of what was after all the real relationship between Peter and Paul in Maltese imagery! The natural expectation would be to find Paul depicted in either the heroic preacher or the suffering mystic of the Protestant tradition, without however the somewhat disparaging allusions to Peter, present even in the Anglican tradition.

Very early on, a distinguishing symbol that comes to accompany Paul is the sword, usually taken to signify both the manner of his martyrdom in virtue of his being a Roman citizen as opposed to the crucifixion, head downwards, of Peter, and Paul's own referring to the Word of God as a two-edged sword. In the Maltese context, however, it is more readily taken to signify that he is possessed of the spirit and

essence of knighthood. One became a knight essentially by being dubbed, that is being hit at the back of the neck with the blunt side of the sword in a gesture similar in meaning to the slap on the face that used to be given by the Bishop as part of the sacramental rite of Confirmation.

The more striking indication of Paul as knight is, of course, the horse on which he is mounted in depictions of the Conversion from the twelve century onwards. St Paul on the way to Damascus begins to be shown on horseback at the time more or less of the first crusade and the foundation of the knightly orders, such as the Templars and the Hospitallers. The Eastern Church has continued until today to consider the intrusion of the horse as a western deviation that has always been rightly rejected by true iconographers, but St Paul was indeed considered to be the first true Christian knight by the Order of St John in whose spirituality Paul was almost as important as the Baptist. That St Paul is shown on horseback in the Conversion scene, as well as in images of visions of him comparable to those of St James *Matamoro*, is certainly

not peculiar to Malta, but is universal since the Middle Ages. However there are details, such as the lifted foot of the horse (which appears for the first time in the *Carnet de Villard de Honnecourt*), that are more particularly associated with the imagery of chivalry and that it would be interesting to be on the look-out for in the Maltese Pauline imagery. Likewise, the Christ who appears to St Paul tends to be presented in late mediaeval imagery as if in moments of the Passion, the Betrayal or the Scourging, while He tends to appear as Christ the King in those depictions that highlight St Paul as the Knight par excellence. Again, one would expect the Maltese St Paul to belong to the second of these categories.

Evidently, the distinctive attribute of the Maltese St Paul is the viper in the flame in addition to the Book and the sword.

Endnotes

- 1 Dennis McDonald, *The Legend and the Apostle, the Battle for Paul in Story and Cannon*, The Westminster Press Philadelphia 1983 Pg. 98
- 2 J.N. Bremmer, *The Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla*, Kampen 1996: Kok Pharos Publishing House. Bremmer confirmed Asia Minor as its place of origin and suggested c. 150 as the date of writing.
- 3 J. Bollok, "The Description of Paul in the *Acta Pauli*" in Bremmer (ed.) op. cit.
- 4 L. de Bruyne, "L'iconographie des apôtres Pierre et Paul dans une lumière nouvelle" in B. N. Apollonij Ghetti (ed.) *Saecularia Petri et Pauli*, Vatican, Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1969 Pages 36-84
- 5 Cfr. E. Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albert Durer*, Princeton University Press 1955, pages 232-5
- 6 Sister Wendy Beckett, *Saint Paul in Art*, St Paul's, UK 2008 Page 160

