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# The Passalacqua Chain

## A Splendid Seventeenth Century Jewel in Malta

One of the most important pieces of historic jewellery in Malta survives to this day. It is an exquisite gold enamelled chain, studded with rubies, diamonds and pearls. This chain, which was bequeathed to the Confraternity of the Blessed Virgin of Carmel by Cesare Passalacqua, is traditionally referred to as a '*cintill*' and is used to adorn the titular statue of the Virgin on the feast day of the Carmelite Church in Valletta.<sup>1</sup>

### THE COMPONENTS OF THE CHAIN

This outstanding item of jewellery is composed of three different sections: a chain made up of twenty three links, and a pendant consisting of a trefoil ornament with a pendant cross suspended below (Ill.1).<sup>2</sup> The links are actually pieces of elaborate jewellery in their own right.

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<sup>1</sup> The chain is nowadays kept in safe storage off premises.

<sup>2</sup> The length of the chain is approximately 66cm, the width (including the velvet and gold braid backing) is 4.5 cm. The trefoil ornament is about 5cm long and 5cm wide at its longest and widest point, and the pendant cross measures approximately 3.5cm by 2.2cm.

There are two types of links, both approximately circular and mounted alternately. The central link is larger, heavier and more elaborate than the other two types and serves as the central focus (Ill.2). The twenty two subsidiary links consist of strapwork in an openwork pattern of curlicues (Ill.3). Each curlicue is enamelled in a different colour: black, blue, white and red are used predominantly, and enhanced with dots of white and gold.<sup>3</sup> Twelve of the links are adorned with four baroque shaped pearls mounted diagonally across the link, while the other ten links, with which they alternate, are more elaborately wrought. The latter consist of a central table cut jewel -mostly rubies but there are also some diamonds- which is set in an elaborate raised mount of gold decorated with black enamelling or possibly niello. The base of the mount is square and tapers as it rises, providing a platform for the jewel which is mounted at the top. This enriches the jewel greatly because the links thereby acquire a more obvious three dimensional aspect. The graceful arabesques at the base of this tapering mount form shapes which are reminiscent of a fleur-de-lys and may be a consideration in trying to establish where this chain was made. Four zoomorphic enamelled heads, perhaps of rams, appear on the perimeter of these links.

The central link, being the visual climax of the chain itself, has a larger diameter and consists of more elaborate openwork and of two jewels mounted in a rectangular shaped rising mount. The arabesques are now interspersed with other delicately striped curlicues in a design resembling curling vine shoots. Pearls are also added, marrying the two designs of the alternating subsidiary links into a harmonious larger one. All of the links forming this chain are connected by smaller bar shaped elements

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<sup>3</sup> The use of golden dots punctuating colourful enamelled areas is a typical element of Sicilian jewellery. Vide Maria Concetta Di Natale, *Gioielli di Sicilia*, Flaccovio Editore, Palermo 2000, 105

consisting of a central table cut stone flanked by two pearls mounted on a gold curved design which still bear traces of enamelling.

The other elements of this ‘*cintill*’ are extraneous to the original chain as is also the black velvet backing with gold braid<sup>4</sup>, which functions as a support for the entire chain since it is heavy and its links have clearly come apart with time. The several 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century inventories, held in the archives of the Confraternity make no mention of the pendant, limiting themselves instead to describing the chain by specifying the amount of pearls (between 92 and 98), rubies (28, sometimes 29) and diamonds (3,4 or even 5- the variations may be due to slight changes and resetting of stones which could have fallen out with time and got replaced) and one false stone. The gems survive more or less intact on this chain. A curiosity exists in that some inventories also include 44 ‘*mostacci*’ or ‘*mustacci d’oro*’ in the description of the chain – it is possible that in this context the *mostacci* mean small heads, in which case they could refer to the zoomorphic heads mentioned above.<sup>5</sup>

The inventories sometimes provide valuations for this chain, and a comparison with the other possessions of the Confraternity show that it was their most precious movable asset and therefore an object of great prestige.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The earliest reference I have come across mentioning velvet is in the inventory dated 30<sup>th</sup> August 1774 (A[rchives]V[eneranda] C[onfraternita della Beata Vergine del Carmine] Reg. 24 folio no. illeg.): ‘*Un Cintiglio con velluto nero per il Collo della Vergine con perle, diamanti, e rubini montati in mostacci d’oro*’ and then a reference to velvet next appears in the inventory dated 1<sup>st</sup> July 1913 (A.V.C. Reg. 15 f.32-) which states ‘*l Collarone con perle e pietre preziose ed ordinarie montato sul velluto....*’

<sup>5</sup> The earliest inventory found which mentions ‘*mostacci*’ was compiled in 1755 (A.V.C. Reg. 34 f.27v). Other instances are A.V.C. Reg. 24 f. illeg. (Inventory of 1774), A.V.C. Reg. 19 f. 130v (Inventory of 1789) and A.V.C. Reg. 19 f. 143v. (Inventory of 1790)

<sup>6</sup> A.V.C. Reg. 34 f.153 (Copy of Inventory of 1715 where the chain is noted as having been valued at 420 scudi by Carlo Troisi, Maestro della Zecca), AVC Reg. 19 ff. 24, 24v (Inventory of c. 1790 where the chain is valued at 639 scudi 11 tari and 10 grani and the inventory is signed ‘*Giuseppe le Brun M.to di Zecca*’ Curiously the chain is noted as having 9 pearls rather than 98 but taking into consideration

Though presumably added later, the elements which form the pendant hanging below the central link of the chain are also possibly very old and are interesting items of jewellery in their own right (Ill.4).<sup>7</sup> The trefoil pendant consists of three clusters of colourless stones which are mounted together in rosette shapes and backed by a piece of crudely cut metal. These clusters may have formed part of a larger element of another piece of jewellery, possibly mutilated to form the current arrangement. An interesting clue is supplied by a fragment of white enamel decorated with black swirls which is just visible on the back of two of the clusters (Ill.5). This type of decoration was used extensively in Portuguese and Sicilian jewellery of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, however removal of the extraneous metal backing would be necessary prior to forming any conclusions.

The second element of the pendant is a jewelled cross which is also of great interest but is likewise probably unrelated to the chain or the pendant cluster (Ill. 4). The cross is made up of five square table cut clear stones, possibly of rock crystal, with a sixth larger stone mounted at the crossing. What seems like a simple border of tiny white enamelled beads<sup>8</sup>, reveals a more complex pattern of polychromised enamel foliate motifs, connected by a network of gold wires, at the back of the cross (Ill.5). This enamelled design is what gives the cross particular interest. The translucent enamelling and colour have been compared to similar elements used on an early 17<sup>th</sup>

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that the setting for the pearls on the chain seem original and that all other inventories mention 98 or thereabouts, this is likely to be a mistake), AVC Reg. 13, f.11 (Inventory of 1811 where the value is again entered as scudi 639.11.10)

<sup>7</sup> An inventory of the same Confraternity dating to c. 1790 mentions '*Una Croce d'Oro smaltato con 31 pietra di francia con 3 rosette d'Argento stimata (scudi) 15*' which possibly might indicate the origin of these pendant pieces (A.V.C. Reg. 19 f.24-) and in 1790 '*Una Croce d'Oro smaltata con suo fiocco in 31 pietra di francia montato in 3 rosette d'Argento*' (Inventory of 1790 A.V.C. Reg. 19 f. 143v)

<sup>8</sup> The motif of enamelled beads, resembling tiny match stick heads, appears on Sicilian jewellery of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. See for example di Natale, 63

century hardstone ewer of French production (Louvre Collection, inventory number MR 130 OA 10409) and it has been suggested that the floral motifs are akin to Balthasar Moncornet's (c.1600-1668) designs. It is possible that the cross is early 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup>

## SOURCES OF INFLUENCE

Although a source of origin for the style and production of this chain has yet to be satisfactorily proven, it is worth noting that comparable examples are present in Malta and in neighbouring Sicily. The heavy chain, also backed by black material, appended to the silver 'dress' of the Icon, known as the St Luke Madonna, at the Metropolitan Cathedral, Mdina appears to have stylistically similar enamelled elements, however this chain has not been studied in detail yet. A large enamelled chain mounted on the reliquary bust of Saint Agatha, in the Cathedral of Catania, Sicily is quite close, particularly in the manner the jewels are mounted in elaborate settings placed in the centre of each link. Other examples of jewellery and painted images - even in different formats such as hat jewels and ladies' girdles - originating from Central Europe and datable to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century show some similarities.<sup>10</sup> In the absence of documentary evidence to assist in the identification of origin, it is quite hard to determine where the chain was produced especially since this style seems to have been diffused throughout Europe.

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<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Clare Phillips for drawing my attention to the Louvre ewer and for the reference to Moncornet and the suggested dating of the cross, which she has supplied on the basis of photographs of the chain.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Di Natale, 58-59 and *Princely Magnificence* Exhibition Catalogue (V&A), Debrett's Peerage Limited, U.K. 1980, 24, 93. Clare Phillips has indicated B. Januszkiewicz, *Klejnoty i stroje*, Warsaw 1995, 45

## PROVENANCE

The provenance of the chain is less nebulous. By means of a legacy contained in the 1683 will of Cesare Passalacqua, the chain, together with a pair of golden bracelets set with pearls and cameos (which have not been traced), was donated to the ‘*Ven. Confraternità di Nostra Signora del Carmine*’ (also known as the Confraternity of the Blessed Virgin of Carmel).<sup>11</sup> This provides us with a definite *terminus ante quem* for the production of the chain. The text of the will describes the chain as a ‘*cintiglio d’oro ingastato con piu diamanti, rubini e perle*’. Certain conditions were attached to the legacy, namely that the chain and bracelets could not be alienated in any manner and were to be placed on the statue of the Virgin on her feast day and on other ‘*gni (giorni) solenni*’. A further, rather curious obligation specifies that the chain must be lent on request, on the feast day of St Cajetan, to the Church of St Paul in Valletta, in order to be placed on the statue of St Cajetan.

Passalacqua’s special devotion to Our Lady is emphasised in the will drawn up on his deathbed, where he recommends his soul to the ‘*Beatissima Vergine del Monte Carmelo sua particolare Protettrice*’<sup>12</sup> and, amongst other saints, to ‘Gaetano Tiene’.

Why Passalacqua held a particular devotion for St Cajetan, enough to insert an unusual clause which required the chain be lent to the statue of St Cajetan, is unclear.

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<sup>11</sup> N[otarial] A[rchives] V[alletta], Not. Pietro Attard, R30/24, ff.366v-367. Passalacqua’s will is dated Friday 9<sup>th</sup> July 1683. This particular testamentary disposition requires that the executors of the will consign the chain and bracelets to the Confraternity by means of a public deed, which has yet to be traced. A barely legible note in the margin reads as follows: ‘*d.f. die iv Martii 1796*’. The significance of this side note is not clear. I am grateful to Mr Charles Dalli and Ms Joan Abela for helping me to decipher this note.

<sup>12</sup> N.A.V., R30/24, f. 362 v.

It is worth noting that St Cajetan was canonized in 1671, only twelve years prior to the drawing up of Passalacqua's will, and is sometimes depicted wearing a rich jewelled chain to symbolise his nobility. Incidentally, Passalacqua's slave - who is granted his freedom in Passalacqua's will - is named Gaetano.<sup>13</sup>

The chain remained in the possession of the Confraternity, probably undergoing the additions of the pendant and the black velvet backing at some unknown later date. On the arrival of the French in Malta it was probably hidden, together with all the silverware pertaining to the Confraternity, in a grave in the Church and retrieved after their departure.<sup>14</sup>

## **CESARE PASSALACQUA**

Cesare Passalacqua was born in about 1595, married Maria nee Farruge on the 28 January 1618,<sup>15</sup> and passed away at his home on the 19<sup>th</sup> July 1683,<sup>16</sup> soon after making his will. Passalacqua came from humble origins and in his early youth lived in the vicinity of the Carmelite church, with an overbearing grandmother who practiced magic. Carmel Cassar has conducted a study on an Inquisition trial in 1617 in which both Cesare and his grandmother, amongst others, were tried for practicing magic and from the proceedings of this trial important details about Passalacqua's childhood and

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<sup>13</sup> N.A.V., R30/24, f. 365v. Passalacqua's slave was baptized Cesare Gaetano on the 8<sup>th</sup> December 1677, when he was about 43 years old (A[rchives] S[aint] P[aul], Valletta), *Liber Baptizatorum*, Vol V (1663-1681), f.242v)

<sup>14</sup> This fact emerges from a petition of Giuseppe Azzopardi made in 1864 to the Confraternity for a pension on the basis of having served the Confraternity devotedly, including, it is stated, having helped to bury the silverware during the French occupation (A.V.C. Reg.11 f.80)

<sup>15</sup> A.S.P., *Liber Matrimoniorum* Vol. i, (1595-1639), f.80v

<sup>16</sup> A.S.P., *Liber Defunctorum* Vol iii, (1673-1686), f.100

youth have emerged.<sup>17</sup> The depositions in the trial show that Cesare's role was limited to acting as a rather unwilling accomplice and that he was already otherwise generally considered to be a virtuous and devout Christian.

Whatever shadows were cast on his character in his early youth, later in life he seems to have risen to become a prominent citizen, a generous church benefactor, and an owner of various properties –arable land, houses, and stores<sup>18</sup>- which he rented out. He also served as Jurat in the Valletta Università.<sup>19</sup> In 1646 Passalacqua, together with his daughter (variously referred to as Giovanna, Genovefa or Generosa<sup>20</sup>) and her husband Silvestro Fiteni, was granted the Barony of Budaq.<sup>21</sup> Silvestro Fiteni, a descendant of the Testaferrata family from the maternal line, was Capitano della Verga between 1644 and 1652, and ten years after being created Baron of Budaq was made a Knight of the Order.<sup>22</sup> The Barony of Budaq was granted to Cesare Passalacqua '*as a sign of gratitude for services rendered to the Holy Religion*'.<sup>23</sup>

Passalacqua kept good company and moved in powerful circles as evidenced by the affection in which he was held by Bishop Luca Bueino (sic)<sup>24</sup>, as well as his testamentary dispositions in favour of various knights of the Order.

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<sup>17</sup> Vide C. Cassar, *Sex, Magic, and the Periwinkle*, PIN, Malta 2000

<sup>18</sup> As evidenced in the '*Nota delli miei debitori*' at the end of the will (N.A.V., R30/24, ff.369v-)

<sup>19</sup> John Montalto, *Nobles of Malta 1530-1800*, Midsea Books Ltd, Malta 1979, 121, 129

<sup>20</sup> These last two names are mentioned in C. Gauci, *The Genealogy and Heraldry of the Noble Families of Malta*, Vol 2, P.E.G. Malta 1992, 66-7)

<sup>21</sup> Gauci, 69. '*Fiteni left no legitimate heir and so the title became extinct with his death. The Barony was regranted to Gio Pio de Piro in 1716. The de Piro family hold the fief to this day.*'

<sup>22</sup> Gauci, 69. For more information about Fiteni vide V. Denaro, 'Still More Houses in Valletta' in *Melita Historica*, ed. B. Fiorini, Malta 1962, 48 and Montalto, 89

<sup>23</sup> Montalto, 38 cites A[rchives] O[rder] M[alta] 471, ff.273r.-273v.

<sup>24</sup> N.A.V., R30/24, f. 363v.

Denaro has traced his Valletta house to 248-254, St Ursola Street.<sup>25</sup> By the time Passalacqua made his will in 1683 his wife, daughter and son-in-law were all dead, and he seems to have had no immediate descendants to leave his property to.

Passalacqua's special devotion to Our Lady of Carmel perhaps stems from the fact that he was the founder and first Rector of the Confraternity of the Blessed Virgin of Carmel.<sup>26</sup> He seems to have continued in this important role for a number of years. Passalacqua left instructions to be buried in his tomb sited at the Oratory of the said Confraternity. Already buried in this grave were his wife Maria, his daughter Giovanna and his niece who remains unnamed, and he specifies that he wishes no further burials to be made in this tomb after his own.<sup>27</sup> From the will it transpires that he was the main benefactor of the Oratory of the Confraternity which, he claims, he practically entirely set up and embellished single handed. He goes on to supply important information for anyone researching the history of this Oratory:

*'...d'haver In gran parte fabricato e dorato detto oratorio à proprie spese e posta in esso la figura et imagine e statua di Nostra Sig.ra con varij*

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<sup>25</sup> Denaro, 53

<sup>26</sup> N.A.V., R30/24, f. 362v.

<sup>27</sup> N.A.V., R30/24, ff. 362v., 363. An interesting note found in A.V.C. Reg. 22 f. 14 reads as follows: *'Sepoltura nel Oratorio fatta dal Confrate Cesare Passalacqua ed l'inscritt.ne in pie d'essa .H.M.H.N.S. che intende significare Huic; Monumento; Heredes; Non; Succedunt* ('the heirs do not inherit this monument').

*Adi 16 Maggio 1651 morse Gioseppe figlio del Barone Silvestro Fiteni et fu messo in deposito nella fossa della Confr.ta et fu riportato nella fossa s.a nom.ta adi 4 Luglio 1656.*

*Adi 4 Luglio 1656 morse la figlia d'esso Passalacqua moglie di ...Barone Fiteni e fu sepolita in essa fossa: di nome Genoveva (sic)*

*Adi 25 Febro 1657 fu sepolita in essa fossa la moglie d'esso Passalacqua di nome (blank) la q.le morse ieri'*

*adornamenti et abbellimenti per l'Altare et un lampiere d'argento per honore d'essa Beatissima Vergine e Madre del Carmine*<sup>28</sup>

Some works seem to have been incomplete by the time he drew up his will, and he provides for them in this manner:

*'..vuole che si diano scudi trenta....per perfettionarsi la niccia, che' sopra la sua sepoltura nel detto oratorio del Carmine cioe' Indorarla conforme sta scritto nelli suoi libretti'*<sup>29</sup>.

Unfortunately the original Oratory does not survive, nor, to my knowledge, the ledger stone once marking the Passalacqua family tomb.

Passalacqua's concern to enrich the Confraternity is also apparent in the other legacies he leaves, consisting of thirty two pieces of red and green damask tapestry hangings and four pieces of '*frigio*' from his own hangings.<sup>30</sup>

Other testamentary dispositions in favour of various churches in Valletta include a sum of 260 scudi in favour of the Convent of St Francis for the bell to be made<sup>31</sup>, 100 scudi to the Church of Santa Maria di Gesu' for the manufacture of a '*Cappa pianeta*,

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<sup>28</sup> N.A.V., R30/24, f.362v. Incidentally the will provides other pieces of fascinating information. One such case is the donation of the relic and '*ganga*' of the Virgin Saint Rosolea of Palermo to the reigning Grand Master Carafa. The extraordinary story of this relic is carefully recorded in Passalacqua's will. This relic was first presented to Grand Master de Redin by the City of Palermo during the time when he governed as '*ViceRe*' of Sicily and on his deathbed de Redin donated it to the Bishop of Malta Monsignor Fra Luca Bueino (sic), who wore it around his neck and donated it on his own deathbed, together with a golden gemmed bracelet which he also wore, to Passalacqua in the presence of several named witnesses. Passalacqua had the relic reset in a silver statue which, it is stated, was already in the reigning Grand Master's possession. (f.363v.)

<sup>29</sup> N.A.V., R30/24, f. 366

<sup>30</sup> N.A.V., R30/24, f. 367

<sup>31</sup> N.A.V., R30/24, f. 365v

*due tonicelle, e un avant altare*<sup>32</sup>, and in his list of creditors it emerges that Passalacqua has two paintings from or of (Cav.ri?) Zumbi which he now wishes to be hung in the church of Santa Lucia '*per esser stati siracusani*'<sup>33</sup> (subject matter or origin?) In his will he furthermore confirms as his universal heir for all the property not already disposed of by legacies, the '*opera pia*' which he had instituted in favour of the Order and the Conventual Church of St John.<sup>34</sup> This probably refers to the Passalacqua foundation, the records of which are kept at the National Library Valletta.<sup>35</sup>

The chain is certainly of considerable artistic merit and the circumstances of its early history deserve to be explored in greater depth. It would also be of great interest to examine comparable pieces which survive in Malta, either as existing jewellery items or in depictions of Maltese subjects.

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*Francesca Balzan graduated Legal Procurator in 1994. She went on to study history of art at the University of Malta, obtaining a B.A. (Hons) in History of Art and was later awarded a distinction for her Masters' dissertation which focused on Jewellery in Malta during the Knights' Period (1530-1798). Francesca sits on the board of the Malta Council for Culture and the Arts and is Curator of Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum, Mdina. She has published aspects of her research and a book on historic jewellery in Malta is due to be published in the near future.*

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<sup>32</sup> N.A.V., R30/24, f. 367

<sup>33</sup> N.A.V., R30/24, f.371. For Passalacqua's important donations to the church of St Paul *vide* M.Galea, 'Cesare Passalacqua' in *Programm Festa San Pawl Nawfragu*, Malta 2002, 16-17. I am grateful to Kan. Dun Alfred Camilleri for drawing my attention to this publication.

<sup>34</sup> N.A.V., R30/24, f.368

<sup>35</sup> A.O.M. Treasury A Vol 61: *Controlib.o della Fundaz.ne del fu' Em. Mo Sig.r Gran Maestro Fra D. Nicolas Cottoner, Passalacqua, e Marradas – segnato – B.*



Ill.1: *The Passalacqua Chain*, Confraternity of the Blessed Virgin of Carmel, Photo: F. Balzan



Ill.2: *The Passalacqua Chain* (detail of central link), Confraternity of the Blessed Virgin of Carmel, Photo: F. Balzan



Ill.3: *The Passalacqua Chain*, (detail of alternating subsidiary links), Confraternity of the Blessed Virgin of Carmel, Photo: F. Balzan



Ill.4: *The Passalacqua Chain*, (detail of pendant from front), Confraternity of the Blessed Virgin of Carmel, Photo: F. Balzan



Ill.5: *The Passalacqua Chain*, (detail of reverse of pendant), Confraternity of the Blessed Virgin of Carmel, Photo: F. Balzan