

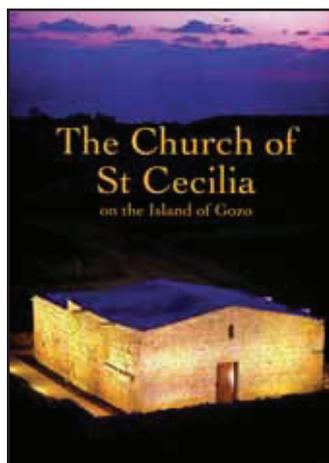
## The Church of St Cecilia on the Island of Gozo

Author - David Mallia

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Reviewed by *Joe Azzopardi*



*Wirt Ghawdex* president Franco Masini writes in the preface to this excellently produced publication that the Church of St Cecilia is a survivor. This definition is certainly correct for any mediaeval building still standing today and it is even more so in this case, considering that apart from being the sole surviving example of “undiluted mediaeval architecture in Gozo”, to quote Franco Masini again, St Cecilia has suffered the humiliation of being deconsecrated, of becoming an ancillary building to the nearby tower – possibly housing a mule-driven mill, the loss of one of its walls and finally being set on fire.

A telling factor is that, as pointed out by Masini, the structure has suffered more in the past 50 years than it did over the centuries. Not even the close proximity of a WWII air field managed to inflict the kind of damage done to it in the recent past, with the arson incident of 2007 marking the lowest point of the church’s history, but also thankfully providing the impetus for the commencement of a restoration programme. As is often the case, we had to risk losing the Church of St Cecilia before we realised its true value and took steps to save it for posterity.

Thankfully, the energy dedicated to the restoration of the church was directly commensurate to the immense value of the building and the very present possibility of it being lost. Firstly, a clear understanding of the church and its history was needed to act as the guide on which the restoration programme would be based. This understanding came in the person of Dr David Mallia, who had carried out research on the Church of St Cecilia in all its aspects over many years. Thankfully – again – *Wirt Ghawdex* decided that, with the work concluded, all the information collected deserved to be preserved in a permanent form, resulting in the publication under review.

Dr Mallia starts off by looking at the Church of St Cecilia from a distance – both physical and historical. He traces out the context of the church in both of these aspects trying to establish its origins, the factors that brought it into being, its life as a place of worship until the definite deconsecration in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century (when it was supplanted by Xewkija parish church), and the various uses to which it was put before the long abandonment which almost brought about its destruction. Following this long distance approach, he starts to focus on the structure proper, analysing the building techniques used for its construction and drawing parallels with other buildings that present architectural affinities with St Cecilia.

Next comes a detailed dissection of the various component parts of the building, with sections dedicated to the plan, the walls, the arches, the roof, the altar, the doorways and the parvis. For many of these, the author draws yet more parallels with other buildings of the same era, while in the process emphasising the particular elements that characterise those same elements in St Cecilia’s church. By so doing, the author ensures that this unique building will have the place it deserves in the architectural history of Malta.

While much of the strength of this publication is based on Dr Mallia’s in-depth knowledge, much of its appeal comes from the intelligent layout and magnificent photographs – both by Daniel Cilia. These two aspects come together in the section dedicated to the many graffiti found in the church, which are meticulously mapped, graphically illustrated through drawings and vividly presented in a series of photographs cross-referenced to the drawings.

This publication is certainly visually enjoyable and stimulating. While the photographs of the blackened masonry strike a deep cord of disbelief and anger at the insensibility of those who could perpetrate such an act, those of the restored church fill the soul with joy and anticipation of the moment when this newly saved monument will be open to the public. Now that the Church of St Cecilia has been saved, *Wirt Ghawdex* will no doubt care for it with infinite dedication for many years to come.

