

Famous Portraits Series

Dun Mikiel Xerri

Maltese prelate and patriot

Born: 29 September 1737 Died: 17 January 1799 (Aged 61)

Issue 18

Mikiel Anton Vassalli

Maltese writer, philosopher and linguist

Born: 5 March 1764 Died: 12 January 1829 (Aged 65)



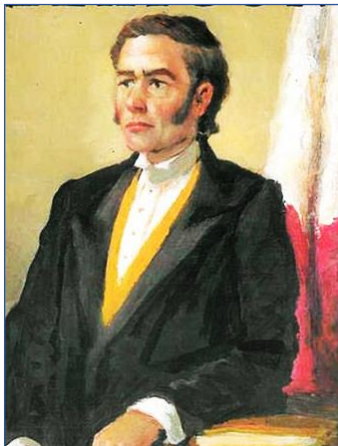
1. A contemporary portrait of Dun Mikiel Xerri



2. Portrait of Dun Mikiel Xerri commemorated on a Maltese stamp of 1999.



3. An idealised portrait of Dun Mikiel Xerri



4. An idealised portrait of Mikiel Anton Vassalli



5. Image of Vassalli as commemorated on a Maltese stamp



6. Monument dedicated to the memory of Vassalli at Ħaż-Żebbuġ, his hometown

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Image Sources:

- <https://maltadailyphoto.blogspot.com/2008/12/dun-mikiel-xerri-maltese-patriot.html>
- <http://stampdata.com/image.php?id=369933>
- <https://www.facebook.com/100063970268254/posts/111720627519807/>
- <https://maltaonlinebookshop.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/lexicon-3.jpg>
- <https://www.hipstamp.com/listing/malta-1980-europa-sept-famous-people-writers-briffa-vassalli-2v-sc575-576-mnh/29703298>
- <https://tvmnews.mt/en/news/the-cell-where-mikiel-anton-vassalli-suffered-hunger-and-humiliation/>

Dun Mikiel Xerri was born in Haż-Żebbuġ but little is known about his childhood except that he was very much interested in learning. As a young adult, Mikiel studied philosophy in different universities in Europe. His later years in life were marked by a turbulent period in history – in 1792 the French Revolution took an anti-religious slant when priests were persecuted and executed. The anti-clerical aspects of the revolution irritated Dun Mikiel and he was later appalled by the behaviour of the French garrison troops left by Napoleon in charge of the Maltese Islands.

On 2 September 1798, the Maltese rose up in revolt against the French garrison in Mdina. The rebellion quickly spread all over the island. The French Governor Vaubois and his soldiers were trapped behind the fortifications of Valletta and Cottonera. The situation however came to a stalemate as the Maltese could not oust the French from their strongholds. It was at this juncture that Dun Mikiel Xerri and a group of patriots in Valletta organized a secret plot against the French. They planned to open one of the gates of the city on the night of 12 January 1799 while a group of armed compatriots approached from Manoel Island.

However, the French discovered the plot and the rebels were quickly arrested. Dun Mikiel and his collaborators were tried, found guilty and condemned to death for treason. Their execution took place at the Palace Square between 14 and 20 January. Their bodies were then buried in the cemetery of St Publius Church in Floriana. Dun Mikiel has ever since been hailed as a patriot and hero. A monument commemorating this heroic event was inaugurated in Independence Square, Valletta in 1986.

Mikiel Anton Vassalli was born in Haż-Żebbuġ to a peasant family and lost his father at the age of two. This loss, however, did not prevent him from displaying an interest in education and politics from an early age. In 1785 he started studying oriental languages at the Sapienza University in Rome. During the 1790s Vassalli published three substantial works about the Maltese language which set the study of the Maltese language for the first time on solid and scientific foundations. *L-Alfabet Malti* (1790), *Il-Mylsen* (1791) and *Ktieb il-Kliem Malti* (1796). His interest in the Maltese language gained him the appellation of 'Father of the Maltese Language'.

At that time, Malta was governed by the Order of St John, which had become an anachronistic institution. His involvement in the politics of the island during the last turbulent years of the Knights in Malta, led to his arrest for seditious ideas against the Order under Grandmaster Emmanuel de Rohan. He managed to escape to France where he came in direct contact with the ideas of the French Revolution.

In 1798 Vassalli returned to Malta with the French fleet under General Napoleon Bonaparte. During the blockade, he was arrested for his sympathies with the French and exiled when the islands fell under the British in 1800. After 20 years in exile in France and Spain, he was allowed to return to Malta. With the help of John Hookham Frere, an English diplomat and author, he was appointed first Professor of Maltese at the Royal University of Malta. During this time, he published a Maltese grammar book in Italian and a translation of the Gospels. However, Vassalli was not on the best of terms with the Church authorities. He was even suspected of being a Protestant. For this reason, when he died, he was refused a Catholic burial. Instead, he was laid to rest at the Msida Bastion Cemetery, the place reserved for British Protestant servicemen who died in Malta.

Further reading:

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dun_Mikiel_Xerri - https://mt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dun_Mikiel_Xerri
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikiel_Anton_Vassalli - https://mt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikiel_Anton_Vassalli
- Ciappara, Frans, M.A. Vassalli 1764–1829: An Enlightened Maltese Reformer, 2014.
- <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/mikiel-anton-vassalli-founder-first-school-maltese.964511>

Questions

1. What do we know about Dun Mikiel Xerri's early life?
2. When and how did he become a prominent person in Malta's history?
3. What could have been the motive for his involvement in the plot against the French?
4. Mention THREE attributes about his character and personality.
5. What do we know about Mikiel Anton Vassalli childhood and education?
6. Why did he get into trouble with the administration of the Order of St John in the 1790s?
7. List FOUR facts about Vassalli's later life between 1800 and his death in 1829.
8. What earned him the appellation 'Father of the Maltese language'?