

Malta antemurale Christianitatis: Viceroyalty military defence in the Mediterranean under the Knights of St. John

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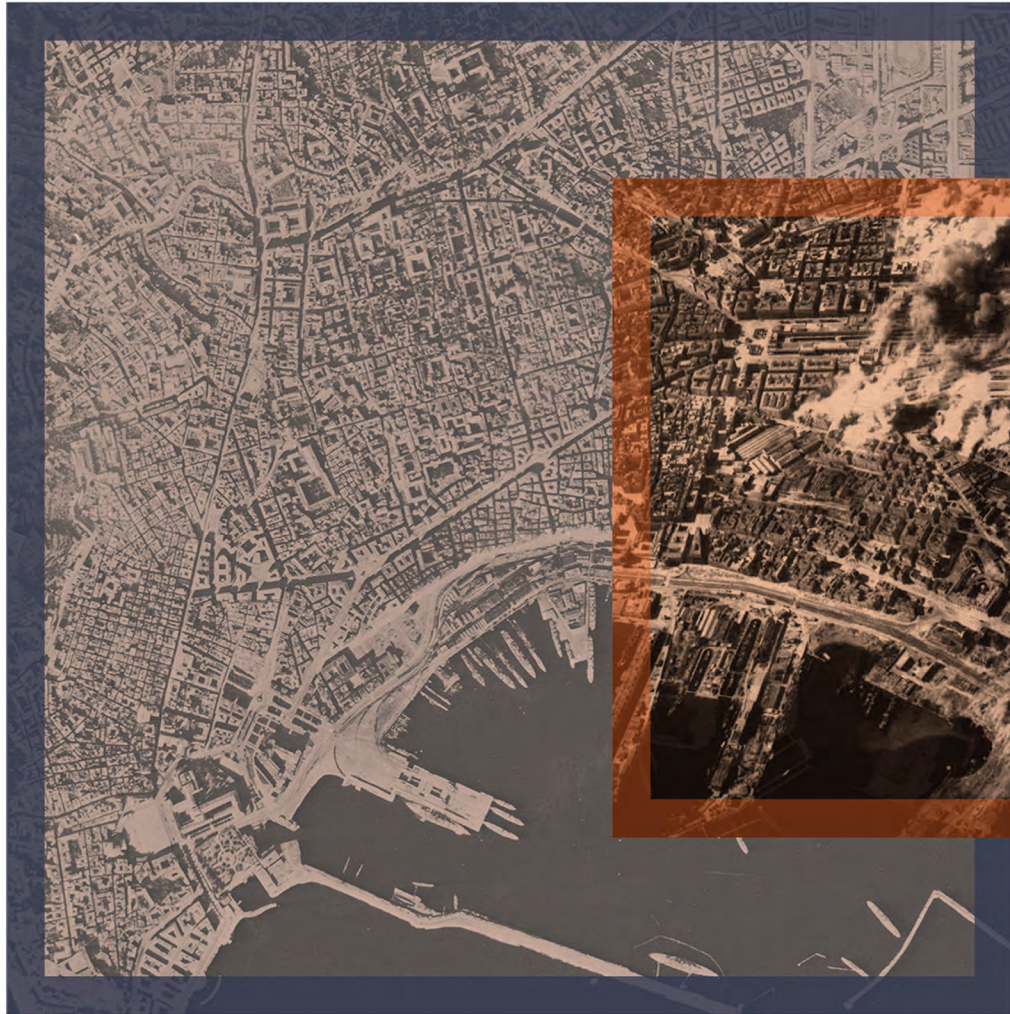
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CITTÀ E GUERRA

DIFESE, DISTRUZIONI, PERMANENZE
DELLE MEMORIE E DELL'IMMAGINE URBANA

CITY AND WAR

MILITARY DEFENCES, RUINS, PERMANENCES
OF URBAN MEMORIES AND IMAGES



Tomo primo

FONTI E TESTIMONIANZE

a cura di
Francesca Capano,
Emma Maglio,
Massimo Visone

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collaborazione alla curatela: Mirella Izzo

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CITTÀ E GUERRA

Difese, distruzioni, permanenze delle memorie e dell'immagine urbana

Tomo I - Fonti e testimonianze

a cura di Francesca CAPANO, Emma MAGLIO, Massimo VIGONE

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INDICE

15 | **Presentazione**

ANNUNZIATA BERRINO, ALFREDO BUCCARO

19 | **Introduzione. Città e guerra: storie in transizione**

FRANCESCA CAPANO, EMMA MAGLIO, MASSIMO VISONE

PARTE I / PART I

Archeologia e guerra: contesti, cultura materiale, iconografia, testimonianze letterarie

Archaeology and war: contexts, material culture, iconography, literary evidence

BIANCA FERRARA, FEDERICO RAUSA

CAP.1 **L'archeologia della guerra nel mondo antico: analisi, ricostruzioni, interpretazioni**

The archaeology of war in the ancient world: analysis, reconstructions, interpretations

LUIGI CICALA, BIANCA FERRARA

29 | Roscigno-Monte Pruno: un insediamento indigeno fortificato

Roscigno-Monte Pruno: an indigenous fortified settlement

Giovanna Greco, Bianca Ferrara, Rachele Cava

39 | Guerra e 'damnatio memoriae': le vicende dell'area archeologica del Laterano. Ricostruzioni e interpretazioni edificatorie dei 'Castrum Nova Equitum Singularium'

War and 'damnatio memoriae': the events of the archaeological area of the Lateran in Rome.

Reconstructions and building interpretations of the 'Castrum Nova Equitum Singularium'

Olimpia Di Biase

49 | Tracce di ricerca per lo studio delle mura storiche della città antica di Ashkelon

Research traces for the study of the historical walls of the ancient city of Ashkelon

Novella Lecci, Laura Aiello, Cecilia Luschi

CAP.2 **Città e guerra nelle fonti letterarie e iconografiche: temi e contesti**

Cities and war in literary and iconographic sources: themes and contexts

GIANCARLO ABBAMONTE, FEDERICO RAUSA

63 | La guerra nei monumenti funerari d'età imperiale: duratura memoria di un trionfo

War in funerary Monuments of Imperial Age: memory of a personal triumph

Angela Palmentieri

PARTE II / PART II

Guerra e pace nelle città europee e mediterranee

War and peace in European and Mediterranean cities

ANNUNZIATA BERRINO, GIOVANNA CIGLIANO, PIERO VENTURA

CAP.1 **La rivoluzione militare nelle città europee: trasformazioni e rappresentazioni tra XV e XVIII secolo**

The Military Revolution in European cities: transformations and representations between the 15th and 18th centuries

DIEGO CARNEVALE, FRANCESCO STORTI, PIERO VENTURA

79 | Scienza del disegno e sapienza di Stato

Science of drawing and knowledge of the State

Andrea Donelli

91 | La "prima chiave del Regno": sistema difensivo ed esercizio delle armi nella Napoli del Quattrocento

The "first key of the Kingdom": defensive system and military practice in the Fifteenth-century Naples

Alessio Russo

- 105 | La rappresentazione della città nelle scene di guerra in Palazzo Vecchio a Firenze
The representation of the city in the battle scenes in Palazzo Vecchio in Florence
Daniela Stroffolino
- 113 | Strutture di difesa, guerra, assedi nell'iconografia di Siena tra XV e XVI secolo
Fortifications, war, sieges in the iconography of Siena between the 15th and 16th centuries
Bruno Mussari
- 125 | Innocenzo X Pamphilj e la ristrutturazione di San Martino al Cimino (Viterbo) nel panorama politico e diplomatico della guerra di Castro (1641-1649)
Innocenzo X Pamphilj and the renovation of San Martino al Cimino (Viterbo) in the political and diplomatical panorama of the Castro war (1641-1649)
Giordano Ocelli
- 137 | Bergamo 1796-1797. Monumenti ambivalenti nella 'guerra per simboli'
Bergamo 1796-1797. Double-meaning monuments for a 'war of symbols'
Michela Marisa Grisoni
- 147 | Nuove interpretazioni e suggestioni sulla rappresentazione della città fortificata di 'Bononia', contenuta nel *Liber Chronicarum* di Hartmann Schedel
New interpretations and suggestions on the representation of the fortified city of 'Bononia', within in the Hartmann Schedel's *Liber Chronicarum*
Luca Orlandi, Roberto De Lorenzo

CAP.2 Guerra e contesto urbano in età contemporanea: realtà e rappresentazioni
War in Urban Contexts during the Contemporary Age: Reality and Representations
GIOVANNA CIGLIANO

- 161 | Guerra nelle città del XXI secolo: caratteristiche, questioni umanitarie, narrazioni
War in 21st Century Cities: Characteristics, Humanitarian Issues, Narratives
Giovanna Cigliano
- 171 | Piccole Stalingrado: memoria e public history nella rappresentazione della guerra urbana nella Russia contemporanea
Little Stalingrad: memory and public history in the representation of Urban Warfare in Contemporary Russia
Giovanni Savino
- 179 | Il ruolo dell'immagine tra produzione e distruzione del simile: fotografie di guerra a Mariupol
The Role of the Image between Production and Destruction of the Similar: War Photographs in Mariupol
Filomena Fera
- 187 | Alla soglia delle immagini. Un viaggio virtuale da Palmira a Mosul
At the threshold of images. A virtual journey from Palmyra to Mosul
Marianna Sergio

CAP.3 Città e turismo in guerra e pace
Cities and tourism in war and peace
ANNUNZIATA BERRINO

- 199 | "Stodeschizzare" il lago di Garda: turisti come nemici dalla Belle Époque alla Grande guerra. La Società Dante Alighieri
"Strangers, leave Lake Garda!" Tourists as enemies from the Belle Époque to the Great War. The Dante Alighieri Society
Maria Paola Pasini, Riccardo Semeraro
- 207 | Civilian Tourism Infrastructure and Conflict: The British Hotel in Wartime, 1914-1918
Kevin James
- 217 | Tourism and war in San Sebastián, 1914-1918. The impact of the First World War in a neutral country, Spain
Carlos Larrinaga
- 223 | Barcelona 1936: Tourism, culture and society before and immediately after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War
Saida Palou Rubio
- 229 | Termalismo e *Villes d'eaux* in Italia a servizio della politica economica autarchica del Regime
Thermalism and *Villes d'eaux* in Italy in the service of the Regime's autarchy economic policy
Monica Esposito

- 239 | Denunce e rappresentazioni dei danni subiti dalle località turistiche italiane durante la Seconda guerra mondiale
Complaints and representations of the damage suffered by Italian tourist resorts during the World War II
Annunziata Berrino
- 249 | 1946: Ginevra fra pace e guerra. Le *Rencontres internationales* e il dialogo sul futuro dell'Europa
1946: Geneva between peace and war. The *Rencontres internationales* and the confrontation over the future of Europe
Anna Pia Ruoppo
- 255 | Pace e turismo negli anni della Ricostruzione. Un'ipotesi di ricerca su Taranto
Peace and tourism during Reconstruction. A research hypothesis on Taranto
Elisabetta Caroppo
- 263 | Frammenti di memoria ottocentesca e spazi urbani nel secondo dopoguerra a Napoli: i casi dell'Hôtel Isotta & Genève e del Caffè Vacca
Nineteenth-century memory fragments and urban spaces in the second post-war period in Naples: the case of Hôtel Isotta & Genève and Caffè Vacca
Rossella Iovinella
- 271 | L'impatto della Primavera Araba sul settore turistico: il caso della Tunisia
The impact of the Arab Spring on the tourism sector: the case of Tunisia
Emanuela Locci

CAP.4 Paesaggi reali e mentali di Varsavia nel secondo conflitto mondiale
Physical and Mental Landscapes of Warsaw in World War II
ANNA TYLUSINSKA, PIOTR PODEMSKI

- 283 | A window onto Waliców: Liberating new perspectives
Michał Saniewski

PARTE III / PART III

Identità, architettura e immagine storica delle città in guerra
Identity, architecture and historical image of cities at war
ALFREDO BUCCARO, ALESSANDRO CASTAGNARO, ANDREA MAGLIO, FABIO MANGONE

CAP.1 Città e mura nei domini spagnoli e veneziani del Mediterraneo in età moderna
Cities and walls of Spanish and Venetian dominions in the Mediterranean during the modern period
ALFREDO BUCCARO, EMMA MAGLIO, ALESSANDRA VEROPALUMBO

- 301 | Treviso «fedelissima»: la città murata dopo Agnadello (1509)
Treviso «very loyal»: the walled city after Agnadello (1509)
Elena Svalduz
- 311 | Le fortezze balcaniche attraverso le rappresentazioni cartografiche delle coste mediterranee orientali
Balkan fortresses through cartographic representations of the eastern Mediterranean coasts
Felicia Di Girolamo, Raffaella Fiorillo
- 321 | Immagini da una guerra. L'assedio ottomano di Candia nell'iconografia urbana (XVII secolo)
Snapshots from a war. The Ottoman siege of Candia in the urban iconography (17th century)
Emma Maglio
- 333 | *Malta antemurale Christianitatis*: Viceroyalty military defence in the Mediterranean under the Knights of St. John
Valentina Burgassi
- 343 | Taranto: fortificare e ampliare
Taranto: fortify and expand
Oronzo Brunetti
- 353 | Fortezze alla prova del fuoco. Vecchie e nuove difese nel regno di Napoli dal *Memoriale storico* di Giovanni Battista Pujadies (1708)
The trial by fire. Old and new fortifications in the Kingdom of Naples in the Giovanni Battista Pujadies' *Memoriale storico* (1708)
Giuseppe Pignatelli Spinazzola

363 | Torri costiere e case-torri di epoca vicereale nei Campi Flegrei tra permanenza e trasformazione
Coastal towers and tower-houses from the viceregal age in Campi Flegrei between permanence and transformation
Mariangela Terracciano

373 | Le torri costiere di Positano: restauro e abbandono
The coastal towers of Positano: conservation and neglect
Luisa Del Giudice

CAP.2 Oltre li turchi. Memorie delle difese nelle città e nel paesaggio tra Sette e Ottocento

Beyond the Turks. Memories of defences in cities and in the urban landscape between the 18th and 19th centuries
FRANCESCA CAPANO, SALVATORE DI LIELLO

387 | «Una rovina fantastica abitata dai serpi, dai gufi e dalle rondini»: la roccaforte dei d'Avalos di Procida, oltre li turchi
«Una rovina fantastica abitata dai serpi, dai gufi e dalle rondini»: the d'Avalos fortress of Procida, beyond the Turks
Salvatore Di Liello

399 | «Ala bucca de lo Gulfo». La fortezza di Bouka e le sue trasformazioni tra Venezia e Impero Ottomano
«Ala bucca de lo Gulfo». The Bouka fortress and its transformations between Venice and Ottoman Empire
Giuseppina Scamardi

411 | La fortificazione di Crotona tra XVII e XIX secolo: la permanenza dell'immagine, il progressivo declino della funzione
The fortification of Crotona between the 17th and 19th centuries: the permanence of the image, the gradual decline of the function
Bruno Mussari

423 | Il castello svevo di Lucera da fortezza a monumento archeologico
The svevo castle of Lucera from fortress to archaeological monument
Emanuele Taranto

435 | The castle of Sant'Angelo in Fasanelle: memory and identifying characteristics
Emanuela De Feo

443 | Al posto delle mura: resilienza delle forme nell'architettura pubblica e residenziale del XIX secolo
In place of fortifications: resilience of forms in nineteenth-century public and residential architecture
Pasquale Rossi, Matteo Borriello

455 | Il castello di Angri: la residenza dei principi Doria
The castle of Angri: the residence of Doria princes
Gianluca Novi, Emanuele Taranto

465 | El Castillo de San Marcos. Símbolo e identidad de San Agustín de la Florida (1743-1821)
St. Marks castle. Symbol and identity of St Augustine, Florida (1743-1821)
Pedro Cruz Freire, Alfredo J. Morales

477 | Rilievi integrati e ricostruzioni digitali della Cattedrale nel Castello d'Ischia
Integrated surveys and digital reconstructions of the Cathedral in the Castle of Ischia
Saverio D'Auria

485 | Il Castello di Ischia nell'Ottocento: tra decadenza e abbandono
The Castle of Ischia in the nineteenth century: between decadence and abandonment
Francesca Capano

CAP.3 Teatri di guerra: La mise-en-scène cinematografica dello spazio urbano come fronte di guerra

Theatres of War: The cinematic mise-en-scène of urban space as a war front
TANJA MICHALSKY, CARLO UGOLOTTI

499 | Interno teatro. Il simulacrum teatrale come alternativa alla realtà in *To be or not to be* di Ernst Lubitsch
Inside theater. The theatrical simulacrum as an alternative to reality in Ernst Lubitsch's *To be or not to be*
Francesca Di Fazio

507 | Napoli, un palco in guerra: dispositivo teatrale e spazio urbano nella messa in scena di Roberto Rossellini
Naples, a stage at war: theatrical device and urban space in Roberto Rossellini's staging
Carlo Ugolotti

517 | «Ci sarà soltanto il paesaggio». I Sassi di Matera come teatro del dopoguerra ne *La lupa* di Alberto Lattuada
«Ci sarà soltanto il paesaggio». The Sassi of Matera as postwar theater in Alberto Lattuada's *La lupa*
Malvina Giordana

CAP.4 Cicatrici urbane. La memoria della guerra e il patrimonio costruito

Urban scars. The memory of the war and the built heritage

JUAN MANUEL MONTEROSO MONTERO, BEGOÑA FERNÁNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ, CARLA FERNÁNDEZ MARTÍNEZ

- 529 | Il monumento ai caduti franco-pontifici nella campagna militare dell'Agro romano: un memoriale preunitario 'dimenticato' nel cimitero monumentale Campo Verano a Roma
The monument to the franco-pontifical fallen in the military campaign of the Agro romano: a 'forgotten' memorial pre-unitary in the Campo Verano monumental cemetery in Rome
Roberto Ragione
- 539 | I monumenti ai caduti di Siracusa tra memorie della patria e passato coloniale
The war memorials of Syracuse between memories of the homeland and the colonial past
Maria Stella Di Trapani
- 549 | Tangible Absence: Architectural History of Armenian Presence in Anatolia
L'assenza Tangibile: Storia dell'architettura della presenza armena nell'Anatolia
Mesut Dinler
- 557 | La città e i suoi spazi: Teano e il complesso di Sant'Antonio abate
The city and its spaces: Teano and the complex of Sant'Antonio abate
Italia Caradonna
- 565 | The Scars of Post-war Socio-political Change in Cultural Heritage: The Example of the Greek Church of Kutahya
Le cicatrici del cambiamento socio-politico del dopoguerra nel patrimonio culturale: il caso della chiesa greca di Kutahya
Demet Yilmaz
- 575 | La città di Campagna durante la Seconda guerra mondiale. L'ex convento di San Bartolomeo da campo d'internamento a luogo della memoria
The city of Campagna during World War II. The ex-convent of San Bartolomeo from internment camp to memorial site
Michele Cerro
- 585 | Il monastero di S. Scolastica a Subiaco. Note sui restauri postbellici
The monastery of S. Scolastica in Subiaco. Notes on post-war restorations
Gilberto De Giusti, Marta Formosa
- 595 | L'avamposto archeologico bellico di Cuma
The war archaeological outpost of Cuma
Emanuele Navarra
- 605 | Piazza Orsini a Benevento: una ferita ancora aperta
Piazza Orsini in Benevento: a still open wound
Massimo Visone
- 613 | La ricostruzione postbellica del nucleo storico di Viareggio: tensioni e cicatrici nel tessuto urbano dal 1944 a oggi
The post-war reconstruction of the historic center of Viareggio: tensions and scars in the urban fabric from 1944 to today
Paolo Bertoncini Sabatini, Denise Ulivieri
- 625 | Immagini di guerra a Torino: segni e disegni della ricostruzione
War images in Turin: signs and drawings of the reconstruction
Cristina Boido, Pia Davico
- 635 | Monumenti medievali nella Cagliari post-bellica. Demolizioni, ricostruzioni e dispersioni del patrimonio culturale dopo la Seconda guerra mondiale
Medieval monuments in post-war Cagliari. Demolitions, reconstructions and dispersal of cultural heritage after the Second World War
Nicoletta Usai
- 645 | Festung Helgoland: le molte vite dell'isola sacra
Festung Helgoland: the many lives of the sacred island
Marco Falsetti

- 653 | Retroactive Wounds in the Townscape of Budapest. Contemporary Debates on Post-war Interventions in the Buda Castle District
 Ferite retroattive nel paesaggio urbano di Budapest. Dibattiti contemporanei sugli interventi postbellici nel quartiere del Castello di Buda
Franz Bittenbinder
- 665 | L'ombra della guerra nella cappella di Notre-Dame-du-Haut di Le Corbusier
 The shadow of war in Le Corbusier's Notre-Dame-du-Haut chapel
Chiara Roma
- 677 | Semantizzare l'assenza. Le rovine, i vuoti urbani e le tracce 'in negativo' dei conflitti nelle città contemporanee
 Semanticising absence. Ruins, urban voids, and the 'negative' traces of conflict in contemporary cities
Maria Rosaria Vitale, Francesco Mazzucchelli

CAP.5 Le città europee e la guerra. Piani e trasformazioni in età contemporanea
European cities and war. Plans and transformations in the contemporary era
GEMMA BELLI, ANDREA MAGLIO

- 693 | Ai margini dello Stato moderno. Riforme istituzionali e insediamenti militari a Cremona tra XVIII e XX secolo
 At the boundaries of the Modern State. Institutional reforms and military settlements in Cremona between the 18th and 20th centuries
Alessandra Brignani, Angelo Giuseppe Landi
- 705 | L'ospedale militare di Roma. Architettura e ruolo urbano
 The military hospital of Rome. Architecture and urban role
Barbara Tetti
- 715 | Il Campo di Marte nel Piano di Ampliamento di Firenze di Giuseppe Poggi. Analisi grafica dei disegni d'archivio
 The Field of Mars in the Enlargement Plan of Florence by Giuseppe Poggi. Graphic analysis of archival drawings
Francesco Cotana
- 727 | Nuove caserme per l'esercito di Pio IX: progetti di adeguamento e nuove costruzioni nella capitale dello Stato Pontificio
 New barracks for army of Pius IX: adaptation projects and new buildings in the capital of the Papal States
Carmen Vincenza Manfredi
- 737 | Paris face à la guerre. La risposta della capitale francese ai conflitti bellici tra XIX e XX secolo
 Paris facing war. The French capital's response to the conflicts in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries
Luigi Saverio Pappalardo
- 749 | Storie della Prima guerra mondiale. Antonio Garboli e l'hangar per dirigibili di Augusta
 Stories of the First World War: Antonio Garboli and the Airship Hangar of Augusta
Francesca Passalacqua
- 759 | La memoria della guerra nel Grande Archivio: difesa, danni, racconti, cicatrici, ricostruzione
 War's memory in the Great Archive: defense, damage, stories, scars, reconstruction
Giuliana Ricciardi
- 767 | «Qui si continua a vivere senza disciplina, autorità, giustizia». Immagini e racconti di guerra dal diario di Pio Jacazzi
 War images and stories from Pio Jacazzi's diary
Danila Jacazzi, Giuseppe Fresolone
- 777 | Architetti in uniforme: Giuseppe Pagano, Luigi Cosenza e le Città Militari
 Architects in uniform: Giuseppe Pagano, Luigi Cosenza and the Military Cities
Francesco Viola
- 789 | Neumarkt Viertel in Dresden: un esemplare laboratorio di ricostruzione urbana agli albori del terzo millennio
 Neumarkt Viertel in Dresden: an exemplary laboratory of urban reconstruction at the beginning of the 3rd millennium
Marina Fumo, Giuseppe Trinchese
- 805 | Il sistema della rete Troposcatter utilizzata durante la Guerra fredda. Analisi, valorizzazione e riuso delle basi Nato dismesse di Dosso dei Galli e di Cavriana
 The Troposcatter network system used during the Cold War. Analysis, enhancement and reuse of disused Nato bases in Dosso dei Galli and Cavriana
Olivia Longo, Davide Sigurtà

CAP.6 Luoghi di sepoltura, della memoria e paesaggi segnati dalla guerra. Storie e possibili futuri
Stories and possible futures of battle-scarred landscapes, burial places and places of memory
GEMMA BELLI, ANGELA D'AGOSTINO, GIOVANGIUSEPPE VANNELLI

- 817 | Un luogo della memoria, tra dittatura e democrazia: Redipuglia
A site of memory, between dictatorship and democracy: Redipuglia
Fabio Mangone
- 827 | Storia, materia e tecniche costruttive per la conservazione dei sacrari militari della Grande Guerra: il Sacriario del Montello a Nervesa della Battaglia
History, materials and construction techniques for the conservation of Great War military memorials: the Montello memorial in Nervesa della Battaglia
Manlio Montuori, Luca Rocchi
- 837 | Ad memoria militum. I sacrari della Grande Guerra di Caporetto e Oslavia
Ad memoria militum. The Great World War memorials of Caporetto and Oslavia
Maria Grazia Cozzitorto, Francesco De Giuli, Domenico Lillo
- 847 | Liturgia fascista e sacrari: la Cella commemorativa di Luigi Moretti nel Foro Mussolini
Fascist liturgy and memorial monuments: the Cella commemorativa of Luigi Moretti in the Foro Mussolini
Gemma Belli
- 855 | Memorie sovrapposte. Durata e mutamento nel Monumento ai Martiri per la Libertà di Fondotoce
Overlapped memories. Endurance and transformation in the Monument to the Martyrs for Liberty in Fondotoce
Michela Marisa Grisoni
- 865 | Luoghi della memoria nelle province di Brescia e Bergamo. Parchi e viali della Rimembranza
Places of memory in the provinces of Brescia and Bergamo. Parks and avenues of Remembrance
Carlotta Coccoli, Lia Signorini
- 877 | Il cimitero militare del Commonwealth nel rione Testaccio a Roma (Rome War Cemetery): genesi di un luogo di sepoltura e di memoria della Seconda guerra mondiale
The Commonwealth Military Cemetery in the Testaccio district of Rome: genesis of a World War II burial and memorial site
Roberto Ragione
- 887 | «Siamo piante e non uomini, o meglio più piante che uomini». Due donne riflettono sulla guerra nel cimitero militare francese di Roma (1944-47)
«We are plants and not men, or rather more plants than men». Two women pondering upon the war in the French military cemetery in Rome (1944-47)
Monica Prencipe
- 899 | Cimiteri di guerra degli Alleati angloamericani in Italia: il Salerno War Cemetery
Anglo-American War Cemeteries in Italy: The Salerno War Cemetery
Rosa Sessa
- 911 | Venafro, città dello "schermo": la Winter Line e il ruolo dei cimiteri di guerra
Venafro, city of the "screen": the Winter Line and the role of war cemeteries
Maria Carolina Campone
- 921 | Forestazione come spazio della memoria e azione sui paesaggi della guerra: il Monumento Nazionale della Battaglia di Castelfidardo
Forestation as a space of memory and action on war landscapes: the National Monument of the Castelfidardo's Battle
Sara Cipolletti
- 931 | Intermittenze della memoria. Un dialogo a distanza tra paesaggi di guerra e architettura funeraria
Intermittences of memory. A remote dialogue between war landscapes and funerary architecture
Alessandra Carlini
- 941 | Cimiteri di guerra: logistica militare e architettura cimiteriale
War graves: military logistics and cemetery architecture
Luigi Coccia
- 951 | Distruzione, vandalismo e rifiuto del patrimonio costruito: la difficile tutela e conservazione del Partisan Cemetery di Mostar di Bogdan Bogdanović
Destruction, vandalism and rejection of built heritage: the difficult protection and preservation of the Partisan Cemetery in Mostar by Bogdan Bogdanović
Emanuele Morezzi

- 963 | Nei villaggi, nelle radure, nei boschi. Spazi per la memoria nel paesaggio sloveno
In the villages, in the clearings, in the woods. Spaces for memory in the Slovenian landscape
Susanna Campeotto
- 975 | An architectural understanding of The Memorial of Suffering
Una comprensione architettonica del Memoriale della Sofferenza
Oana Diaconescu
- 985 | Metabolizzare tracce e memorie. Reinterpretare il passato nella Leipzig che verrà: la post-perforated city
The metabolization of traces and memories. New interpretations of the past towards the Leipzig that has to come: the post-perforated city
Giovangiuseppe Vannelli, Giuseppe Palmieri, Gennaro Vitolo

CAP.7 *Complessi scultorei medievali all'indomani della Seconda Guerra Mondiale tra distruzioni, dispersioni e restituzioni. L'impatto sulle metodologie e sugli strumenti di ricerca*
Medieval sculpture in the aftermath of the World War II: destruction, dispersion and restitution. The impact on research methodologies and tools
PAOLA VITOLO, ANTONELLA DENTAMARO

- 1003 | The Recovery of Artistic Remains from the Ruins of War: Investigating the Medieval Portals of San Tommaso in Ortona and San Giovanni Evangelista in Ravenna
Cathleen Hoeniger
- 1011 | Documentation and Discovery: Locating the Cappella della Pace Madonna and Child in a postwar exhibition in Naples
Claire Jensen
- 1021 | Medieval Sculpture from the Recovered Territories and the New Canon of Polish Medieval art after 1945
Agnieszka Patała
- 1033 | Medieval sculpture in the collection of the Archdiocesan Museum in Wrocław after 1945 – difficult heritage?
Romuald Kaczmarek

CAP.8 *Residenze reali in guerra. Conoscenza, restauro e valorizzazione di architetture e paesaggi storici*
Royal Residences at War. Knowledge, Conservation and Enhancement of historical architectures and landscapes
VIVIANA SAITTO, MARIAROSARIA VILLANI, MASSIMO VISONE

- 1047 | Da Porxo del Forment a palazzo reale. Una residenza storica e militare a Pla de Palau de Barcellona
From Porxo del Forment to the royal palace. A historic and military residence in Pla de Palau in Barcelona
Laura García
- 1057 | Giardini reali ed eventi bellici: la scomparsa del parco di Venaria Reale durante l'occupazione napoleonica e gli orti di guerra a Stupinigi nel secondo conflitto mondiale
Royal Gardens and wars: the Vanishing of the Venaria Reale Park during the Napoleonic Occupation and the War Vegetable Gardens at Stupinigi during the Second World War
Paolo Cornaglia, Marco Ferrari
- 1067 | Il Real Sito di Portici tra le delizie reali e il gioco della guerra. L'analisi storico-cartografica attraverso i nuovi strumenti digitali
The Royal Site of Portici between the Royal Pleasure and the Game of War. Historical-cartographic analysis through the new digital tools
Mariarosaria Villani
- 1075 | Siti reali in guerra. Restauri, ricostruzioni e lacune in Campania nel secondo dopoguerra
Royal site at the war. Restoration, reconstruction and gap in Campania into the second post-war period
Mariarosaria Villani
- 1085 | Dal mito al conflitto: perdite e trasformazioni dei siti reali nei Campi Flegrei
From myth to conflict: losses and transformations of the royal sites in the Phlegraean Fields
Sara Iaccarino

- 1095 | Dai Borbone ai bombardamenti. Per il restauro del Palazzo Reale di Venafro tra danni bellici e abbandono
From the Bourbons to the bombings. For the restoration of the Royal Palace of Venafro between war damage and abandonment
Luigi Cappelli
- 1105 | Capodimonte e il secondo conflitto mondiale. Danni di guerra e restauri
Capodimonte and the Second world war. Damages and restoration
Renata Picone
- 1115 | Capodimonte oltre la guerra. Restauri e trasformazioni per le Gallerie Nazionali
Capodimonte royal palace beyond the war. The transformation and restoration project for the Nation Galleries of Naples
Giulia Proto
- 1123 | *La Reggia di Caserta: da 'Casa di Re' a polo della cultura*
The Royal Palace of Caserta: from "house of kings" to pole of culture
Rosanna Misso
- 1131 | Reconstrucción y progreso. Actores y arquitectura tras los temblores de Lima y Cuzco en la segunda mitad del seiscientos
Ricostruzione e progresso. Attori e architettura dopo i terremoti di Lima e Cuzco nella seconda metà del Seicento
Iván Panduro Sáez

CAP.9 «My City of Ruins». Raccontare, rappresentare, tornare a vivere
«My City of Ruins». Telling, representing, come back to life
GIOVANNI MENNA, GIANLUIGI DE MARTINO

- 1143 | La guerra di Candia e i progetti della nuova nobiltà veneziana
The siege of Candia and the architecture of the new Venetian aristocracy
Marco Felicioni
- 1151 | Riconoscere il valore nel disvalore per una rappresentazione identitaria della città
Recognize the value in the disvalue for an identity representation of the city
Irene De Natale
- 1157 | Il patrimonio culturale come cura nella riabilitazione postbellica
The healing power of cultural natural heritage in postwar recovery
Giulia Mezzalama
- 1161 | La rappresentazione culturale e identitaria e la selezione della memoria attraverso le ricostruzioni post-belliche. Il caso del Nord della Francia all'indomani della Prima guerra mondiale
Cultural and identity representation and the selection of memory through post-war reconstructions. The case of Northern France in the aftermath of the First World War
Stefano Guadagno
- 1171 | Memoria, ricostruzione e identità nella percezione di un danno bellico emblematico. Il caso dell'insula di Santa Chiara in Napoli
Memory, reconstruction and identity in the perception of an emblematic war damage. The case of the insula of Santa Chiara in Naples
Rita Gagliardi
- 1181 | I luoghi in guerra dello sbarco alleato in Sicilia tra interpretazione e rappresentazione
The Allied Landing in Sicily: interpretation and representation of the war zone
Antonio Maria Privitera
- 1193 | Cronaca di una rovina annunciata: le maquette di guerra di Mendelsohn, Wachsamann e Raymond
Chronicle of a Ruin Foretold: a war project by Mendelsohn, Wachsamann and Raymond
Gianluigi Freda
- 1199 | Paesaggi dell'anima. Immaginario e progetto nei luoghi del conflitto
Soul's landscapes. Imagery and project in places of conflict
Francesca Coppolino
- 1207 | *Fictional war ruins*. Rappresentazione, estetica ed iconografia delle rovine belliche nel cinema e nei videogiochi
Fictional war ruins. Representation, aesthetics and iconography of war ruins in movies and videogames
Barbara Ansaldo, Veronica Scarioni
- 1217 | La Zattera della Resistenza. Una installazione di architettura contro tutte le guerre
The Raft of Resistance. An architectural installation against all wars
Gennaro Di Costanzo, Nicola Campanile, Oreste Lubrano

1225 | Quel che resta. Le «Aree ristrette» di Danila Tkachenko
What remains. The «Restricted Areas» of Danila Tkachenko
Olga Starodubova

1235 | Come Again! Il progetto Beirut-Centre-Ville 1991
Come Again! The Beirut-Centre-Ville Project 1991
Giovanni Menna

CAP.10 Fabbriche e lavoro. La rappresentazione dello spazio urbano-industriale al tempo della guerra e al tempo della pace

Factories and work. The representation of the urban-industrial space at the time of war and at the time of peace

FRANCESCA CASTANÒ, MADDALENA CHIMISSO, ROBERTO PARISI

1249 | Gli spazi della produzione e del commercio nei piani di ricostruzione dell'Archivio digitale RAPu
The spaces of production and trade in the reconstruction plans in digital Archive RAPu
Maddalena Chimisso, Barbara Galli

1259 | Una centralità indesiderata
An unwanted centrality
Ilaria Zilli, Maria Giagnacovo

1271 | Lavoro e industria: il Sannio dall'economia di guerra allo sviluppo (sec. XX)
Labour and Factory: Samnium from the war economy to development (20th century)
Rossella Del Prete

1279 | *Town Plan of Naples* 1943. Lo spazio della fabbrica nella cartografia di una città in guerra
Town Plan of Naples 1943. The factory space in the cartography of a city at war
Roberto Parisi

1291 | La Banca d'Italia a L'Aquila tra città, fabbrica e quartiere operaio
The Bank of Italy in L'Aquila between city, factory and working-class district
Simonetta Ciranna

1301 | Colleferro, da città per la guerra a città morandiana
Colleferro, from war city to città morandiana
Francesca Castanò, Luca Calselli, Alessandra Clemente

1311 | Renato Avolio De Martino e la Società Meridionale di Elettricità. La centrale termoelettrica Vigliena
Renato Avolio De Martino and the Società Meridionale di Elettricità. The Vigliena thermoelectric power plant
Chiara Ingrosso

1321 | Olivetti Synthesis: l'interpretazione umanistica del lavoro
Olivetti Synthesis: the humanistic interpretation of work
Alessandra Clemente

CAP.11 La ricostruzione postbellica in Italia (1945-1965)

The reconstruction in Italy after the World War II (1945-1965)

ALESSANDRO CASTAGNARO, LUCA GUIDO

1333 | La seconda 'rinascita' di Avezzano. Il piano di ricostruzione dell'ingegnere Marcello Vittorini del 1957-59
The second 'rebirth' of Avezzano. The reconstruction plan of the engineer Marcello Vittorini of 1957-59
Patrizia Montuori

1343 | 1945-1958: la ricostruzione di Sulmona nell'applicazione del Piano di Pietro Aschieri
1945-1958: Reconstructing Sulmona by applying Pietro Aschieri's Plan
Raffaele Giannantonio

1353 | Dalmine dopo il bombardamento: la rinascita della città-fabbrica
Dalmine after the bombing: the rebirth of the factory and the town
Giulio Mirabella Roberti, Monica Resmini

1363 | Il villaggio artigiano e la casa-torre: nuovi modelli per la ricostruzione a Modena
New models for the reconstruction in Modena: the artisan village and the tower house
Silvia Berselli

- 1373 | Edilizia residenziale pubblica e alta densità abitativa nel secondo dopoguerra. Analisi di sperimentazioni tipologiche tra Genova e Milano
Public housing and high population density after World War II. Analysis of typological experiments between Genoa and Milan
Duccio Prassoli, Ayla Schiappacasse
- 1383 | Una nuova scena urbana: il racconto iconografico di piazza Garibaldi e del Convitto Nazionale di Tivoli negli anni della ricostruzione
A new urban scene: the iconographic story about piazza Garibaldi and the National Convitto in Tivoli during the reconstruction years
Marco Carpiceci, Antonio Schiavo
- 1393 | Dall'architettura vernacolare a quella sociale nel secondo dopoguerra: la casa a botte a Capri e la resilienza della forma
From vernacular to social architecture after World War II: the barrel house in Capri and the resilience of form
Carolina De Falco
- 1405 | Edilizia ospedaliera napoletana nel secondo dopoguerra. Il caso degli Ospedali dei Colli
Neapolitan hospital construction after World War II. The case of the Ospedali dei Colli
Roberta Ruggiero
- 1417 | Giovanni Costantini e l'opera di ricostruzione in Italia: nuovi scenari nel secondo dopoguerra
Giovanni Costantini and the rebuilding in Italy: new scenarios after World War II
Michela Pirro
- 1425 | Marcello Canino progettista di chiese di quartiere nel periodo della ricostruzione postbellica
Marcello Canino architect of neighbourhood churches in the post-war reconstruction
Riccardo Serraglio
- 1437 | Il restauro di Bruno Zevi a Villa Aurelia sul Gianicolo. Un esempio di mediazione culturale inversa, dall'Italia agli Stati Uniti
The restoration by Bruno Zevi of Villa Aurelia on the Gianicolo. An example of opposite cultural mediation, from Italy to the United States
Davide Galleri
- 1447 | Distruzioni belliche e riviste: *Metron* (1945-1947)
War destruction and magazines: *Metron* (1945-1947)
Francesca Giudetti
- 1457 | Ricostruire un'identità nazionale. Il contributo storiografico di *Architettura italiana oggi/Italy's Architecture Today* di Carlo Pagani (1955)
Reconstructing a National Identity. The Historiographic contribution of *Architettura italiana oggi/Italy's Architecture Today* by Carlo Pagani (1955)
Ermanno Bizzarri

Malta antemurale Christianitatis: *Viceroyalty military defence in the Mediterranean under the Knights of St. John*

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Abstract

This paper will investigate the Order's relations with the Viceroyalty during mid-16th century. In 1523, the Spanish Emperor was conceding the Maltese archipelago and Tripoli to the Order of St. John. Malta and the Mediterranean provided excellent facilities to the application of new discoveries in engineering: the best military engineers perceived as real the importance to prevent enemies from entering the Mediterranean through the ports of Malta, Messina, and Syracuse. The model adopted for the Order's new city was influenced by the Spanish power closely related to Malta: the same urban pattern (the Hippodamus grid) of the new capital of the Order, Valletta, was introduced in the city of Carlentini.

Keywords

Military architecture, viceroyalty, Order of Saint John of Jerusalem.

Introduction

In the mid-16th century, the spread of innovative strategies in fortifications and the construction of newly founded cities were strongly connected to Charles V's policy. His will for control of the Mediterranean was strongly associated with the project of urban renovation for the defense of the Habsburg Empire [Brunetti 2002, 21]. During that period, the Spanish Crown spent large amounts of money and human resources on new war machines, employing the best military engineers in the design of new fortresses. Charles V was in fact obliged to protect his lands in the strategic areas of the Mediterranean and the New World in order to oppose the spread of the Protestant Reformation: the religious ideological thinking that divided the Old Continent made the Spanish empire the primary oversight of the Catholic Church's interests. The empire of Charles V, where "the Sun never sets", coincided with the largest amount of spending in military engineering. In carrying out his political projects, the emperor was supported by his two key actors, the viceroy of Sicily, Juan de Vega, and the Spanish architect sculptor, Pedro Prado. The defense of the viceroyalty was central to the emperor's policy, which was continued later by his successor Philip II. This led naturally to the increase of city walls, castles, and coastal towers, including the castle of Peñíscola on the Valencian coast, that of San Felipe in Menorca, Santa Barbara in Alicante, and new coastal towers in Palma in the Balearic Islands. The viceroy sent the architect Prado from one Sicilian city to another between 1549 and 1550 to quickly get a direct impression of the territory to improve defenses [Brunetti 2006]. In Sciacca, Prado emphasised the necessity to proceed with the consolidation of the city walls and castle, in Trapani to improve the urban fortification, and in Marsala and Termini to defend the curtains with new ramparts. Site management was particularly challenging in Licata and Lentini, which were both affected by earthquakes and whose urban walls had suffered much damage. While Licata's walls were strengthened, Lentini suffered a different fortune. Prado quickly found another site that met these two expectations to move the inhabitants there. The reason was that it was necessary

to avoid a natural disaster, but it was also necessary to maintain territorial control in the direction of the Messina Strait. Selection fell on the Meta *plateau*, and in 1551 the new city was founded: the name given to it was “Carlentini”, meaning “Charles’ Lentini”. The vast fortification work of the Habsburg possessions echoed in treatise drawings and engravings. Numerous were the engravings depicted in Francesco Negro’s atlas [Negro, Ventimiglia 1992], the designs of Tiburzio Spannocchi [Trovato 1993], and even the Madrid codex of Carlos de Grunenbergh [de Grunenbergh 1686]. This latter was a very famous 17th-century Flemish military engineer, active in Spain and then Sicily between 1671-1687, where he carried out numerous works.

The emperor’s aim remained to gain knowledge of the state of the Mediterranean’s coastal walls and towers [Aricò 2008].

1. Carlentini and Valletta

Valletta was not part of Charles V’s possessions but was somehow directly subordinated as a result of the Maltese archipelago’s donation¹. This meant that Malta was fully part of the plans to defend Christendom against the expansionist aims of the Ottomans [Brognini 2011].

The similarities between the Valletta and Carlentini projects are considerable, and the urban layout for both cities coincides with the Polybius plan (fig. 1).

Polybius’s scheme was well known and had also spread through Machiavelli’s books and Sebastiano Serlio’s treatise [Musti 2002]. In Book VI of Polybius, the Roman *castrum* was outlined as a model. Some important 16th-century architectural treatises, such as those from Vitruvius to Vignola and Palladio, are still preserved today in the National Library of Malta and possibly they are a source of inspiration for architects and military engineers who passed on the island. The journeys of these famous engineers from a city to another involve a direct reflection on the architectural language choices, in a perpetual exchange with the local craftsmen, and as it happens in Valletta, the capital of the Order [Nobile 2013]. The knights also made their own contribution to the circulation of models with donations to the Hospital library of books (including architectural treatises) they had inherited from their families. The cosmopolitan dimension of Valletta since its founding attracted men from a high social class, from different cultures to the island, as well as their origins. The knights came from different *Langues* and spent at least five years in Malta to complete their training as religious, thus contributing to intense cultural exchanges. The noble social background allowed them to possess culture and interests in multiple disciplines, in addition to an excellent knowledge of Latin as required by the role. The phenomenon of intellectual and artistic migration (circulation of men, books including treaties and ideas) was encouraged by the proximity to Sicily and this fact led the Renaissance language to Malta [*I libri e l’ingegno. Studi sulla biblioteca dell’architetto (XV-XX secolo)* 2013]. From the other site, the entrenchment of a traditional way in stone building, with a skillful use of stereotomy, remained well known to the local craftsmen [*Gli ultimi indipendenti* 2007].

The internal organisation of Carlentini was marked by the two major streets and square-shaped *insulae*. A first square module departed from the main square. Valletta had the same attention to the module [Hughes 1970]. The city was organised in a chessboard, and there the principal square, facing the grand master’s palace, marked the grid structure. There were other squares, which were placed in front of public places [Romeo 2017] (fig. 2).

¹ Valletta, National Library of Malta, *Archivum Ordinis Melitae*, AOM 59, *Lettere di Castiglia, Portogallo e Aragona (1522-1764)*, cc. 18r-18v.



1: Francesco Villamena, *Valletta citta Nova di Malta*, Roma, 1601, 43,4x33 cm [Courtesy of Stanford Libraries, G6791.V2.1601.V4, David Rumsey Map Center, Creative Commons].

Grand master Friar Jean de La Valette had recalled to Malta all the knights on their mission to the continent and obtained permission to bring with him the military engineer Francesco Laparelli [Ganado 2009]. Born in Cortona (1521-1570), Laparelli was called in 1553 to oversee the fortifications of Cosimo I de' Medici and then became Pius IV's trusted military engineer carrying out public works in Rome and Civitavecchia. Francesco Laparelli reasoned about the shape to be given to the new city. At first, sticking to the Albertian theory of observing the site of future construction, he was convinced to «distort the streets with that smoothness which is seen in Pisa»². The reason behind it was that the site had differences in elevation and was subject to strong winds³. However, the initial idea was modified in 1565, preferring the checkerboard model [Marconi 2011]. Quite probably, this change came about as a result of discussions with the grand master and the viceroy of Sicily, who had just returned from Carlentini's experience and was well aware of the arrangements made for possessions in Latin America according to the Roman *castramentatio*.

² Cortona, Biblioteca dell'Accademia Etrusca di Cortona, Ms. 724, c. 23v.

³ Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, *Ottob. Lat. 2808*, c. 129v.

VALENTINA BURGASSI



2: T. Spannocchi, *Descripción de las marinas de todo el Reino de Sicilia*, Madrid, 1596 [Trovato 1993, Creative Commons].

Although no drawings of Laparelli's first proposal remain, the definitive plans remain for the project conceived for Valletta according to the Roman *castrum*. Laparelli's four autograph drawings differ in detail⁴: in the first, there is a search for regularity with the drawing of the main road. The second shows an initial attempt at the allotment with a two-sided symmetrical scheme. In the third one the first buildings are placed, including the magistral palace, the Conventual church, Santa Maria della Vittoria, and the *Collachium*. This latter was the exclusive area of the Hospitallers later replaced by the *Auberges*. Finally, the last drawing by Laparelli displays a fully developed urban scheme that stretches to the entire perimeter within the fortified walls.

In the 16th century, the *Auberges* were palaces that were the exclusive domain of the knights, where they gathered for meals and communal life according to the language they belonged to. The *Auberges* had characters that can be traced back to the Italian Renaissance, such as the rusticated ashlar on the facade, the regular pattern of windows, and the regular floor plan with openings to the courtyard and access to the various rooms. However, these architectural characteristics are tempered by the austerity of the military, and

⁴ Cortona, Biblioteca dell'Accademia Etrusca di Cortona, «Piano A» (126×102 cm), «Piano B» (57×43 cm), «Piano C» (58×44 cm), «Piano D» (58×44 cm).

the Hospital's sober style, together with its adherence to traditional models such as Melitan molding and the use of local stone [Nobile 2007] (fig. 3).

Renaissance language assimilations in the specific Maltese context, coming from Rome and other Italian artistic centers, were actually marked by a Mediterranean culture strongly influenced by Sicily and North Africa [Burgassi 2022]: a special role was assumed by local materials, such as globigerina light-colored limestone, susceptible to intense light. The quarries of the Aegean islands were rich in this material, where large blocks were found. These blocks were lacking in imperfections that would have undermined the strength of slabs subjected to heavy cutting stresses. The yellow color, with shades varying from yellowish to amber with the passage of time, prevails on all the buildings and derives from the material with which they are built, namely Maltese stone. The limestone was similar in many characteristics to Lecce stone. Stereotomy was one of the main construction techniques employed in the Hospitallers' buildings and specially known by the local craftsmen [Antista 2021] (fig. 4).

2. Valletta's echo in engravings between the 16th and 18th centuries

The new city of the Hospital was reproduced by painters and engravers, but one of the most important representations was executed by Matteo Pérez d'Aleccio (1547-1628). During his



3: *Façade of the Auberge of Italy* [V. Burgassi 2022].

VALENTINA BURGASSI

stay on the island, he completed the series of frescoes of the Great Siege for the Great Council Chamber in the magistral palace in Valletta between 1577 and 1581. D'Aleccio was born in Alezio (Lecce) and was the son of Antonio Pérez. He was a pupil of Michelangelo in Rome in 1566. He later left for Malta, where he stayed for five years. D'Aleccio was the official painter chosen by the Hospitallers: after him, names such as Caravaggio and Mattia Preti worked in Malta [Sciberras 2009].

In his fresco, D'Aleccio adopted an aerial view, trying to vary in scale in the representation and adding twelve side panels. The main events of the siege were framed by Virtues placed on plinths. In the first three frames, D'Aleccio introduced the subject of the battle with the Ottoman army's arrival on the island. In the next three frescoes, he described the military operations, emphasising the Ottoman troops' power and the knights' bravery. In the last frescoes, the spectator felt part of the action itself and witnessed the strenuous Hospitaller resistance. In his tale, D'Aleccio recounted the pathos of the battle stage by stage. One of the scenes showed the drama of the taking of St. Elmo, illustrating the horror of war, and the fall of Fort St. Michael. In the frescoed scenes, D'Aleccio consistently portrayed all the fortified curtains and ramparts with great skill, and their details stand out with absolute brilliance.

Once he returned to Rome in 1582, D'Aleccio also executed a series of fifteen etching branches, reproducing the Great Siege fresco with the addition of two plates, the plan of the



4: Castel Sant'Angelo, Birgu. Detail of the coffered vault [V. Burgassi 2022].

Old City (Mdina) and the New City (Valletta) [D'Aleccio 1582]. The axonometric plan representation of the New City seems to echo in its forms Laparelli's 1565 drawing, with the same checkerboard subdivision, ramparts, and fort locations as designed by the engineer from Cortona [Marconi 1970]. The Auberges gain more detail, as they are all already built, and so does the grand master's palace [Mahoney 1996] (fig. 5).

D'Aleccio's frescoes, which showed the Hospitallers' epic resistance during the Ottoman siege, were very popular: the same etching of Valletta was also included in the 1584 Order's Statutes and was reproduced, as a fresco, in the Gallery of Maps based on Egnazio Danti's sketches between 1580-1585. In a frame placed on a left corner of the Great Siege fresco, which shows the peninsula of Xiberras on which Valletta was built, Danti's map is shown with the name "Melita", that is Malta in Latin. This sketch faithfully reproduces D'Aleccio's etching. With Antoine Lafréry's cartographic collection, d'Aleccio's etchings experienced their greatest popularity. The etching depicting the great siege was included in the first section of the catalog. It was probably used as a model for Danti's *Carte Geografiche* fresco and represented the great power of the Hospitallers in the Mediterranean, in the fierceness of the battle. Interestingly, among the other etchings in the same collection, in which the island of Malta appeared in several forms, is the "Disegno vero della nova città". By that time, the building of Valletta had not yet been completed. Therefore, this etching's purpose was propagandistic, that is, to obtain the necessary funding for the construction of the new capital. This is evident from the frame in the upper right corner, which calls on the Christian world to



5: Matteo Pérez D'Aleccio, *The Siege of Malta, Siege and Bombardment of Saint Elmo, 27 May 1565* [Courtesy of Royal Museums Greenwich, BHC0253, Creative Commons].

VALENTINA BURGASSI

help the Jerusalemite religion per Pope Pius V's wishes. The etching by engraver Domenico Zenoi echoes the version in Lafréry's collection while adding a graphic detail of remarkable sophistication: lower down is in fact depicted the workers at work, dedicated to the construction of the new city. It is indeed the symbolic illustration that represents the laying of the foundation stone at the hands of Grand master Friar Jean de La Valette in the presence of the Knights.

In 1631 again, the Florentine engraver Anton Francesco Lucini gave to prints sixteen plates of etchings. These etchings were taken from the frescoes by d'Aleccio, who had died in the meantime and whose copper plates had been lost.

Conclusions

Valletta became a model of a fortified city and was conceived from Renaissance models of the city, but concretised according to the natural characteristics of the site and the military experience of the Viceroyalty of Sicily within the policy of Charles V. From an ideal city to a real Renaissance city, the conception of Valletta aroused great interest among the best military engineers of the time, and beyond: echoes followed in graphic representations from the 16th to the 18th century [Maglio 2016a; Maglio 2016b]. The new Hospital city was in fact reproduced by painters and engravers. Due to several engravings circulated between the 16th and 17th centuries, Valletta, became «véritable rempart du Christianisme» [Brogini 2006], and assumed a symbolic value, being able to embody the idea of the frontier between the Christian and Ottoman worlds. With the best military engineers around at the time,



6: Jean Boulanger, *Plan des fortifications [sic] de Vallete, bourg et sangle de Malte*, Paris, 1645, 49,4x38,2 cm [Courtesy of Stanford Libraries, G5671.M2.1645.B6, David Rumsey Map Center, Creative Commons].

Malta's fortifications attracted great interest, and they were included in Pietro Paolo Floriani's treatise on military engineering, and then in Antonio Maurizio Valperga's collection of drawings. Carlos de Grunenbergh, who was also working in Malta in the late 17th century, made drawings for Fort St. Angelo and included the plan of Valletta in his Geographical Theater.

The period between 1650 and 1750 marked the rise of France in European politics, and Malta welcomed an increasing number of French military engineers to the island. Their contributions included the arrangement of fortresses on the coast, with the aim of strengthening the existing defense, in addition to the construction of new forts. With the French occupation in 1798, the Hospitallers bowed to the enemy. However, this was not because of the failure of the fortifications, which remained almost intact after centuries, but because the Hospital was no longer able to make up for its social decay in the face of Napoleonic leadership (fig. 6).

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VALENTINA BURGASSI

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I contributi contenuti in questo volume indagano il rapporto tra città e guerra dal punto di vista dell'archeologia, della storia e dell'architettura, saperi tra loro sempre fortemente connessi e collaboranti per studiare, analizzare, decodificare e ricostruire criticamente tracce, memorie e parole che riguardano i contesti urbani e i conflitti dall'antichità a oggi, all'interno di un paesaggio in eterno divenire. Proprio nella peculiarità degli approcci della ricerca, i diversi contributi disegnano un ricco mosaico di casi studio, di oggetti di indagine e di progetto che lascia appena intravedere l'estrema complessità di un tema di stringente attualità.

The papers included in this volume investigate the relationship between city and war from the viewpoint of Archaeology, History and Architecture, disciplines that are always strongly connected and work together to study, analyse, decode and critically reconstruct traces, memories and words about urban contexts and conflicts from antiquity to the present day, within a landscape in constant transformation. Precisely in the peculiarity of their research approaches, the different contributions draw a rich mosaic of case studies, objects of investigation and projects that hardly gives a glimpse of the extreme complexity of a highly topical theme.