

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

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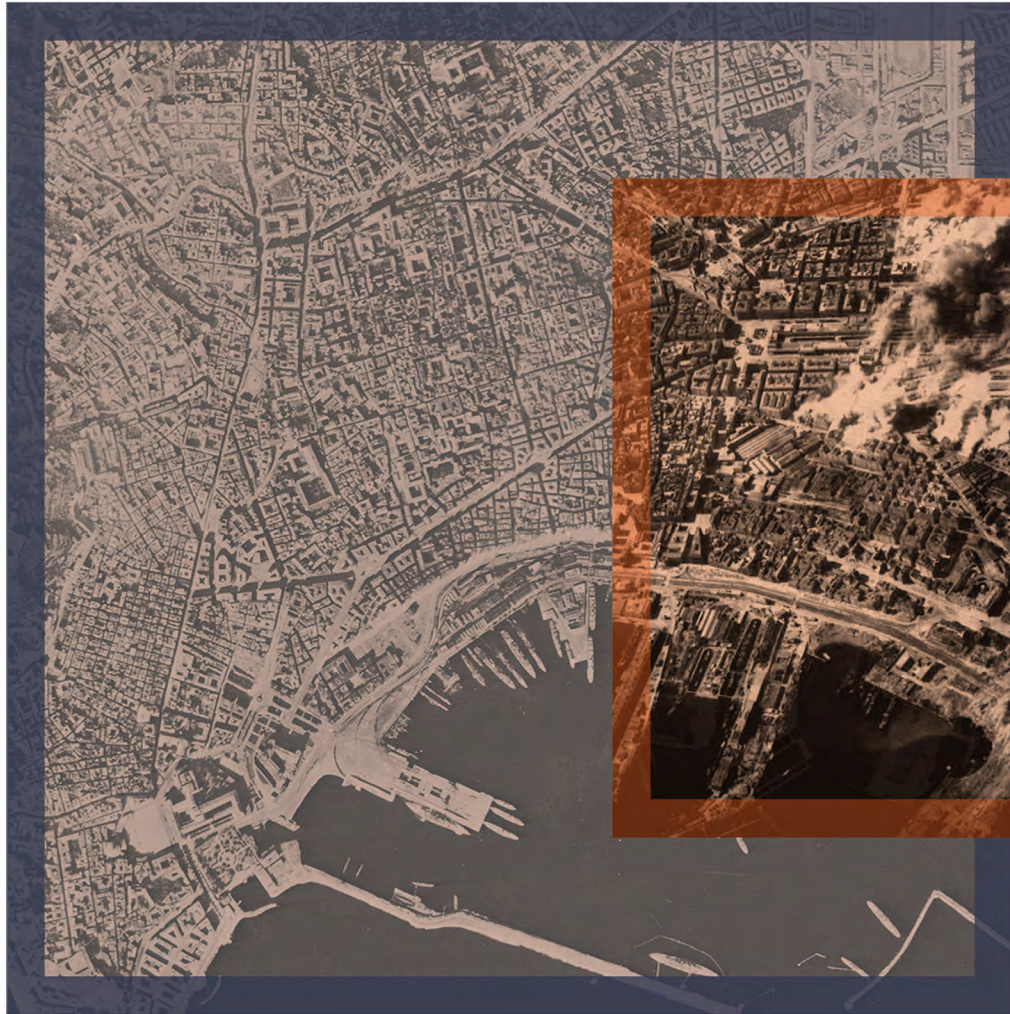
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CITTÀ E GUERRA

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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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 *Languages* 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 città 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.

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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].

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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].

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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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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.