

Parallel Lives: Guarini and Dechaes and the Theories of Fortification

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Michele RUSSO, Marta ACIERNO (Eds.)



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Table of contents

Preface	XIII
Contributions	
HISTORICAL RESEARCH	
Castruccio Castracani and the Castles of Lunigiana <i>Claudia Aveta, Stefano Calabretta</i>	5
The Della Rovere Castles in the Unpublished Drawings by Girolamo Cialdieri: The Muzio Oddi Album from the University of St Andrews <i>Paolo Bertoncini Sabatini, Marco Giorgio Bevilacqua</i>	13
The fortress of Sinj: fortification projects and border defence in Venetian Dalmatia until 1714..... <i>Darka Bilić, Krasanka Majer Jurišić</i>	21
<i>Plan de la Ville et Citadelle</i> : representations in the Napoleonic era for a border stronghold..... <i>Cristina Boido, Pia Davico</i>	29
Oneglia's fortifications: new documents and remaining legacies <i>Maria Vittoria Cattaneo</i>	37
From <i>Mellianum</i> to Miglianico, from the <i>castrum</i> to the Masci palace: the difficult protection of an Adriatic historical center..... <i>Stefano Cecamore, Claudio Varagnoli</i>	45
The Tower of Tablate, a case of a Nasrid defensive tower in the Lecrín Valley..... <i>Alessia Chillemi</i>	53
Art of War in Teofilo Gallaccini's Drawings <i>Fabio Colonnese</i>	61
The Ismaili fortresses of the 'Assassins' in Syria: a heritage yet to be discovered and explored <i>Giovanni Coppola</i>	69
Pompeo Robutti Gentleman, a military engineer and treatise writer <i>Annalisa Dameri</i>	77
Oriental marbles in Castel del Monte in Andria (Puglia, Italy) <i>Maurizio Delli Santi</i>	85
Stately towers in the Estate and House of Baza of the Enríquez-Luna lineage (Kingdom of Granada, Spain)..... <i>Luis José García-Pulido, Lorenzo Sánchez Quirante, Frida Salazar Martín</i>	91

The Kasbah of Essaouira. A fortified naval base on the Atlantic coast of Morocco (18th century)	99
<i>Lamia Hadda</i>	
The little-known warning function of the bell tower of the Mother Church of Acireale in the 16th-17th century	107
<i>Davide Li Rosi</i>	
Fortifications of the maritime stronghold of Civitavecchia: expansions and transformations between the Papal States and the Kingdom of Italy	115
<i>Carmen Vincenza Manfredi</i>	
Perspectives of <i>Monumenta bellica</i> in the treatise of Andrea Pozzo.....	123
<i>Anna Marotta</i>	
Fortresses and castles in Val d’Aniene. Traces in historical cartography and landscape.....	131
<i>Valeria Montanari</i>	
Procedures, management and workers in war demolitions: the adjustment and dismantling of Castro’s fortifications (1641-1649).....	139
<i>Giordano Ocelli</i>	
From caravanserai to fortress: early typological foundations of medieval fortifications on the Mediterranean coast.....	147
<i>Mohand Oulmas, Angel Benigno Gonzalez Aviles, Mohammed Chabi, Amina Abdessemed-Foufa</i>	
Where was the Church located in St Michael’s Fortress in Šibenik?	153
<i>Karla Papeš</i>	
<i>Villanova Maris Valentiae</i> , a walled town by the port of Valencia	161
<i>Rosa M^a Pastor Villa</i>	
The defenses of Corsica in the second half of the sixteenth century. El Fratin’s design for the citadels of Ajaccio and San Fiorenzo	169
<i>Andrea Pirinu</i>	
Engineers against water: The case of the aljibes in La Cabaña fortress in Havana	177
<i>Talia Quesada Campaña, Marica Forni</i>	
Port and coastal fortifications from Brundisium to Brindisi: new geoarchaeological data and archival research.....	185
<i>Fabiana Ribezzi, Maurizio Lazzari</i>	
The image of Territorial ‘ <i>Entremeios</i> ’ in the Vila Nova de Cerveira-Goián Defensive Subsystem (1621-1763). Cartographic analysis for reading the military landscape	193
<i>Tiago Rodrigues, João Cabeleira</i>	
Examples of military architecture in Piedmont in the first decades of the eighteenth century through the drawing collection of the engineer Augusto de la Vallée (1698-1742)	201
<i>Marcello Schirru</i>	
Analyzing the design and structure of the Sea Walls of Constantinople	209
<i>Nisa Semiz</i>	
Parallel Lives: Guarini and Dechaies and the Theories of Fortification	217
<i>Roberta Spallone, Martina Rinascimento</i>	

Critical comparison of von Sholl's never-built plans for the Verona bridgehead	225
<i>Denise Ulivieri, Michele Russo</i>	
THEORETICAL CONCEPTS	
Urban walls and castles within bastioned fortifications: a contrastive analysis.....	235
<i>Francesco Broglio</i>	
From the high citadels of Pedro Escrivá in Naples to the new portuguese paradigm of coastal city-fortresses	243
<i>João Campos</i>	
The Great Castle of Brindisi. A palimpsest of poliorcetics.....	251
<i>Astro Ferrante</i>	
Defensive Architecture and the Oval Shape in Military Treatises between the 16th and 18th Centuries	259
<i>Ornella Zerlenga, Margherita Cicala, Riccardo Miele, Vincenzo Cirillo</i>	
BUILT HERITAGE RESEARCH	
Torre Paola in the Circeo National Park (LT), between history, restoration and valorisation	269
<i>Maria Letizia Accorsi, Roberta Maria Dal Mas, Marta Formosa</i>	
Layers of Stone: Investigating the Building Techniques of Vico's Ancient Wall.....	277
<i>Marta Acierno, Giovanna Ferra, Elisabetta Giorgi, Carlo Inglese</i>	
The Tower of San Domenico: A Knowledge Project for the Restoration of the Walls of Vico nel Lazio	285
<i>Marta Acierno, Elisabetta Giorgi, Carlo Inglese, Silvia Seller</i>	
Rediscovery of a Sicilian coastal defensive complex: historical evolution and morphological analysis of the Brolo tower-castle (ME).....	293
<i>Alessio Altadonna, Alessia Chillemi, Giuseppina Salvo, Fabio Todesco</i>	
Multidisciplinary Studies, Knowledge Development, and Dissemination of Fragile and Inaccessible Fortified Heritage: The Case Study of <i>Castle of Uggiano Ruins</i> in Ferrandina (MT), Italy	301
<i>Daniele Altamura, Antonio Pecci, Michele Iacovazzi, Pietro B. Carosone, Leonardo Pecora, Giuseppe Lafergola, Paolo D'Amelio</i>	
The Borgo Fantasma of Celleno: a medieval fortification	309
<i>Barbara Aterini, Raffaele Vergaro</i>	
The Fortress of Senigallia and the fortifications in the Malatesta territory in the 15th century. Typological comparisons between coeval fabrics and conservation and enhancement features.....	317
<i>Alfonso Ausilio, Alessandra Pacheco</i>	
From abandonment to heritage resource: hypotheses for the virtual restitution of the Castle of Villanueva del Fresno (Badajoz)	325
<i>Alejandro Bocanegra Cayero</i>	
Comparative data at the conclusion of the conservation restoration works of the civic walls in Piazza Fiera (Trento).....	333
<i>Anna Bruschetti, Monica Endrizzi, Giorgia Gentilini, Elena Milesi</i>	

Ceilings in medieval defensive buildings in Sicily. The case study of the painted ceiling of the XIV century Ventimiglia's Castle in Castelbuono (Palermo): comparisons between regional and European examples	341
<i>Maria Teresa Campisi, Giulia Scalia</i>	
Historical continuities and physical discontinuities among fortified elements of the Genoese coast.....	349
<i>Cristina Cándito, Alessia Segalerba</i>	
The Angevin-Aragonese Castle of Gaeta: Historical Sources and Restoration Insights through Paterna Baldizzi's Drawings.....	357
<i>Luigi Cappelli</i>	
The fortress of the Royal Citadel of Messina. A project for the regeneration and restoration of the falcata area	365
<i>Enrico Carafa, Vincenzo Guadagno, Salvatore Tito Vaccaro</i>	
The fortified rural landscape in Piedmont: some examples of 'rural castles' between Turin and Racconigi	373
<i>Federica Castiglione, Alice Vergano</i>	
A strategic fortified route between the Guadalquivir River and the Kingdom of Granada (Spain)	381
<i>Pilar Chías, Tomás Abad, Lucas Fernández-Trapa</i>	
The defensive complex of the Lecrín Valley: between intervisibility and typological definitions of Nasrid defensive elements	389
<i>Alessia Chillemi, Jose Francisco Peral Lopez, Fabio Todesco</i>	
Fortified masserie (farmhouses) along the transhumance routes in the Abruzzo region	397
<i>Annalisa Colecchia</i>	
Promoting knowledge and interpretation of fortified architecture: the case of the digital reconstruction of the central courtyard of Trani Swabian Castle	405
<i>Daniela Concas, Davide Mezzino, Fabrizio Tritto</i>	
The forts of Valdivia: Theory and methods in the restoration of Chile's colonial ruins (1950-54)	413
<i>María Victoria Correa Baeriswyl, Juan Blánquez Pérez</i>	

Parallel Lives: Guarini and Dechaes and the Theories of Fortification

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the treatises about military architecture by Guarino Guarini (1624-1683) and Claude-François Milliet Dechaes (1621-1678). Guarini and Dechaes were two religious figures who shared a deep interest in mathematics and the art of fortifications at the same time and, for a specific period of their lives, in the same cultural milieu. Dechaes wrote the *Architectura militaris*, included in the *Cursus seu mundus mathematicus* (1674) and *L'art de fortifier* (1677); Guarini wrote the *Trattato di fortificatione* (1676). This research compares the three treatises, including in visual form through synoptic charts, to highlight recurrences, variants, and possible derivations between the themes treated by the two treatisers.

Keywords: treatises, fortification, Guarino Guarini, Claude-François Milliet Dechaes.

1. Introduction

This proposal has been realized in the framework of the project Infortreat, funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU. The overall goal of the project is to make accessible the constructive knowledge related to military architecture (as described by early modern treatises) through 3D digital information models that can be consulted and queried by scholars, professionals, and the community. One of the research tasks is to observe possible links and derivations between the over eighty treatises analyzed. The current contribution focuses on the treatises about military architecture by Guarino Guarini (1624-1683) and Claude-François Milliet Dechaes (1621-1678). Both were religious; Guarini was

of the Theatine order, and Dechaes of the Jesuits, and for a period of their lives, they gravitated to the court of Savoy in Turin. The two scholars devoted themselves to mathematics and wrote volumes in Latin on Euclidean theories, the *Euclides adauctus* (Turin, 1671) and the *Elementorum Euclidis* (Lyon, 1660), respectively, and shared an interest in theories related to Modern fortifications. The *Trattato di Fortificatione Che hora si usa in Fiandra, Francia, & Italia; Composto in Ossequio del Sereniss. Principe Lodovico Giulio Cavagliere di Savoia da D. Guarino Guarini Chierico Regolare* (in the following *Trattato di Fortificatione*) was published in Turin in 1676, and *L'art de fortifier*,

de defendre, et d'attaquer les places, suivant les methodes Françaises, Hollandoises, Italiennes & Espagnoles. Le tout enrichy de Figures en taille douce. Par le R. P. Claude François Milliet Dechaies, de la Compagnie de Jesus (in the following *L'art de fortifier*), in Paris in 1677. However, Dechaies had already written about fortifications. Specifically, he included the *Tractatus XIII - Architectura militaris* into another one of his works, the *Cursus seu mundus mathematicus*, the first edition of which was printed in Lyon and is dated 1674.

This research compares the three treatises, including in visual form through synoptic charts, to highlight recurrences, variants, and possible derivations between the themes treated by the two treatises.

2. Guarini and Dechaies' lives and theoretical works

As mentioned above, Guarini and Dechaies shared a deep interest in mathematics during the same historical period and cultural milieu for a specific period. Both lived, worked, and wrote their books in the second half of the 17th century, a period permeated by the so-called *esprit de géométrie*, fueled by discoveries and studies in mathematics, particularly in pure geometry. Indeed, geometry established a leading position within the philosophical method through the theories of Galileo, Bacon, Descartes, and Desargues.

The shared interest in Euclid's work was reflected in Dechaies's Latin volume of 1660, translated into French in 1672 and then reprinted and translated numerous times into English and Italian, testifying to the interest in and dissemination of the work, and in Guarini's Latin volume of 1671, which opened the way to the theory of the method of double orthographic projections (Bianchini, 2008) which, as we shall see, characterized the organization of the contents of some of his treatises. Guarini lived and worked in numerous cities, including, in chronological order, Messina, Modena, Parma, Guastalla, Paris, and finally Turin. Besides mathematics, he dealt with philosophy, astronomy, and mainly with architecture as a theorist and designer of numerous works recognized as Baroque masterpieces. In addition to those already mentioned, several treatises resulted from his intense theoretical and didactic activity. Among

these we can mention: *Placita philosophica* (1665), *Modo di misurare le fabbriche* (1674), *Compendio della sfera celeste* (1675), *Leges temporum et planetarum* (1678).

Dechaies mainly devoted himself to teaching: he was a professor of hydrography, navigation, military engineering, philosophy, mathematics, and theology, in Marseille, Lyon, and finally Turin. Among his other writings, we can mention the *Art de naviguer* (1677).

Guarini's stay in Turin is documented from 1666, when the Theatines called him to renovate the church of San Lorenzo, and he soon held many assignments from the court of Savoy until he died in 1683. No information has been found regarding the date of Dechaies' move from Marseille to Turin, but, as will be seen in the following paragraph, he probably met Guarini in Turin in 1674 (Roero, 2009). Other meetings between the two, in Turin and Milan, have been reported (McQuillan, 2014).

As religious figures, both dealt with the subject of fortifications without having direct experience as men-at-arms, as they pointed out in their respective texts, in which they referred to contemporary fortification techniques in the international context, sometimes including their own personal solutions.

3. Guarini and Dechaies' scientific links: critics' contributions

Two scholars, in particular, have linked the theoretical contributions of Guarini and Dechaies. Roero (2009) observed that the *Cursus seu Mundus Mathematicus* by Dechaies was cited by Guarini in the *Architettura civile* (Guarini, 1737). Moreover, she affirmed that Guarini and Dechaies probably met in Torino in 1674, when Dechaies gave a scholarly lecture in the aula magna of the Jesuit College. (Roero, 2009).

McQuillan (2014), in an article dedicated to Guarini's *Trattato di fortificatione*, recalled that the Theatine's stay in Paris coincided with that of the greatest military architect of the day, Sebastian le Prestre de Vauban.

He went on to emphasize the didactic purpose of Guarini's work, which, in his opinion, is demonstrated by the choice to preface it with two preludes, dedicated to the basic principles of geometry and arithmetic before arriving at military architecture.

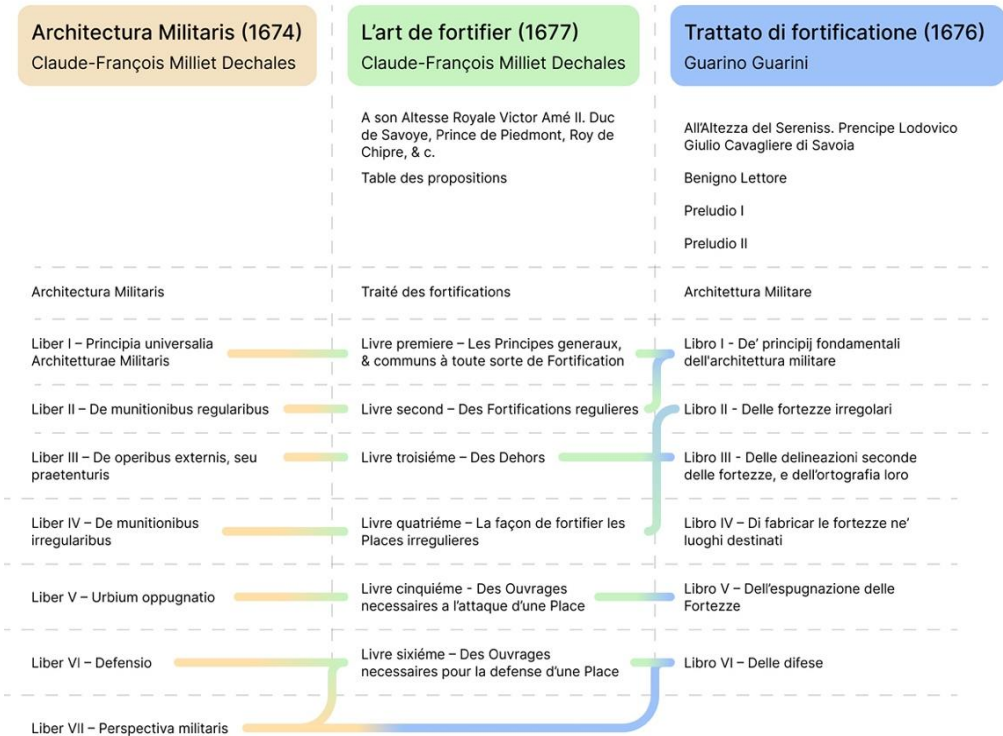


Fig. 1- Synoptic chart representing the treatises' indexes and their contents' relation (editing by Martina Rinascimento)

Furthermore, he observed that “this is very typical of Guarini’s methodical approach to any subject, as he was a trained philosopher in Second Scholastic as well as in mathematics”. He then examined and compared the indices of Guarini's text with Dechaies' *Architectura militaris*, noting similarities in the structure of the six and seven books, respectively, and differences in the placement of content in books II, III, and IV.

Finally, he stated that Guarini met with Dechaies on several occasions and that the Theatine had taken up the *Tractatus XIII*, presenting military architecture in the *Trattato di Fortificazione*, and concluded that “there is little doubt that both authors were working in parallel to some extent”. The analysis carried out in this paper, including three synoptic charts, highlighting similarities in definitions and differences in the methodological approach to the subject of fortifications. This study follows the comparative analyses carried out as part of the aforementioned *Infortreat* project, particularly about the topic of irregular

fortifications between the 16th and 17th centuries (Bevilacqua et al., 2025) and previous investigations into the geometric constructions of the profiling in Guarini's treatise (Spallone 2015, 2017, 2024).

4. Visual synoptic charts for contents comparison

The decision to create synoptic charts as a tool for comparison and data visualization made it possible to represent the results of the analysis of the three previously mentioned treatises in a clear and easily understandable visual form. As an outcome of this analysis, three synoptic charts were developed to compare specific aspects, namely: the indexes and the sequence of contents in the treatises; the definitions of the terms *Architettura Militare*, military architecture, and *Fortificazione Regolare*, regular fortification; and finally, the drawings produced by the authors to illustrate the defining elements of regular fortified structures.

Definition of

Architettura Militare



Architectura Militaris (1674)
Claude-François Milliet Dechaies



L'art de fortifier (1677)
Claude-François Milliet Dechaies



Trattato di fortificatione (1676)
Guarino Guarini

Definition of

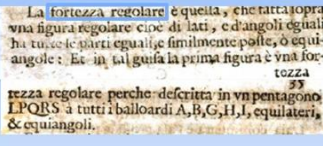
Fortificazione Regolare



Architectura Militaris (1674)
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Fig. 2- Synoptic chart comparing the definitions of terms such as military architecture and regular fortifications in the three selected treatises (editing by Martina Rinascimento)

In detail, the first synoptic chart retraces the indexes of the treatises and, through connectors, shows how and in what sequence the same topics are addressed in the three documents.

The second synoptic chart focuses on the different definitions provided by the authors for the aforementioned terms. The original manuscript definitions were displayed by inserting the manuscripts' scans and photographs, in order to demonstrate their authenticity.

The third synoptic chart compares the schematic drawings of fortified structures and the possible combinations of architectural elements used to generate more or less complex configurations. Drawing on the original illustrations contained in the treatises, these were aligned along their ground-plan axes to facilitate reading and comparison.

In conclusion, the chosen and carefully designed visualization tool also offers the additional advantage of being adaptable and scalable to the many other treatises selected and analyzed within the framework of the Infortreat project, of which this contribution is part. It thus constitutes a highly useful and modular methodology for the representation, analysis, and technical dissemination of the literature on fortifications.

5. Guarini and Dechaies' treatises on fortification

A comparison between Guarini's and Dechaies' treatises reveals the primogeniture of the *Architectura militaris* di Dechaies in relation to *L'art de fortifier* by the same author and the *Trattato di fortificatione* by Guarini. This observation inspired the order in which the

contents of the three texts will be examined (Fig. 1).

The *Architectura militaris*, as said, is the *Tractatus XIII* in the three-volume encyclopaedia *Cursus seu mundus mathematicus* (1 ed. Lyon, 1674). The entire work is in Latin, as was required for disciplines belonging to the field of ‘artes liberales’, has in-folio format [36,1x22,5] cm., and woodcut diagrams and schematic illustrations inserted in the text. The *Tractatus XIII* consists of 159 pages and is divided into seven books. In sequence, it deals with the general principles of military architecture (Book I), regular fortifications (Book II), external works (Book III), irregular fortifications (Book IV), attack (Book V), defense (Book VI), and military perspective (Book VII).

L'Art de fortifier (1st ed. Paris, 1677), in French, is composed of 405 pages in duodecimo [9,5x15,5] cm, and is enriched by 68 full-page plates, made using chalcography and inserted into the text. The imprimatur is dated September 1, 1676. The text is preceded by a dedication to Victor Amadeus II, Duke of Savoy, and is divided into six books whose titles mirror those of *Architectura militaris*. The sixth book covers military strategy.

The *Trattato di fortificatione* (Turin, 1676) is written in Italian, consists of 128 pages in octavo [10,2x18,1] cm, and features 12 woodcut plates at the end. The imprimatur is dated April 13, 1677. The volume is dedicated to Lodovico Giulio, Prince of Carignano, a distant relative of the Duke of Savoy and Prince of Piedmont, Carlo Emanuele II, and a pupil of Guarini. A dedication to readers follows this. Two preludes, dedicated to plane geometry and arithmetic principles, precede the discussion of military architecture. Military architecture is divided into six books devoted to fundamental principles, which include the description of regular fortifications (Bk. I), irregular fortifications (Bk. II), the complete definition of the plan profiles of fortifications, including external works and related elevations (Bk. III), the construction of fortifications in particular places (Bk. IV), attack (Bk. V), and defense (Bk. VI). The last book also contains instructions on military perspective drawing and the coloring of drawings.

A comparison between the indices reveals the natural derivation of Dechalet's subsequent

treatise from *Architectura militaris*, due in part to the fact that only three years separate the two works and to the aforementioned correspondence between the themes of some of the books in Guarini's work (McQuillan, 2014). An in-depth analysis of the texts reveals that, compared to the *Tractatus* of 1674, in 1677 Dechalet reorganized and systematized the contents by moving some paragraphs and enriching the iconographic apparatus, both from the point of view of printing technique and by using chalcography instead of woodcut, allowing the transition from line drawings to more detailed iconographic representations, especially in military perspectives, enriched with hatching shadows. In addition, the 1677 volume included plans of fortified sites taken as examples of the cases discussed.

Guarini's treatise, beyond the obvious correspondence of general definitions (Fig. 2) and the organization into books, shows differences in content choices, in solutions to the problems of bastion construction (Bevilacqua et al., 2025), and even, as can be seen from the extended title, in the choice to exclude Spanish examples from the discussion.

The different order of content in Guarini is linked to his particular approach, also present in the *Architettura civile* (posthumous, 1737), according to which construction topics are addressed through the sequence between iconography (the plan) and orthography (the elevation and section). For this reason, only in Book III, after completing the descriptions of the geometric constructions of regular and irregular fortifications and their external works, does he devote himself to the description of the vertical sections that define the three-dimensionality and materiality of fortified works (Spallone & Vitali, 2023). Unlike Dechalet, Guarini uses the propaedeutics of preludes, as he did in *Modo di misurare le fabbriche* (1674), with an obvious didactic purpose, while minimizing the use of tables, which were common in 17th-century treatises and widely used in Dechalet's works, to spare military engineers the calculation of lengths and angles of polygonal fortification elements with different numbers of sides. Furthermore, Guarini includes a series of personal tracing methods, although he states that he would not discuss his own inventions in the introduction.



Fig. 3- Synoptic chart focusing on schematic drawings of fortified structures and the possible combinations of architectural elements (editing by Martina Rinascimento)

Dechaies makes explicit references to the methods of Pagan, whom he holds in high regard, dedicating entire paragraphs to them, as well as those of Goldman, Dögen, Marolois, and Errard. At the same time, Guarini refers to the methods of Goldmann, Pagan, Dögen, and Fritach.

Among the shared features of the three texts, it is worth noting the discussion of irregular fortifications, which reveals the treatise writers' new interest in modifying pre-existing fortifications, made necessary by the invention of gunpowder, and the application of the second flank, which consists of a portion of curtain wall between the razant and the fichant line of defense, dedicated to soldiers armed with muskets.

Finally, the two authors fully adhere to the new dictates that inspired the fortification of the early modern age, intended as a geometric system, where altering one element affected the entirety (Fara 1989). As will be seen in paragraph 6,

Guarini applies this principle from the very definition of the elements of the regular fortress. A different approach to geometric tracing emerges from the authors: Dechaies uses sequences of geometric constructions to define the different bastion systems. In contrast, Guarini uses them to relate the other elements of the fortress to respond to new methods of war.

6. The regular fortresses

The discussion of regular fortifications in all three books begins with a general definition of a work having equal sides and angles. It continues with a description of the elements by lines and angles. As will be seen, the elements described vary from work to work, as do the drawings accompanying the descriptions and the relationships between text and image. (Fig. 3).

In the *Architectura militaris*, the pentagon, hexagon, and square are mentioned as examples

of regular fortresses, and the elements described can apply to all of them. The schematic drawing shows a hexagonal fortification that references different layouts and elements of the work. In fact, the geometric construction of the bastion with a second flank is built on the MN side of the inner polygon. At the same time, the HIT demi-bastion is set on the HN demi-gorge, which appears to be equal to 1/5 of the side of the hexagon, while the angle at the vertex is 90°, as is typical in French bastions. Similarly, the razant line starts from 3/5 of the side, leaving 1/3 of the curtain to the second flank GH. In contrast, due to different proportions between the elements, the adjacent horizontal side has no second flank, since the razant and the fichant lines hit the same points E and F. The XQV semi-bastion has a shoulder and a squared oreillon, while the TRSV bastion has a round oreillon. External works include the XYZ ravelin, the 5 6 7 8 horned work flanked by half-moons, the 9 10 11 crowned work, and the 12 13 14 15 tenaille.

In the *L'Art de fortifier*, the definition of regular fortification is expanded to include figures with three to twelve sides, and the description begins with curtains and bastions, defined as the ordinary elements of modern fortification. This introduction is accompanied by two figures on plate 1, representing details of the fortified square and the bastion with round oreillons visualized from a military perspective. Figure 1 appears to be a partial 3D implementation of the geometric construction of the bastions present in the *Architectura militaris* scheme, and focuses on the presence or absence of the second flank by highlighting the razant line of defense that strikes the curtain CD near C, giving rise to the second flank. At the same time, it is absent concerning the bastion CGFEH. Table 2 shows the plan of the entire regular fortress and is comparable to the above scheme from *Architectura militaris*. Still, it takes on an exclusively typological meaning concerning the different elements, as the geometric constructions of the elements represented, although described in the text, are missing.

In the *Trattato di fortificatione*, the description of the regular fortress and its elements closely connects with figure 1 in table 1 of the book, which, as Guarini points out, takes the regular pentagon as its basic shape. The line drawing represents only the pentagonal fortress, i.e., the first delineation, through iconography. The

geometric reconstruction carried out in previous research (Spallone, 2015) highlighted the morphological and metric relationship between all the elements of the fortress, which appear to be generated by consecutive and concatenated geometric constructions typical of Guarini's design method (Millon, 1970; Portoghesi, 1970) and typical of modern fortifications, understood as a system (Fara, 1989). Some dimensional and proportional data provided by Guarini in the text, such as the maximum line of defense, which must be between 750 and 850 geometric feet (equal to the musket shot), the fichant line, which must not be greater than the shot of a musket, the curtain, which must be between 500 and 300 feet, resulting in a bastion face of approximately 240 feet, the flank, which must measure between 1/3 and 1/2 of the face, and the semi-gorge between 1/3 and 1/2 of the face, made it possible to verify the plausibility of the reconstruction hypotheses (Spallone, 2017). Therefore, in Guarini's system, each element is dependent on the previous one through a geometric logic that, in the deconstruction of Guarini's scheme, follows the same sequence in the text.

7. Conclusions

A comparative analysis of the three treatises, based on the hypotheses of derivation and links highlighted by critics, has revealed complex relationships between the three works. Dechales's French-language treatise on the art of fortification, written just three years after the publication of *Cursus seu mundus mathematicus*, is not a mere translation, nor is it simply a reorganization of the contents.

The iconographic apparatus, of higher quality thanks to the technique of chalcography, allows the work to be configured as a new edition in terms of content and images. Guarini's work, despite explicit references, especially in the organization of the text and definitions, proves to be largely original in terms of methodology, revealing profound connections with the other theoretical works of the Theatine.

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This contribution, whose authors shared the methodological framework, was written by R. Spallone (par. 2, 3, 5, 6), M. Rinascimento (par. 4 and the visual synoptic charts in fig. 1, 2, 3). Par. 1 and 7 were written by all the authors.

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