

VIRTUAL STRUCTURES: DIGITAL PRESERVATION OF HOSPITALLER ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY

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Daniel K. Gullo

Joseph S. Micallef Director of the Malta Study Center, Hill Museum & Manuscript Library
dgullo@hmml.org

Abstract

Despite their importance for the study of Hospitaller architecture, museum and archival sources for the Order's architectural history remain difficult to access. Digitization projects led by the Malta Study Center at the Hill Museum & Manuscript will improve access and provide digital preservation of these invaluable museum and archival records. The Malta Study Center's new projects will offer scholars an unprecedented opportunity to research previously unknown or difficult to access art and archival sources for the study of the Order's architectural history in Malta, England, and Italy.

Keywords

Digital Preservation, Architecture, Museums, Archives, Order of Saint John of Jerusalem

The drawings and archival records of the Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem provide rich sources of information for the architectural history of religious orders in Europe and the Mediterranean. These sources describe how buildings were constructed for the medical care, religious life, military activities, and living space of the men and women who joined the Order of Saint John. The evidence details costs for construction, examples of technology, inventories of building materials, plans for improvements, and descriptions of furnishings and art occupying or adorning the architectural space. The extant buildings and their related documents reveal the daily life and activity of the Order's members as they evolved as an institution from a Levantine military religious order into a Mediterranean order-state with the princely ambition to plan cities and construct the buildings that would populate their space. These diverse sources remain invaluable for the study of Hospitaller architecture as witnessed in the collected essays found in this volume: studies that demonstrate the ways in which scholars utilize evidence to understand how the Order constructed space according to their practical, religious, and aesthetic needs and desires.

Despite their importance for the study of Hospitaller architecture, museum and archival sources for the Order's architectural history remain difficult to access and vulnerable to damage and decay. Staffing shortages, limited opening hours, incomplete or non-existent cataloging, and inadequate conservation restricts their use and inhibits their long-term preservation¹. This unfortunate state of affairs is magnified by the dispersal of the Order's archives across multiple institutions as a result of the suppression of religious orders during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries². Decreased funding, particularly at the state level, has only increased the need to resolve the issues of preservation and access if only to provide art historians and architects with the necessary information for the ongoing preservation of existing buildings. As a first step to preserve these records, the Malta Study Center at the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML) microfilmed the

Archives of the Order of Malta (AOM) at the National Library of Malta and related Maltese collections during the previous century. Access to the Center's microfilm collections, particularly the volumes of the AOM, unfortunately remains largely restricted to those scholars who are able to visit HMML³. The Center's new digitization projects in Italy, Malta, and England, however, offer scholars an unprecedented opportunity to research previously unknown or difficult to access sources for the study of the Order's architectural history. The Malta Study Center has initiated three types of digitization projects over the last decade that support research into the architectural history of the Order of Saint John. The Center has recently given attention to architectural drawings found in museum collections to facilitate the study of art in the context of archives. Architectural drawings, for our purposes, encompass a broad range of sources. They include building plans, land surveys, maps, watercolors, and studies for decorative architectural features. The Center initiated its first museum project in 2017 in partnership with Heritage Malta at MUŻA, the Malta National-Community Art Museum in Valletta. MUŻA's collection holds important examples of preparatory drawings for churches, ornamental pieces, and frescoes. Rare designs for tombs, such as the anonymous *Tomb of Fra Alexandre de Loubert de Martainville*, were digitized alongside studies for altarpieces, paintings, and frescoes. To these drawings we can add over 400 printed and hand-made maps of Malta, including those of the Albert Ganado Malta Map Collection. The Malta Study Center's partnership with Heritage Malta extended to the digital preservation of the drawing and map collections at the Malta Maritime Museum in 2020. This small maritime collection contains important visual evidence of the continuity and change of the Order's buildings and fortifications in the Grand Harbor during the early British period. The depth and breadth of both cartographic collections provide an invaluable resource for understanding the evolution of the archipelago's urban and rural architectural landscape from the sixteenth through the early nineteenth century.

The Malta Study Center began a similar digitization project at the Cathedral Museum in Mdina in 2020. The Cathedral Museum, like MUŽA, maintains an important collection of drawings crucial to the architectural history of Malta during the reign of the Order of Saint John. Examples include drawings prepared for the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Mdina after the earthquake of 1693, as well as later preparatory studies for chapels and tombs to augment the new building.⁴ Designs for Maltese parish churches also appear in the collection. Of particular interest is a drawing for a triumphal arch surmounted by the arms of Grand Master Marc'Antonio Zondadari [fig. 1]. Unlike MUŽA's collection, many of the Cathedral Museum's architectural drawings were in fact extracted from their original archival volumes found in the Cathedral Archives. Since the Malta Study Center microfilmed these volumes during the 1970s and 1980s, the new digitization project will reunite the Cathedral Museum's drawings with their original microfilmed archival sources from the Cathedral Archives. These older microfilms are now systematically being scanned for online access. Once the digital images and scanned microfilm reels are made available in HMML's online repository vHMML.org, scholars will be able to use digital technology to study the museum's drawings in their original archival context.



Fig. 1. Triumphal Arch with arms of Grand Master Marc'Antonio Zondadari (Mdina, Cathedral Museum, inv. 477).

The current digitization project at the Museum of the Order of Saint John in London (begun in 2023) will substantially augment these previously digitized museum collections. This understudied London collection, largely acquired during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, holds a remarkable array of rare drawings from Malta during the reign of the Order of St. John through the early British period. The drawings are complemented by several documents and surveys produced by the Order's engineers, some of which include important maps and sketches of the island's fortifications. Over 150 hand-made and printed maps are also found in the collection. Their digital preservation will only increase our knowledge of the development of Hospitaller fortifications in Malta and Gozo, especially when combined with the works already digitally preserved in the Albert Ganado Malta Map Collection at MUŽA.

The digitization of museum collections in Malta and London coincided with new efforts by the Malta Study Center to systematically digitize the archival records of women's monasteries of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem. These digitization projects created the possibility to research the little-known history of women's Hospitaller architecture in early modern Europe. Between 2021 and 2022, the Center digitized the archives of the Monastery of Santa Ursula, a community of Hospitaller sisters founded in Valletta in the late sixteenth century. Santa Ursula's archive preserves detailed account books recording the expenses for maintaining and improving the monastery over three centuries. The archive also includes an important seventeenth-century land survey describing the buildings and properties owned by Santa Ursula across Malta; an invaluable resource for the study of urban architectural history during the Order's reign over the island [fig. 2]. At the State Archives in Florence, Italy, the Malta Study Center recently completed the digitization of the women's Hospitaller community of San Giovannino dei Cavalieri (2022-2024), which dates back to the fourteenth century. San Giovannino's archives contain impressive account books that detail the day-to-day life of the sisters, especially the expenses associated with the monastery's maintenance, decoration, and improvements. Narrative histories and a mountain of receipts describe how the sisters used their space for various feasts and other ceremonies during the year. The collection also preserves several large eighteenth-century building plans illustrating the architectural design of San Giovannino dei Cavalieri. These architectural plans are doubly important given the division and repurposing of San Giovannino's structure after the suppression of the monastery in the nineteenth century. The digitization of these women's monastic archives offers scholars a unique opportunity to analyze how buildings were constructed to support the lives of two women's Hospitaller communities. Comparative studies could explore regional styles and tastes within the context of gender, space, and religion. Their study raises the question about how architecture changed for Hospitaller women who lived under the direct administration of the Grand Master and Sovereign Council in Valletta, as opposed to a religious life in Florence under the administration of the priory and the *langue*.

The Malta Study Center's most substantial digitization projects have focused on the government and legal archives of the Or-

der of Saint John in Malta. The Center has worked tirelessly with the National Archives of Malta to digitize the tribunals established by the Order of Saint John for the judicial administration of the island. Three tribunals stand out in importance for the study of architectural history. The 1418 volumes of the Magna Curia Castellaniae's *Acta Originalia* (digitized between 2007-2015) contain numerous legal cases and hundreds of drawings concerning building structures and land use in Malta from 1543 to 1798. As the largest and most diverse court in Malta, the Magna Curia Castellaniae administered civil and criminal cases, many of which involved building and property litigation until more specialized courts were established by the Order of Saint John. The digitization of the *Officium Syndicatus Congregationis Munium et Belli* collection in 2019 provides an additional resource for historians of military architecture. Many of the tribunal's legal cases originated to address issues concerning the upkeep and improvements of the fortifications in Malta and Gozo as administered by the Order's Congregation of War between 1646 and 1798. The records of the *Epoca Gallica* collection, digitized in 2014, also deserve attention from art and architectural historians. This small but complicated legal collection contains underutilized reports and records for the administration of the Order's buildings and property in Malta during the French occupation from 1798 to 1800. The documents help narrate the complex history of the Order's buildings and properties from the period of Hospitaller rule to the British control of the island.

The digitization of the Order of Saint John's central and peripheral administration has gained greater focus in the last two years owing to the urgency to preserve these endangered collections. The Order's historic archives, particularly those in Malta, suffer from the effects of climate change given the lack of resources needed for proper conservation and long-term storage. In 2022, the Malta Study Center partnered with Malta Libraries and the National Library of Malta to begin digitization of the Archives of the Order of Malta in Valletta to replace the older and less useful microfilms created during the 1990s. To date, only *Series 9, Correspondence*, has been completely digitized, though *Series 2, Libri conciliorum*, began in 2024. While *Series 9* is not rich in architectural drawings, the letters contain invaluable details about the movement of architects and engineers as they traveled to and from Malta. The letters also narrate crucial information concerning the construction, maintenance, and improvements of the Order's fortifications and buildings, whether in Malta or in the *langues*. The correspondence frequently supplements the official land surveys (*cabrei*) created by the priories as part of their administration of the Order's properties. Indeed, several letters provide corroborating information about decoration and furnishings acquired by members of the Order to embellish their living space similar to the descriptions found in the last wills and testaments (*spogli*) of the knights and chaplains.

The digitization of the Archives of the Order of Malta coincides with a multi-year project begun in 2024 to digitally preserve the archives of the Priory of Pisa at the State Archives in Florence. The digitization of the Priory of Pisa's archives is the first systematic attempt to digitize and make accessible the

complete records of a major priory of the Order of Saint John. For art historians and architects, the project will allow scholars access to the detailed history of the priory's architectural history in Tuscany through its extensive collection of land surveys, account books, deliberations, and correspondence⁵. The priory's archives are impressive for their description of the basic maintenance of their buildings. However, the elaborate land surveys and visitation records offer an unrivaled witness to the Order's architectural history through their extensive documentation, plans, and architectural drawings [fig. 3]. Moreover, online access to the archives of the Priory of Pisa will provide researchers with a singular opportunity to discover missing materials in Italy and Malta given the Order's use of double originals for many of its administrative records concerning the survey and improvements of properties and buildings. Comparing the documents in Florence and the related records found (or missing) in Valletta has the potential to fill evidentiary gaps once digitization of the Archives of the Order of Malta is also completed⁶. Over the last decade, the Malta Study Center has partnered with several European institutions to digitally preserve the dispersed archives of Order of Saint John and to create online access to these endangered archival and museum collections. The promise of the Center's long-term digitization projects for the

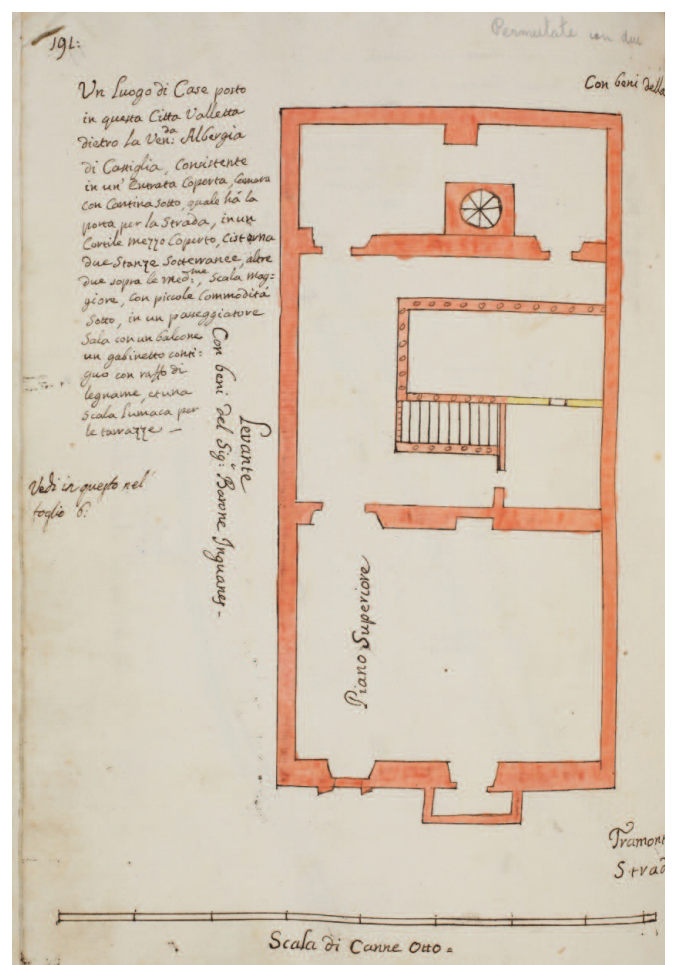


Fig. 2. Building plan for a house near the Auberge of Castilla, 1678 (Archive of the Monastery of Santa Ursula, Valletta, ASU MS A 2, p. 191).

study of the Order's architectural history has already begun bearing fruit for scholars and the public. The Center supported the 2022 International Congress *L'Ordine di Malta e la Lingua d'Italia. Architectura e temi decorativi dalla Controriforma al Settecento* organized by Drs. Federico Bulfone Gransinigh, Valentina Burgassi, Alessandro Spila, and Daniel K. Gullo at the Accademia Nazionale di San Luca in Rome. The current volume of essays presented here attests to the success of the gathering and the quality of the research that it produced. 2023 saw the first ever Winter School in Archival Studies dedicated to the teaching and understanding of the Order's archival heritage. Organized by Dr. Valeria Vanesio, in partnership with the University of Malta, the State Archives in Florence, the National Archives of Malta, and the Malta Study Center, the school invited students from Europe to learn about the Order's documentary heritage to advance their future studies and open new areas of research. Students utilized the Center's online digital resources as part of their archival training. 2023 also witnessed the important exhibition *The Langue of Italy: Building an Identity* curated by Drs. Emanuel Buttigieg, Valeria Vanesio, Valentina Burgassi and Christian Mifsud. This exhibition, held at the Auberge of Italy, the modern home of MUŻA in Valletta, took advantage of the Malta Study Center's digital images to create interactive resources to educate the public about the *Langue* of Italy and the role of the Auberge for the Italian knights and chaplains of

the Order. The renewed interest in the Order's architectural history recently culminated in the 2024 conference *People, Books and Models: The Order of St. John and the Circulation of Architectural Ideas between Malta and Europe, 16th-18th Centuries* organized by Drs. Valeria Vanesio, Valentina Burgassi, Hélène Perez Gallardo, and Armando Antista in Valletta. Each of these efforts has in part benefitted from the resources digitally preserved and made accessible by the Center's European digitization projects. Going forward, the Malta Study Center's efforts to digitize the drawings and archival records of the Order of Saint John of Jerusalem will continue to provide art historians and architects with the resources needed to study the Order's cultural heritage. Much is being done, but more is yet to be done to preserve these essential architectural records of European and Mediterranean history.

Note

- ¹ FARRUGIA, GLASS, 2014, p. 226.
- ² VANESIO, 2022, pp. 42-43.
- ³ AZZOPARDI, 2008, pp. 357-359. VANN, 2008, pp. 344-345.
- ⁴ AZZOPARDI, GAUCI, 2018, pp. 37-49.
- ⁵ BURGASSI, VANESIO, 2018, 47.
- ⁶ BORG, BURGASSI, SPITERI, VANESIO, 2017, 23-24.

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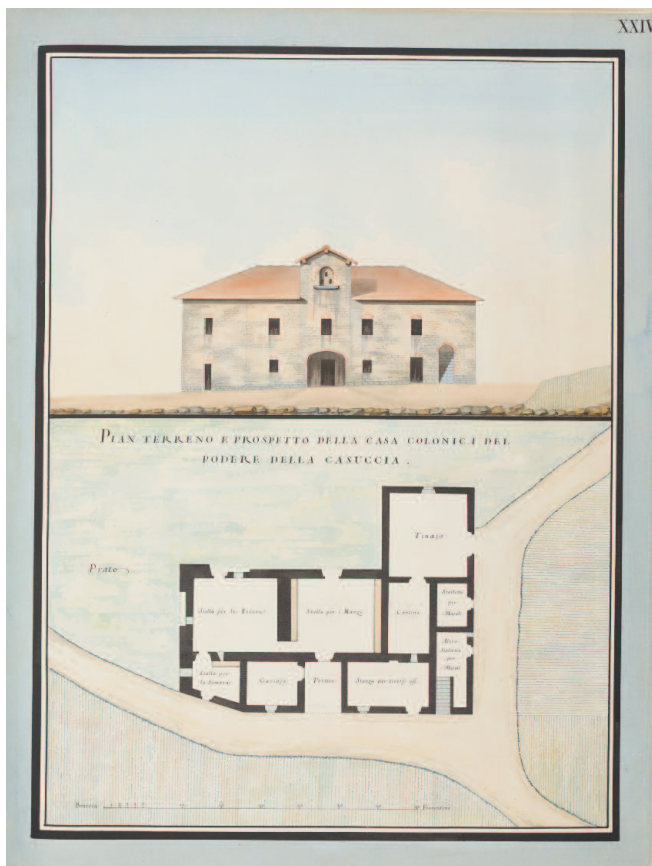


Fig. 3. Pian terreno e prospetto della Casa Colonici del podere della Casuccia della Commenda di Sant'Eufrosino di Volpaia, 1802 (Florence, ASFi Corporazioni Religiose soppresse del Governo Francese 132, vol. 267, plate 24).