

MALTESE ARCHITECTURE AND FRENCH MILITARY ENGINEERS DURING THE REIGN OF LOUIS XIV

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Abstract

Most historical studies on foreign influence affecting the Order of St John while in Malta focus mainly on Italian and Spanish influence. Its history is often viewed in this perspective, and particular importance is attributed to the Siculo-Spanish influence. Maltese historiography hardly highlights the extent of French influence; consequently, the heritage imparted by the French during the Order's reign is all too often ignored or unappreciated. This paper thus proposes a new approach that aims to shed light upon the importance of French influence on Maltese architecture, by placing it in the historical context of the power games that were played within the Order itself. Furthermore, this study aims to examine how the predominant architectural styles in Europe were brought to Malta through the Order's foreign policies which were turned towards the continent, and as from the middle of the seventeenth century, were directed towards France.

Keywords

Order of Malta, French Influence, Military Engineers, Fortifications, Maltese Baroque Architecture

The majority of historical studies on foreign influence affecting the Order of St John while in Malta focus mainly on Italian and Spanish influence. Various historians consider Malta as an extension of the vice-kingdoms of Naples or Sicily. Its history is often viewed in this perspective, and particular importance is attributed to the Siculo-Spanish influence. Maltese historiography hardly highlights the extent of French influence; this is also due to Malta's colonial history under British domination. The negative image of France, especially due to the French occupation of the Maltese islands by General Bonaparte, was transmitted from one generation to another. Consequently, the heritage imparted by the French during the Order's reign is all too often ignored or unappreciated. Maltese architectural historians disregard this influence completely.

Given this premise, this paper proposes a new approach that aims to shed light upon the importance of French influence on Maltese architecture, by placing it in the historical context of the power games that were played within the Order itself. It will take as its starting point, the arrival of the Knights on the island, up to the time when the French influence begins to develop greatly in the seventeenth century, both on the political and military levels. In this context, the question that is posed is: can we speak of a new form of endemic Baroque architecture that is typical of the Maltese islands, which is composed of a unique mixture of different European styles that are blended with Maltese traditional vernacular architectural elements? What were the predominant styles influencing Maltese architecture and what was the French contribution?

In order to determine these influences, the aim of this paper is not to examine Maltese Baroque architecture in a purely local and regional context. On the contrary, the study aims to examine how the predominant architectural styles in Europe were brought to Malta through the Order's foreign policies which were turned towards the continent, and as from the middle of the seventeenth century, were directed in particular

towards France. In effect, the contribution of military architecture, introduced by various French military engineers, has never really been taken into consideration. This study does not limit itself to simply examining the architectural realities to be studied, but to consider them in the context of the Order's efforts to affirm itself as the defender of Christianity, and the ways it has to negotiate its allegiances, given its international composition and profile.

The Order of St John chose Malta as its headquarters in 1530 after having been expelled from Rhodes. During the 268 years in Malta, the Order's alliances shifted progressively from Spanish domination to more independent relations with other European countries, and France in particular. The consequences of this transformation were not only political, but also of a cultural and aesthetic nature. French influence on Malta can be traced to the beginning of the seventeenth century, even though the more tangible results of this influence reach their peak during the eighteenth century up to the end of the Order's presence in 1798. This paper will therefore focus on the beginnings of French influence and concentrate mainly on the period covering the reign of Louis XIV between 1643 and 1715.

Up to the beginning of the seventeenth century, Malta was still like a fief of the Spanish empire. The predominance of Spanish influence, also present in the south of Italy, greatly influenced architectural development in Malta, due to the interventions of Spanish and Italian military engineers who were mainly responsible for the building of the first military fortifications commissioned by the Knights. During the first half of the seventeenth century Italian and Spanish interests still dominated the local scene. Rome sent the military engineer Pietro Paolo Floriani da Macerata in 1636, to design a new line of fortifications outside Valletta. In 1638, another military engineer, Vincenzo Maculano da Firenzuola, was sent by Francesco Barberini to give new advice about the fortifications in the

Grand Harbour¹. Moreover, in 1640, Giovanni de Medici, *Marchese di Sant Angelo*, came to Malta to draw a report on the state of the defensive lines. However, Spanish inertia during the Great Siege and Spain's gradual decadence during the seventeenth century indicated to the Order that it could no longer expect any real military aid from Spain.

During the seventeenth century, the Order of Malta was prospering and its authority over the Maltese islands was progressively affirming itself. The Order had adopted the formula of Christian militant state, given that it still had to face its enemies, in particular the threatening presence of the Ottomans and the corsairs in the Mediterranean as well as their sporadic attacks on the Maltese islands. The Ottoman Empire was still a powerful force to be reckoned with, as can be seen from its offensive attack in the War of Candia between 1645 and 1669². However, in contrast with the preceding century, and despite its aggressive political stance, the Ottoman Empire was less feared by the West towards the end of the seventeenth century, when it had slowly started to decline.

The Order's power was rather limited, when compared to that wielded by the Christian states; therefore the Order was always looking for a powerful protector. From the military aspect, its principal aim had always been that of fighting its eternal enemies, the Ottomans and the Corsairs. This meant that the Order was in a constant state of alert. However, since the threat of the Ottoman power was diminishing, Malta's strategic importance at the heart of the Mediterranean, controlling access to the Western Mediterranean, began to decline. Malta was no longer considered as the key for accession to the East. Consequently, the Order depended more and more on its diplomatic relations with Christian powers.

French influence on the Order may be witnessed in various domains, however, the principal aim of this study is to show how the Order's changing foreign policy, brought in French influence on its military architecture, and through this, on civil and ecclesiastical architecture during the second half of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth. Classical French architecture, together with the new French theories regarding military engineering that were being elaborated upon during the first half of the seventeenth century, assumed much greater importance under Louis XIV, when they radiated towards foreign lands in the second half of the century. During this latter period, French theories concerning architecture and military engineering came to Malta. In this context, what was the influence of the French military engineers who came to Malta during this period on the fortifications of Malta and its architecture? How did this influence play a determining role in the concepts, choices and projects of Maltese architects?

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the efforts of Grand Masters de Paule and Lascaris, who tried to shift the balance towards French interests, were blocked by the Council of the Order, which was composed predominantly of Italian and Spanish knights. However, as the century progressed, French influence began to increase thanks to the presence of important personalities and political alliances which were not only favourable to Malta, but also benefited

French interests in the Mediterranean. The close relations between Cardinal de Richelieu and Grand Master Jean Paul Lascaris Castellar were expressed through frequent correspondence. Thus, a reciprocal collaboration had already begun at the beginning of the seventeenth century when Richelieu modelled the Marine de France on that of the Order³. France considered Malta as an important ally and indispensable base for its fleet in the Mediterranean.

During the second half of the seventeenth century, the Spanish empire was already in advanced decay and French supremacy was slowly taking over. Even though the three *langues* of Provence, Auvergne and France, and their respective knights and commanderies, had always exerted a certain influence, French influence became preponderant during this period and remained thus up to the French Revolution. In this way, the Order progressively established privileged relations with France.

The important role played at the French Court by the Knights Hospitallers, who defended the Order's interests and obtained direct favours, is indisputable. The fact that a large number of its members occupied high-ranking positions at Court was advantageous to the Order, because it allowed it to ask its members to intercede directly with the king, in its favour. On the other hand, the French kings continued to call the Grand Master "Mon cousin". The Order's sailing ships and galleys continued to enjoy certain privileges that had been progressively granted by Christian princes, namely, the predominance of its fleet over that of other nations. Louis XIV ensured that both in the French Court and at sea, the privileges granted to the Order by his predecessors were kept intact⁴.

The Order managed its diplomatic relations with the great Western powers very adroitly, in particular with France, during the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth. These diplomatic relations led to a systematic exchange of correspondence between the Order and the French Court which contributed to a change in alliance from Spain to France. Diplomatic relations between the Order and France during the seventeenth century became very courteous and intimate. Relations were generally excellent during the reign of Louis XIV, and this state of affairs continued during the whole of the eighteenth century.

The arrival of important personalities in Malta, such as Blaise François Comte de Pagan, Louis Nicolas de Clerville, and Louis Vicomte d'Arpajon, during the summer of 1645, marked not only the decline of the leading role of the Italians in the art of fortification-building, but also the passage of the Order from the sphere of influence of the Spanish Empire to that of France. The presence of the French delegation shows that the reputation of French military engineers was already generally recognised. In effect, in 1635 the Order had already commissioned a certain Jardin to design the Porta Reale of Valletta. The exact identity of Jardin is uncertain, but it is most likely that it could be Nicolas Desjardins, who is already recorded as an engineer in 1643. Between 1664 and 1669 Desjardins was an assistant to Louis Nicolas De Clerville at the Chateau de Trompette in Bordeaux.

In 1670, the project of the Cottonera fortifications was entrusted

ed to Antonio Maurizio Valperga from Turin. The implementation of this grand project gave rise to contradictory opinions and the arrival of prestigious French military engineers in Malta. However, the fact that Valperga had been previously hired by Colbert and Charles Emanuel II of Savoy, shows clearly that the Order had not abandoned French influence, even though Valperga's fortifications were more "all'olandese" rather than corresponding to the school of French military engineering led by Vauban⁵.

Given the close relations between France and the Order, it is not surprising that, during the second half of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, various French military engineers came to Malta to oversee its system of defence. The presence of Médéric Blondel, the brother of the better-known François Blondel, was to play a decisive role in the widespread application of French architectural principles in Malta. Blondel was the first French resident military engineer on the Maltese archipelago, and can be considered as the catalyst for French influence on Maltese civil and ecclesiastical architecture. He was responsible for all the defence works and the water supply to the entire archipelago. During his stay in Malta between 1659 and 1695, he finished the network of coastal defences which Grand Master Lascaris had started in 1647 and supervised all major military works including those designed by Valperga and Carlos de Grunenbergh between 1680 and 1687. The *Devis sur les Fortifications* of 1681, written by Blondel, gives a clear idea of the different roles he undertook during his 36 years of service with the Order. Furthermore, in his long report Blondel criticises heavily Valperga's design for the fortifications of Floriana [fig. 1]. French influence was not only registered in the military field, but also in the civil domain. In the 1630's Antoine Garçin from Marseille was already commissioned to redesign the facade of the Auberge de Provence in Valletta. However, the classical elements in Maltese Baroque architecture were introduced by Blondel who was imbued with his brother's writings and theories, as well as those of the highly renowned school of classical French architecture, so greatly appreciated by Louis XIV. The façades designed by Blondel are all less Baroque and more Mannerist, or rather, relate directly to French Classicism.

Blondel served as resident engineer of the Order for many years, and during his service, Grand Master Carafa personally commissioned him to construct a number of buildings. Amongst other works, he conceived the splendid façade of the Church of the Franciscan Minors known as "Ta' Giezu" in 1687⁶, the Church of St. Francis of Assisi in 1681, the new facade of the Auberge d'Italie in the 1680's, and the Church of Saint Roch (1675) all in Valletta. Between 1675 and 1676 Blondel was also the engineer responsible for the construction of the Church of Sarria in Floriana designed by Mattia Preti [figg. 2-3].

Blondel trained or influenced the entire school of Maltese architecture of his time. His influence can be seen in the works of Maltese architects Francesco Sammut (the Carmelite Church in Mdina), Giovanni Barbara (Lija Parish Church), Vincenzo Casanova (Cospicua Collegiate Church) and the

more well-known Lorenzo Gafà (Cathedral of Mdina), who all started out as *capomastri* before launching into their careers as architects. These Maltese Baroque architects designed various buildings in Valletta and in other localities imbued with the French classical style even though these façades displayed more audacious and plastic forms than those of Blondel.

The French military engineers applied their new concepts of defence to Malta, following the leading role that Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban (1633-1707) had given to France in the development of military architecture in the second half of the seventeenth century. Their presence contributed to the building of coastal fortifications, the high-quality improvement of existing lines of fortification in the Grand Harbour, and the construction of Fort Manoel of which the plan has many points in common with the works of Vauban.

The engineers who came to Malta in the beginning of the



Fig. 1. A proposal by Médéric Blondel of a *fausse braye* at the crowned horn-works in Floriana (National Library of Malta, Archivum Ordinis Melitae (NLM, AOM) 1016, c. 103).



Fig. 2. Detail of the façade of the Church of St. Mary of Jesus (Ta' Giezu) in Valletta designed by Médéric Blondel in 1687.

eighteenth century, such as Colongues, De Tigné, Mondion, Maigret and Folard, had all been influenced by Vauban's school of thought⁷. Consequently, all the fortifications built in Malta during the beginning of the eighteenth century reflect the best of French military architecture – from coastal batteries and retrenchments to the last major fortresses, including the majority of the outworks (covert ways and glacis) along the Valletta, Floriana and Vittoriosa landfronts as well as Mdina [fig. 4].

French influence on Maltese fortifications was already well established at the beginning of the eighteenth century, in the last years of the reign of Louis XIV. The change of alliances from Spain to France became permanent after the death of Blondel in 1698, when Grand Master Ramon Perellos Y Rocaful, seeking military assistance, recurred to the French Court to request a French military engineer. The arrival of Claude de Colongues to Malta in 1703, marked a turning point because, from then on, French military engineers predominated the Maltese military architectural landscape. Following this new military approach, Louis XIV personally sent a military mission to Malta at the request of Grand Master Perellos. Although the Grand Master himself was Spanish, he preferred to ally the Order with the French Court



Fig. 3. Detail of the façade of the Church of St. Francis of Assisi in Valletta built in 1681 and attributed to Médéric Blondel.

rather than with the fast-declining Spanish power. Médéric Blondel, Claude de Colongues, and François Bachelieu were all employed by the Order. However, relations with France were solidified through the presence of a group of French military engineers sent by the Louis XIV in 1714, and all of whom belonged to the prestigious royal corps of military engineers. Following orders emitted directly by the aged King himself, this team was placed under the command of the renowned Brigadier René Jacob de Tigné. At the time, Tigné was already one of the most experienced engineers in France, with 26 years of active service. This contingent had a decisive influence on the concept and the development of Maltese fortifications right up to the last decades of the century. Consequently, the final appearance, size and character of Maltese fortifications are largely the result of the school of French military engineers. Tigné was accompanied, in particular, by Charles François de Mondion, who was also to leave a strong mark on Maltese eighteenth-century architecture [Fig. 5-6].

The most obvious result of the French influence may be seen in the coastal defences of Malta and Gozo: the redoubts, batteries and ditches built in the period 1715-17 were planned to resist any external invasion. These lines of defence were inspired by models experimented in France towards the end of the seventeenth century. Although a large number of batteries only materialised on the Maltese coasts between 1715 and 1717, the plan to build these fortifications in the French manner had initially been proposed in 1714 by two special envoys, D'Arginy and Fontet, and by François Bachelieu, a military engineer of minor importance⁸.

French influence on Maltese architecture lasted well beyond Blondel. As this paper has shown, the progressive shift of political influence from Spain to France, also left an indelible mark on Maltese architecture. French influence which existed marginally in the sixteenth century, grew steadily during the seventeenth century and triumphed in the eighteenth. The presence of French military engineers contributed to the formation of an endemic Baroque architecture that has its own distinctive style and characteristics.

Note

¹ BORG, 1967, p. 449-450.

² BARDAKÇI & PUGNIÈRE, 2018, p. 61-64.

³ PETIET, 2002, p. 266-268.

⁴ BUSUTIL, 2018, p. 874.

⁵ MENICHETTI, 2013, p. 161-166.

⁶ FIORINI, 1970, p. 300-303.

⁷ FAUCHERRE, 2011, p. 14.

⁸ SPITERI, 2008, p. 77.

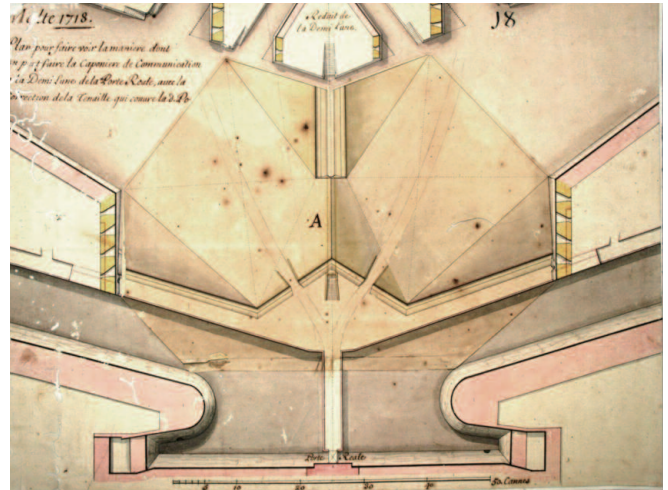
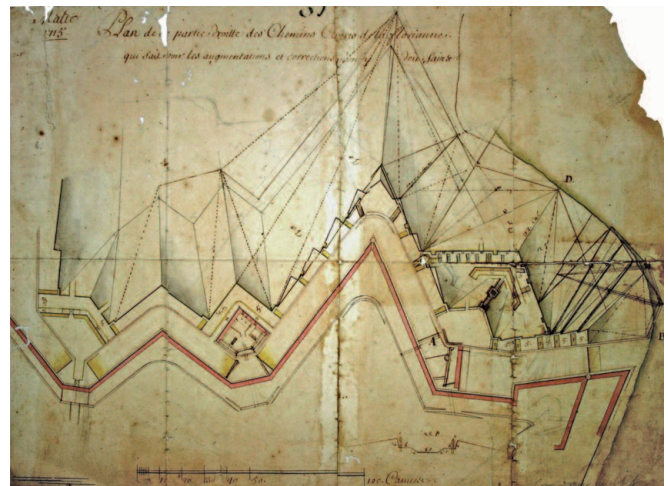


Fig. 4. Plan of the landfront fortifications in front of the Porta Reale (Valletta) entitled «Plan pour faire voir don't on put faire la Caponiere de Communication à la Demi Lune de la Porta Reale, avec la Correction de la Tenaïlle qui couvre le dit Pte.» René Jacob de Tigné, 1718. National Library of Malta NLM V15.



Plan of the Floriana Landfront fortifications by René Jacob de Tigné, 1715 entitled «Plan de la partie droite des Chemins Couverts de la Florianne qui fait voir les augmentations et corrections qu'on y doit faire». National Library of Malta NLM F16.



Plan of the Bastion of St. Paul in the Cottonera fortifications by René Jacob de Tigné, 1716 entitled «Plan du Bastion de St. Paul de la Cottoniere pour l'Établissement de ses flancs et les autours des deux Courtines disposées en retranchement». National Library of Malta, NLM C22.

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