

Books Received

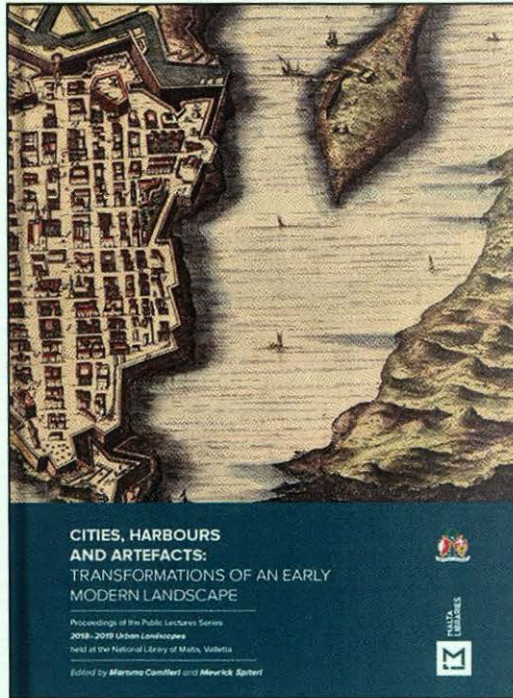
Cities, Harbours and Artefacts: Transformations of an Early Modern Landscape

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The content of this book about the Baroque city-fortress of Valletta – described by the national librarian of Malta Cheryl Falzon in her foreword as ‘a city which has always exerted a certain fascination on both Maltese and visitors with its awesome churches and palaces, its magnificent harbours and its intriguing atmosphere evoking momentous events of the history of Malta’ – is hinged on five thoroughly researched papers based on eight lectures that were held between November 2018 and June 2010 for the national library of Malta Public lectures Series. Appropriately entitled *Cities, Harbours and Artefacts: Transformations of an Early Modern Landscape*, the five chapters of this book concern ‘The building of a new city’ by Dr Claude Busuttill; ‘Properties of the Order of St John’ by Mevrick Spiteri, ‘Early buildings on the Xiberras peninsula and the sale of building plots in Valletta’ by Professor Stanley Fiorini; ‘Of markets and melting-pots: A methodology for



mapping historic socio-spatial relations at the Valletta market between 1643 and 1798' by Christian Mifsud and 'Malta's harbours in 1798: Transformations of a new urban landscape' by Mevrick Spiteri.

According to the editors, the praiseworthy initiative to hold the above-mentioned lecture series within the beautiful reading hall of Stefano Ittar's late eighteenth-century public library in the heart of Valletta, was inspired by the growing interest of local scholars, especially of the International Institute for Baroque Studies of the University of Malta set up in 1996, towards a hitherto-ignored interdisciplinary approach, this explaining why these lectures had attracted the interest of academics, archaeologists, historians and architects as well as distinguished members of the general public who wanted to expand their knowledge on the Baroque history of a unique island state which was ruled between 1530 and 1798 by no less than twenty eight enterprising Grand Masters of the 'Sacra Religione Hierosolimitana di Malta', better known as the Order of Malta.

It is most useful to see that towards the end of this book, the editors provided the titles, abstracts and selected illustrations associated with all the eight lectures of this praiseworthy initiative taken by the national libraries of Malta, enabling the reader to put the published lectures in their proper context. The first lecture by Claude Busuttill who lectures in the international Institute for Baroque Studies and which is reproduced in Chapter 1, deals with various aspects of the planning and building of a city of new foundation within a ring of artillery fortifications which were skilfully devised to offer maximum protection from a fresh Ottoman attack after the failure of Sultan Suleiman's siege of 1565. The second lecture on 'Studying ceramics in Early modern Malta: Archival and Archaeological sources' by Nathaniel Cutajar, emphasised the fact that our knowledge of the culture of Baroque Malta has hitherto relied entirely on archival records and art history so that it is now not important to explore how the additional evidence provided by archaeological ceramic can provide new insights to the social and historical studies of Early Modern Malta?

The third lecture by Mevrick Spiteri who is an MA graduate of the International Institute for Baroque Studies and which has been published in Chapter 2 of this book, deals with houses in Valletta which were, according to the author one of the most valuable assets of the ruling Order of Malta. We are informed that the building of these houses was often regulated by autonomous foundations and recorded in the *cabrei* of these foundations. The fourth lecture by Timmy Gambin and entitled 'Maritime Spaces: Human Choices' focused on the Grand Harbour which the author rightfully considers to be the foremost maritime space of the Maltese Islands. To this end, Gambin marshalled massive historical, archaeological and environmental evidence to give a fascinating account of the choices that people faced during the rule of the Order in the face of a rapidly evolving physical, economic and geo-political landscape of the harbour area. The fifth lecture by Stanley Fiorini had been originally investigated by this eminent professor of the University of Malta in a paper entitled *Fel uardie col sceber raba iesue uqiaa*. In chapter three of this book, Fiorini looks at several contracts

published by Notary Placido Abela explaining how they highlighted trends and patterns adopted in the acquisition of property in the early building of Valletta.

The sixth lecture entitled ‘Fortress aesthetics and its silent poetry – The Maltese fortified landscape and its representation in Art’ by Stephen Spiteri who is an academic staff member of the International institute for Baroque Studies at the university of Malta with several books and articles to his credit, addressed the unique nature of the artillery fortifications of Valletta, commenting that ‘fortifications have fascinated artists for centuries and the image of the fortress, whether real or imaginary, has lost nothing of its ability to impose itself emphatically upon the imagination.’ In his lecture, the author discussed the manner in which this unique visual experience of the Baroque fortress and its landscape acquired great artistic value throughout the history of the Baroque Age and afterwards. In Lecture seven entitled ‘Of markets and Melting-pots: Commercial spaces in Early Modern Valletta’, reproduced in Chapter four of this book, Christian Mifsud who is a PhD candidate in the International Institute for Baroque Studies, breaks new ground when he explores the daily central market in the so-called called ‘piazza delle herbe’ in Valletta. The author observes that this market situated behind the grand master’s magisterial palace, soon became the central core of a network consisting of a slaughterhouse, a fish market, a system of weekly markets and of ‘botteghe’ trading in both local and imported products. We are also informed by Mifsud that with the passage of time, the market’s importance for the life of Valletta, grew beyond commercial aspects to also start offering residential accommodation, thus providing precious insights into the daily life of citizens of the capital city of the Order of Malta.

And finally, in Lecture eight entitled ‘Malta’s harbour in 1798: The Transformation of a new urban Landscape’ and published in chapter five of this book under the same name, Mevrick Spiteri explains – in a fitting conclusion to this book - how the urban form of the cities of the grand harbour of Malta which are pictured in several fortification maps, reveals an uninterrupted and planned series of changes occurring in the

harbour area since the arrival of the Order in 1530. These changes were meant to accommodate the tastes and lifestyles of aristocratic knights from various languages, the powerful ecclesiastical hierarchy, a growing Maltese middle class, an active commercial community and Maltese low class living in slum conditions, all supported for better or for worse by a large community of Muslim slaves.

In my opinion this valuable book should be carefully read and digested by all who are interested in acquiring updated knowledge about the socio-economic aspects of the role that Valletta played during the long rule of the Order of Malta in the Baroque age. It is an initiative of Malta libraries that does much credit to the editors of this book, to all the lecturers who delivered the talks (and who included the authors of the five chapters of this book) and, lastly, to all those who participated and supported this praiseworthy effort to open new inter-disciplinary horizons in the study of our past in that specific period that is generally known as the Baroque Age. This, I believe, is the correct approach towards a better interpretation and understanding of the history of Baroque Malta in its European context. It is, I believe, the only correct way forward as we approach the first quarter of the 21st century.

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