

The mystery surrounding the Matteo Perez d'Aleccio map prints of the Great Siege of Malta of 1565

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The album of the 1565 Great Siege of Malta prints by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio is very rare and few copies or individual prints ever come on the market. This may possibly be because few copies were printed. In their book on the Siege maps, Ganado and Agius-Vadala quote Lockhead and Barling, and Vincenzo Melillo, (though they immediately state that these authors do not quote their source) saying that Grand Master de Verdalle may have suppressed the album because he was displeased when Perez d'Aleccio had dedicated the album to Cardinal de Medici and not to him¹. This is hardly likely as Perez d'Aleccio had sought and obtained copyright protection from Pope Gregory XIII on 30 May 1582 for a ten-year period, as indicated in the title page *Cum privilegio / GREG. XIII. PONT. MAX. / Ad Decennium / MDLXXXII*². Besides, Pope Gregory XIII held Verdalle in high regard as he had created him a Cardinal and Verdalle would not have gone against the wishes of the Pope. I tend to agree more with what Ganado had originally said in his 1984

article³. Here he mentions that 'Perez d'Aleccio paid homage to the 'Great Verdalle' in the legend accompanying the plan of the new city of Valletta [*Foglio 14*] and apart from including his coat of arms, together with those of De Valette, Del Monte and De La Cassière, on the same plate, he reserved a special place for Verdalle's escutcheon in the elaborate cartouche on the next plate' [*Foglio 15*].⁴

A rare discovery

One of the copperplates of the prints which Matteo Perez d'Aleccio made of the Great Siege of Malta of 1565 has recently come to light and is now in the author's collection. It is *Foglio Undecimo* of the 15 prints of the 1582 edition (Fig. 1). Although the plate came from Miami, it actually originated in Peru.

After a thorough examination, mainly through the print which had been made from this plate in 2012, and which has also been acquired and is now in Malta, it was established beyond doubt that the plate

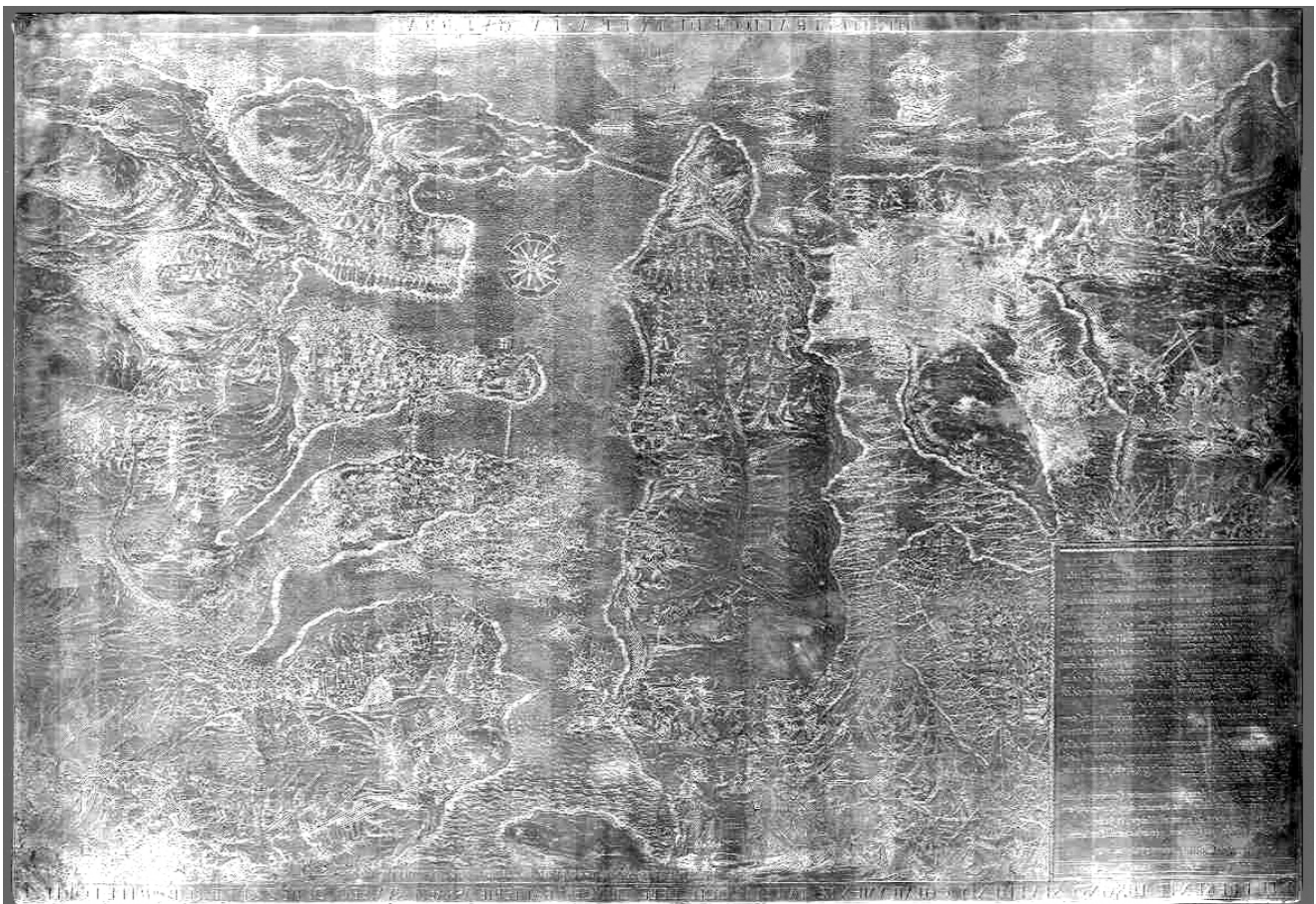


Fig. 1 Copperplate of *Foglio Undecimo*, 314 x 450mm



is authentic⁵. This makes this plate one of the earliest copperplates of a map of Malta known to have survived.

Perez d'Aleccio was the oldest of a group of Italian artists who were active in Peru in the 16th century, when he embarked on his American adventure at the age of 41⁶. On 6 November 1587 he transferred his money to Lima⁷ where he presumably arrived in 1588, and where he remained, got married⁸ and died not later than April in 1616. The will of Pedro Pablo Morón, his principal collaborator, dated 28 April 1616⁹ implies that Perez d'Aleccio had only recently died. According to Baglione¹⁰, there was only one clearly defined purpose that had made Perez d'Aleccio travel to Peru. Perez d'Aleccio had told his friends in Seville that he would come back from America only when he could afford to maintain his horses and his servants in Rome¹¹. In fact there are various documents of Perez d'Aleccio which refer to his commercial deals in gold and silver mines and so we can safely say that he went to Peru in search of fortune¹².

Perez d'Aleccio must have taken his siege plates with him when he went to Peru, but he discovered to his dismay that there was no rolling press with which to print them in Lima¹³. In fact the first two engravings printed in Peru appeared in a book entitled *Relacion de Las Exequias de la Reina Margarita*, published in 1613. The frontispiece shows a shield made by a student of Perez d'Aleccio, Fray Francisco Bejarano, dated 1612 and the other is the drawing of a funerary monument. The printer, Pedro de Merchán y Calderón, was most likely the person who brought from Spain the rolling press necessary to print the copper engravings.

It has to be remembered that Perez d'Aleccio was also a publisher as evidenced by his *APPRESSO PEREZ D'ALECCIO* found on the siege plates. In fact Perez d'Aleccio found himself the possessor of several copperplates including his siege plates, which were of no practical use for him for almost 25 years after his arrival in Peru in 1588. While in Peru, he started to make use of these plates by painting in oil on their reverse, a technique he had learned in Italy. The use of copper as a support for paintings became widespread in Europe in the 16th century when more of the metal was available. In 1591 the only known documented painting signed by Perez d'Aleccio that

we find in Lima to date, is a painting depicting a *Virgen de la leche* (Nursing Madonna) and was executed on a copperplate (Fig. 2). The work is of special interest because on the reverse is an engraving of the painting *Holy Family under the Oak* by Rafaello, which is now in the Prado Museum in Madrid. At the bottom of the engraving there is an inscription drawn in reversed letters which reads: *Matthaeus P. F. Romae Ano Dni 1583*¹⁴.



Fig. 2 *La Virgen de la leche*
oil on copper, 483 x 392mm, Lima, Peru

The copperplate of the *Foglio Undecimo* in question has a painting in oil on the reverse and shows a Madonna which seems to have been started but never completed or else could have been an exercise when Perez d'Aleccio was teaching the technique of oil painting on copper (Fig. 3). Could this be the work of Perez d'Aleccio? It is difficult to say for sure but scientific analysis of the paint has shown that the pigments are of the period .



Fig. 3 Verso of copperplate of *Foglio Undecimo*

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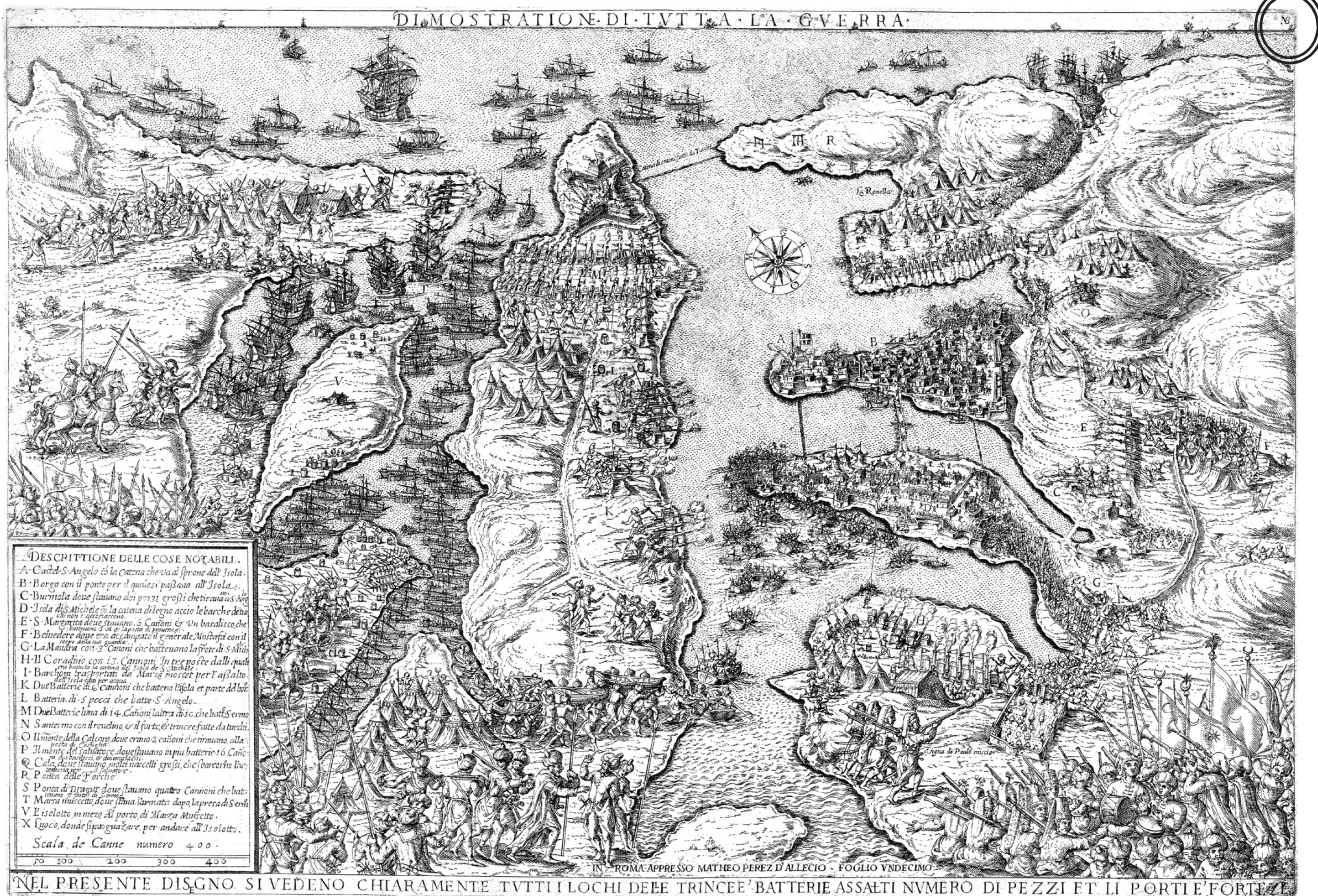


Fig. 4 Print pulled from the copperplate in 2012 by Ediciones Malgon

Natale Bonifacio

The 2012 print pulled from the plate in Miami is very clear and sharp (Fig. 4). This shows that not many prints were pulled from the original plate. When examining the print, there was one slight difference from the original surviving prints of Perez d'Aleccio which proved to be a great sensational discovery and a mystery at the same time. At the top right corner there is the monogram 'NB'. When discussing the plate and the print with Dr Ganado, he suggested that 'NB' could be Nicolas Beatrizet. This was soon discarded however, because Beatrizet lived from 1475 to 1564, meaning that he was already dead when the plates were etched. Dr Ganado then suggested Natale Bonifacio (1537/1538–23 February 1592) who fitted perfectly datewise.

Natale Bonifacio was born in Šibenik in Dalmatia which in those days was under the domain of the Republic of Venice. He was the son of Girolamo, a native of a noble family from Capua. Very little is known of the early years of his life, but certainly in the 1570s we find him in Venice, where he published some maps. Here within a few years he became very famous. On 5 July 1579, Bonifacio was accepted in the *Congregazione di San Girolamo degli Illirici* (or *degli Schiavoni*), becoming the guardian on 10 April 1580, main auditor in 1582 and chamberlain in 1583. In 1589 he had to return to Šibenik to assist his sick mother, leaving behind in Rome his children and his wife Maddalena Guerrini, who was herself an engraver. He died shortly after his arrival in Šibenik on 23 February 1592¹⁵.

The calligraphy of the text found on the siege plate was compared with other prints executed by Natale Bonifacio which also had handwriting on them. The calligraphic comparison was made with a print which had an inscription in Italian found in the centre of the plan and elevation of the alternative door and the first floor balustrade of the Palace of St John in the Lateran, Rome. The print is found in the second edition of Domenico Fontana's *Della trasportatione dell'Obelisco Vaticano et delle Fabriche di Nostro Signore Papa Sisto V*, (1st edition Rome 1590; 2nd edition, Naples 1604)¹⁶ (Figs 5, 6).

Natale Bonifacio had a particular calligraphy which is easily distinguishable. He liked using flourishes such as we find on the *P* in *Porta* in the door plan and the *D* in *Descrizione* in the siege map. His letter *g* is very distinct. He also had a particular way of joining the *st* or the double *ss* together such as *Questa* in the plan and *Castel* in line A and *grossi* in line Q on the siege plan. Other maps found at the National Library in Valletta which are signed by Bonifacio also show the extraordinary similarities of execution and calligraphy¹⁷.

Natale Bonifacio and not Perez d'Aleccio the engraver

It could thus be confirmed beyond doubt that the plates were engraved by Natale Bonifacio. Perez d'Aleccio was the designer as evidenced in the title, written in the third person since it was someone else who engraved the plates: *I VERI RITRATTI...fatti già in diversi quadri di Pittura dal Mag.^{co}[agnifico]*

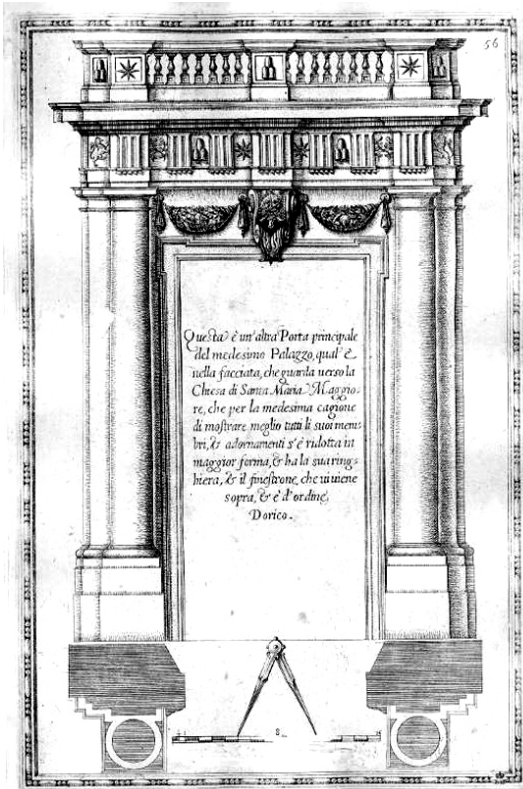


Fig. 5 Print of plan and elevation of alternative door of the Palace of St John in the Lateran, Rome, by Natale Bonifacio

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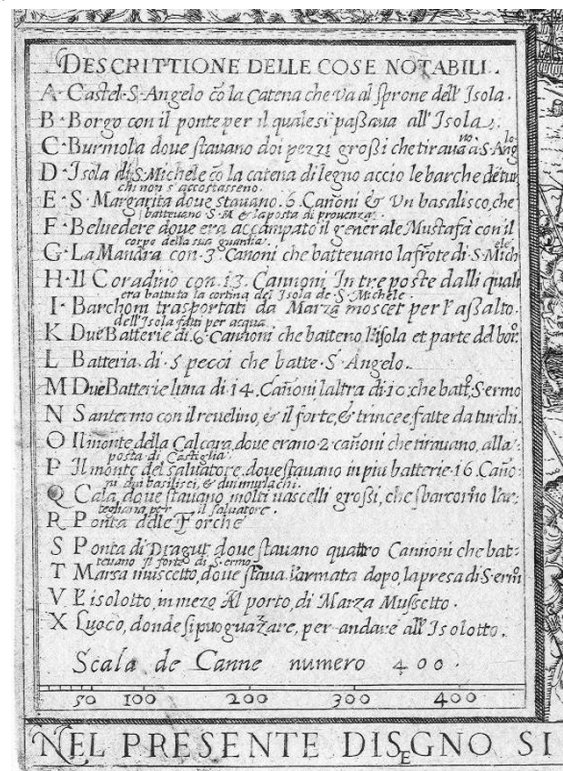


Fig. 6 The key to place-names and events found on *Foglio Undecimo*. The calligraphy can be attributed to Natale Bonifacio

M.,[aestro] Matteo Perez d'Aleccio nella Grà Sala del Palazzo del Ill.^{mo} Gran Maestro in Malta , e ridotti con accurat.^{ma} diligenza dal medesimo in questa forma... On the other hand the first person is used in the dedication on the left of the frontispiece which is signed *humile & affectionatis.^o Seruitore Matteo Perez di Aleccio*¹⁸.

In all the original *Foglio Undecimo* prints that were examined, no monogram NB is visible. Is it possible that Natale Bonifacio could have protested with Perez d'Aleccio about the lack of his signature and that it could have been him who suppressed the printing? Would Perez d'Aleccio have consented to Natale Bonifacio engraving his monogram on the plates, but force of circumstance made him leave for Seville, Spain in 1583 and to Lima, Peru shortly afterwards in 1588 without ever finding the opportunity, the time and perhaps even the money to publish what would then have been a second state of the siege plates with the 'NB' monogram?

Casa di Mattia il Pittore

The discovery of the copperplate was also particularly significant because it also shed new light on other matters. One correction is that there was never a second state published after 1661, which theory came from Vincenzo Melillo's article¹⁹ written in 1984. Here he mentions that *Casa di Mattia il Pittore* found on the Valletta map must have been the house of Mattia Preti and not of Matteo Perez d'Aleccio²⁰ and that the *Casa del Mastro Tomaso* was the house of Tommaso Dingli. Since both Mattia Preti (1613–

1699) and Tommaso Dingli (1591-1666) lived and worked in Malta much later than 1582, he concluded that the prints which he had studied were not of the 1582 edition but must have been reissued between 1661 and 1699. In his article written in 1984, before Melillo's article was published, Ganado had correctly assumed that *Casa di Mattia Pittore* was that of Perez d'Aleccio and he points this out in a footnote of the same article²¹. As for the *Casa de Mastro Tomaso* he also says 'Incidentally, d'Aleccio indicated on the plan both the house of the engineer and architect of the Order and the house of *mastro* Tomaso, who might have been the *capomastro*²². But when later in 1994, Ganado and Agius-Vadalà published their book on the siege maps, they did not question Melillo's assertions and they say that 'no copy is known of the 1582 edition of the album. The reprint of the 1660s is to be found in these libraries...'²³ Yet there could never have been an edition in the 1660s as the plates were always in Peru where Perez d'Aleccio had taken them and this discovery proves Melillo wrong and that Ganado was right back then in his 1984 article.

There is also the question of the position of the site indicated as *Casa di Mattia Pittore* on the Valletta map. Bonello quotes documentary sources for the houses Mattia Preti owned in the *Manderacchio* area²⁴, but he seems sceptical on the third house on St Christopher Bastion on the opposite side of Valletta. This is probably because of lack of archival evidence. He says that: 'The 'large one' may have been his early house on St Christopher Bastion, but more



likely, was the one he had bought in 1668 in the Mandaraggio area²⁵. This copperplate is perhaps the first primary source which excludes beyond doubt that the house could have belonged to Mattia Preti.

In the course of this research an intriguing statement was found written in Witcombe's book *Copyright in the Renaissance* when he describes Perez d'Aleccio's book of the siege prints. He describes them as: 'Individual prints of the frescoed scenes, plus an allegorical frontispiece and a sheet inscribed *Al Lettore* (sixteen sheets in all), were issued by Perez in 1582'²⁶. To date all references of the album of the Great Siege maps mention fifteen plates and not sixteen.

Perez d'Aleccio must have lost a lot of money when he stopped the printing of the Siege maps, after having invested so much capital to produce the

plates. Judging from the evidence of the number of Lucini editions of the prints of the Great Siege of Malta copied from Perez d'Aleccio's album, Perez d'Aleccio would have sold a good number of copies which could have rendered him a handsome profit. The first Lucini edition came out in Rome in 1631 followed by two more editions printed in Bologna also in 1631 and like Perez d'Aleccio, Lucini immediately obtained a *privilegio*, but this time he did not leave any doubts as to who engraved the plates as he wrote prominently on the frontispiece *et hora intagliati con accuratissima diligenza da Anton Fran.^{co} Lucini Fiorent.^o* [and now engraved with the utmost diligence and care by Anton Francesco Lucini, Florentine]. Could he have heard something of what had happened to Matteo Perez d'Aleccio?

Footnotes:

1. Ganado and Agius-Vadalà (1994), *A study in depth of 143 maps representing the Great Siege of Malta of 1565*, Malta, PEG Ltd, 1994, pp. 330–331.
2. The document is recorded in ASVat, SB, 52, fol. 396r. –v.; *Motu proprio*, unnumbered, interleaved between fols. 398 and 399.
3. Ganado (1984), 'Matteo Perez d'Aleccio's engravings of the Siege of Malta of 1565' in *Proceedings of History Week 1983*, Malta, The Malta Historical Society, 1984, pp. 125–161.
4. Ganado (1984), p. 130.
5. The print was made by Joaquín González who studied industrial design specializing in graphic design at the University of San Alejandro in La Habana, Cuba. He now runs *Ediciones Malgon* which he founded in 1999 as an independent print workshop which specialises in traditional fine art printing techniques.
6. Petrucci, Alfredo (1971), 'Il Magnifica Matteo. Dall'Appula Alezio al Nuovo Mondo', in *Pernix Apulia*, Bari, 1971, p. 138. Petrucci says in his article that Perez d'Aleccio could have been lured to Peru because he was fascinated by the idea that the discovery of Peru was made by a namesake of his, Perez de la Rúa, who he fancied could have been his ancestor.
7. Stastny, Francisco (1969), 'Perez de Alesio y la pintura del siglo XVI', in *Annales No 22*, Instituto de Arte Americano e Investigaciones Estéticas, Buenos Aires, A. Baiocco y Cia., 1969, p. 11.
8. In Lima Perez d'Aleccio married María Fuentes de la Cadena on 3 January, 1598. Vargas Ugarte, Rubén (1947), 'Pérez de Alesio, Mateo-Pintor' in *Ensayo de un diccionario de artífices coloniales de la América Meridional*, Buenos Aires, 1947, pp. 96–98.
9. Stastny (1969), p. 13.
10. Baglione, Giovanni (1733) *Le vite dei pittori, scultori ed architetti*, Napoli, 1733 (1st edition Rome 1642), p. 30.
11. Ballesteros, Jorge Bernales, *Mateo Pérez de Alesio, pintor romano en Sevilla y Lima*, Sevilla, 1973, p. 236.
12. Stastny (1969), p. 12; Baglione (1733), p. 30.
13. The author knows of another Perez d'Aleccio Great Siege copperplate in Peru.
14. Stastny (1969), p. 14; Valenzuela, Fernando (2009), *Painting as a form of communication in colonial central Andes; variations on the form of ornamental art in early world society*, Ph. D. dissertation presented at the University of Lucerne, 2009, p. 249.
15. Almagià, Roberto (1948), *Monumenta Cartografica Vaticana*, Città del Vaticano, 1948, Vol. II, pp. 6–8. (I thank Dr Ganado who kindly lent me the book and other material for consultation).
16. Location of print at the British Museum: *Museum number 1982, U.18 AN77 1937*.
17. The maps are found in Vol. VI of the collection of 6 volumes of *Piante, et Alzate di Città e Fortezze Raccolte in Roma*. Loc. PP 1625–1630 at the National Library in Valletta. Volume 6 has no title page. The maps are *Palermo Città principalissima nella Sicilia*, Rome, 1580 and *Parigi. L'Assedio di Parigi*, Rome 1591. For a full description of this collection, see Ganado, Albert, 'Description of a splendid collection of 950 maps and views of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries at the National Library of Malta' in *Proceedings of History Week 1992*, Malta, Malta Historical Society, 1994, pp. 137–228.
18. Petrucci says that *Il frontespizio, riccamente figurato, è un modello irreprensibile d'impaginazione, di armonia, di eleganza, in cui sfociano contemperandosi le più disparate esperienze architettoniche e grafiche del secolo*. [The title-page, richly figured and with the most diverse architectural experiences and graphics of the century, is a model of impeccable layout, harmony and elegance]. Petrucci, Alfredo (1971), p. 138.
19. Melillo, Vincenzo (1980), *Matteo Perez, da Lecce, incisore in Roma*, Roma, 1980. This is an 8-page pamphlet with no imprint whatsoever except for *Roma 1980* at the foot of page 8.
20. As rightly pointed out to me by Dr Giovanni Bonello, Italians tend to distinguish between Mattia and Matteo and asked why would Perez d'Aleccio, who referred to himself as Matteo, change his name (his identity) when identifying something as intimate as his own home. Possibly the reason of the change of name would have been Natale Bonifacio himself. Bonifacio came from Šibenik and it would have been easy for a Croatian to use the name *Mattia* rather than *Matteo*.
21. Ganado (1984), "During his stay in Malta, d'Aleccio lived in a house at the eastern end of St. Christopher Street, in Valletta, overlooking the Grand Harbour: it is indicated on his plan of Valletta (*FOGLIO DECIMO QUARTO*) as *Casa di Mattia Pittore* f.5, p. 127.
22. Ganado (1984), p. 152.
23. Ganado and Agius-Vadalà (1994), Vol. 1, p. 336.
24. Bonello, Giovanni (1999), 'Mattia Preti: His houses in Malta' in *Art in Malta: Discoveries and Recoveries*, Malta, Patrimonju Publishing Ltd, 1999, pp. 69–72; Denaro Victor (1962), 'Still More Houses in Valletta' in *Melita Historica*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1962, p. 45; Denaro, Victor (2002), 'Preti's House to Disappear' in *Times* [of Malta], *Half a century ago*, 12 September, 2002, p. 23. The author is grateful to Bernadine Scicluna for these references.
25. Bonello (1999), p. 71.
26. Witcombe (2004), p. 231. Attempts by the author to communicate with Witcombe were unsuccessful until the time of going to print.