

THE GENESIS OF ST. JOHN'S, VALLETTA
AND A NEW INTERPRETATION OF
BRAMANTE'S DESIGN FOR ST. PETER'S, ROME

By **J. QUENTIN HUGHES**

Illustrations by MISS V. M. JOHNSON

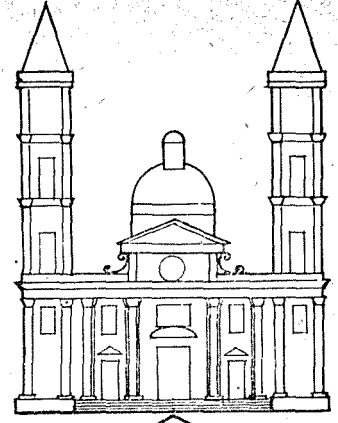
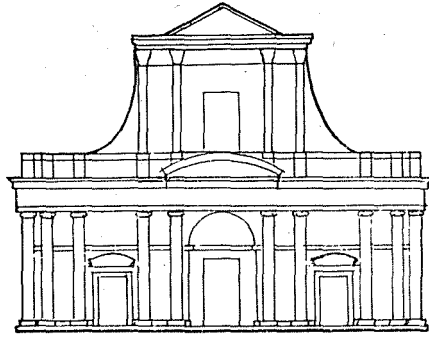
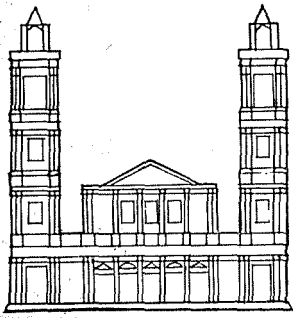
The church of St. John, the conventual church of the Knights of Malta, was begun in 1573 from the plans prepared by the Maltese architect Gerolamo Cassar. It was a church with twin western towers surmounted by spires (1), the first of a long line of churches to be built in this manner. For this reason alone it will be important to establish the origin of this feature of western towers in the design of St. John's. Cassar had just returned from a visit to Rome which he made in 1569. In Rome this treatment of the facade of churches was the exception rather than the rule.

On his return, the first church that Cassar built was the Augustinian church in Rabat dating from 1571. This church has a facade of two storeys, the upper portion tapering to a wider base in a manner obviously modelled upon the Roman church of S. Maria dell'Orto by Vignola (2). There, also the high nave was linked by two graceful curves to the lower aisle chapels. The use of these curves by Cassar shows his indebtedness to the architects of Rome and there are many other examples of his use of mouldings which could only have been inspired by contemporary work in the Eternal City (3).

Why did he decide to use the two towered system on St. John's? The answer can only be surmised from existing architectural evidence as there are no documents to indicate his intention. I believe that he was influenced by the Italian architect Serlio who had himself followed a tradition established by Bramante at St. Peter's in the Vatican. To trace this tradition it is necessary to go back to the early proposals made by the architect Bramante for the church of St. Peter. At the beginning of the 16th century Bramante was rapidly becoming the most important architect in Italy, and he was commissioned by Pope Julius II, soon after his election in November 1503, to prepare plans for the great new church.

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- (1) The spires were removed in 1942 when St. John's had been damaged by aerial bombardment.
 - (2) GIOVANNONI (G) *Saggi sulla architettura del Rinascimento*, Milan, 1931, p. 202, dates this church 1566. This type of facade, with graceful curves linking the two portions, is also found in Vignola's design for the Gesu', Rome (1569), and Giacomo della Porta's Chiesa dell'Annunziata, Genoa (between 1565 and 1570).
 - (3) QUENTIN HUGHES, *The influence of Italian Mannerism upon Maltese architecture*, in "Melita Historica", I, No. 2, Valletta, 1953, pp. 4-5.

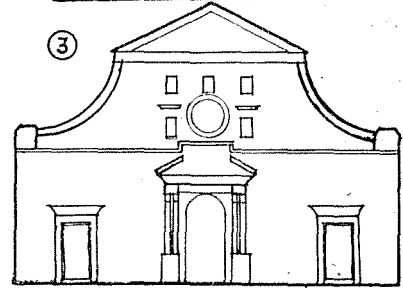
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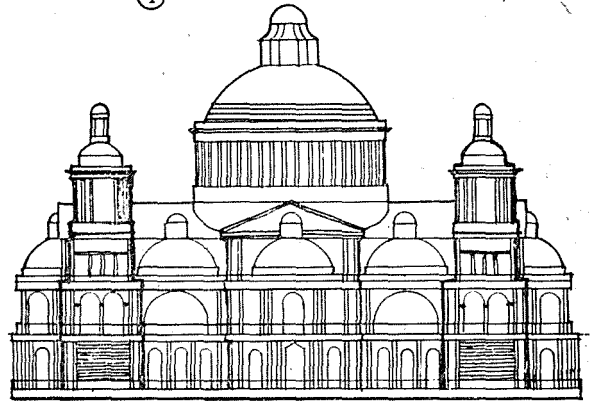
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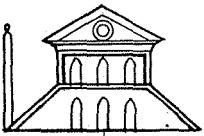
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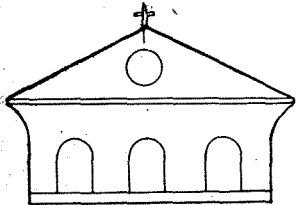
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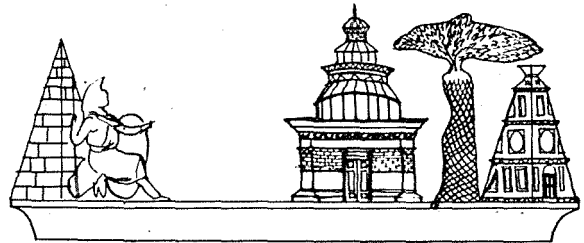
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I. From Giuliano da Sangallo. Project for the facade of S. Lorenzo, Florence (Uffizi. Dis. d'arch. n. 280); II. Vignola. Facade of S. Maria dell'Orto, Rome. III. From Serlio. *Quinto libro d'architettura*, Venice, 1557. IV. Gerolamo Cassar. Augustinian Church, Rabat. V. From Letarouilly, *Vatican*, showing Bramante's proposed facade for St. Peter's, Rome. VI. From Letarouilly, *Vatican*. Surmised facade for St. Peter's. VII. From Letrouilly, *Vatican*. A detail of the bottom right hand panel of the bronze doors at St. Peter's by Filarete. VIII. A portion of the old facade of the Basilica of St. Peter's according to Letarouilly. IX. A portion of the old facade as it appears in "The Meeting of St. Francis and St. Domenic", by Benozzo Gozzoli.

Palladio (4), writing in 1570, had praised Bramante's architecture, and Serlio, a little earlier, had said of him that he "raised up good architecture again, which from ancient times till then had been hidden and kept secret." (5)

Both these architects, and other antiquarians of the time, had included drawings of his work in their books and many considered St. Peter's his greatest design of all. Bramante's work is enigmatic for his style seems constantly to change direction. The more we study his architecture, the more realistic the complexities involved. Several modern art historians (6) have praised and discussed the plans prepared for St. Peter's and the design of the dome which, though not built, was illustrated in Serlio (7), but all have practically neglected the designs for the elevations. What can be the reason for this neglect? It is largely, I believe, because these historians were unable to reach a satisfactory conclusion about the elevations from the evidence which remained to them, for it must be remembered that the church as Bramante designed it was never built, but was actually completed to another design by Michelangelo and succeeding architects.

The evidence which we have consists of two medals prepared by Caradosso and an engraving, which was taken from them, by Agostino Veneziano. The medals were prepared to commemorate the inauguration of the building and were buried in the foundations. The facade depicted on these medals is so strange that writers have considered it a falsification of Bramante's idea by the engraver, or at least an extreme simplification of the proposed design to suit the medium of the small coin. This was clearly the belief held by Letarouilly (8), for he has himself produced an elevation approximately based on the design in the engravings, but tempered to agree with what he thought Bramante would have done. It can be seen from the drawing that the towers, with their multiplication of architectural orders and the coupled Corinthian pilasters supporting the central pediment in Letarouilly's interpretation, bear little resemblance to the designs on Caradosso's medals. It is my opinion that Letarouilly, like others, had built up a preconceived opinion of the development of Bramante's architecture which was based upon an erroneous assessment of his character.

Geymuller's thesis (9) on the development of the rhythm motive in Bramante's work has already been exploded for we know that the first two modulations in

(4) PALLADIO (ANDREA) *I quattro libri di architettura*, Vicenza, 1570, IV, xvii, 97.

(5) The quotation is from the English translation of *The Third book of Antiquitie of the Architecture made by Sebastian Serly*, by Robert Peake, London, 1611, Fol. 16.

(6) GEYMULLER (H. von) *Les projets primitifs pour la Basilique de Saint Pierre*, Paris, 1879. LETAROUILLY (PAUL) *Le Vatican et la Basilique de Saint Pierre, de Rome*, Paris, 1882. FREY (D) *Bramante's St. Peter Entwurf u. seine Apokryphen*, Vienna, 1915. HOFMAN (T) *Die Entstehungsgeschichte des St. Peter in Rome*, Zittau, 1928. BELTRAMI (L) *La cupola vaticana*, Rome, 1929.

(7) *Il Terzo libro di Sebastiano Serlio Bolognese*: Venice, 1562, pp. 35-37.

(8) *Vatican I, The Basilica of St. Peter*, London, 1953, p. 9.

(9) GEYMULLER (H. von) *The School of Bramante*, in "Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects, Transactions", VII, New Series, 1891, pp. 93-142.

elevation treatment that Geymuller attributed to Bramante's early work, those on the facades of the Cancelleria and the Giraud Palace in Rome, were done by some other Lombardic architect, probably before Bramante arrived in the city. In a very clever article Geymuller traced a constant theme of rhythmical development and a singleness of direction which Bramante did not, in fact, possess.

There are two features of Bramante's work which are not generally appreciated. First there is the fact that, beginning in Milan and spreading through his work in Rome, we can trace a constant desire to simplify the architectural orders and motives; and secondly, upon examination it will be found that Bramante's architecture is full of symbolism. This simplification of the architectural orders is found in other architects' work about this time, but it first appears in Bramante's designs on the first floor of the Doric courtyard of S. Ambrogio, Milan (1497-8). Here there is an economy of declaration, the projection of the Doric capitals is reduced to a minimum, and there are no bases at all. Soon after his arrival in Rome he built the Choir of the church of S. Maria del Popolo (1509). Here he was designing in pure proportion and a clean simple line has become the essence of the composition. In the following year he began the courtyard of S. Damaso, one of the two great courtyards he proposed for the enlargement of the Vatican. Instead of applying the normal pilaster and entablature on the ground floor, he inserted plain vertical and horizontal strips without mouldings and with practically no projection; in other words, he indicated the relationship of height to width normally found in the architectural orders with precise line and simple shapes.

We have only to turn to the pages of "Hypnerotomachia Poliphili" (10) to see how important the use of symbols was considered at that time, and Vasari (11) actually refers to "Bramante's fancy to make a frieze on the front of the Belvedere, with letters like ancient hieroglyphics to show his skill and to spell out the Pope's name and his own." Gombrich (12) has recently given a new evaluation of Bramante when he wrote, "our conception of Bramante changes, and he is not an austere classicist. Behind the figure of the ruthless planner we now dimly perceive the utopian dreamer from the North Italian ambiente who tried to transform the capital of Christendom into a classical city conceived in the image of Francesco Colonna's mystery laden fantasies".

We also know that Bramante, when designing St. Peter's, intended to place the Pantheon upon the ancient Temple of Peace. This in itself is symbolic of the union between Imperial and Renaissance Rome with the Temple of Peace representing the conversion of Constantine to the Christian faith.

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- (10) COLONNA (FRA FRANCESCO) *Poliphili Hypnerotomachia*..... Venice, Aldine Press, 1499.
- (11) VASARI (GIORGIO) *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Translated by A. B. Hinds, Vol. II, London, 1948, p. 187.
- (12) GOMBRICH (E. H.) *Hypnerotomachiana*, in "Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes", XIV, Nos. 1 and 2.

It is my belief that Bramante proposed a facade consisting of two towers and a plain central pediment very much in the manner depicted on Caradosso's medals, and in doing so he was symbolizing an incident related to the Martyrdom of St. Peter.

Between 1439 and 1445, Antonio Filarete, working on the commission of Pope Eugene IV, had designed and erected the great bronze doors which closed the central opening to the old basilica of St. Peter. These doors must have been well known to Bramante, for he would have had to pass them on his way to visit the site of the new church. The scene on the bottom right panel, which depicts the Order of Nero and the Crucifixion of St. Peter, is of the utmost importance in this connection. At the base of this panel Filarete has portrayed a domed building set between two pyramids. The domed structure represents the Mausoleum of Hadrian in the large Roman cemetery on the Via Triumphalis. In the Middle Ages there existed two large pyramids on the site of S. Maria Traspontina which flanked the Mausoleum. They were called the Meta di Borgo and the Terebinth of Nero, and it was these that were depicted in Filarete's panel (13). These three buildings occur in many paintings and works of sculpture portraying the Martyrdom of St. Peter, such as the Ciborium of Sixtus IV in the Grotte Vaticane, Giotto's fresco in the Sacristy, and the Vignette of the "Liber ystoriarum romanorum".

VII

If we study Filarete's panel we can see that the right hand pyramid is divided into floors by bold cornice mouldings and each floor is decorated with rectangular or square panels which break down its overall size.

The central building, the Mausoleum of Hadrian, consists of a rectangular facade containing the doorway and surmounted by a dome raised up on a drum which is ornamented with pilasters; and then on the very top there is a smaller version of dome and drum separated from the main dome by a bold cornice moulding.

It is generally believed by tradition that St. Peter was executed on a spot described as being "inter duas metas" (14). The meta was a word usually applied to a pyramidal shaped tomb. The words of Christ, "I say unto thee that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church" (15), together with the belief that St. Peter was crucified between two pyramids, is surely sufficient to warrant Bramante's wish to represent symbolically the Crucifixion on the facade as an outward expression of St. Peter's church.

Bramante proposed that the whole axis should be swung through 90 degrees so that the church might face the obelisk in the Circus of Nero where St. Peter is

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- (13) LANCIANI (RODOLFO) *Christian and Pagan Rome*, Boston and New York, 1892, p. 720.
 (14) BONANNI (PHILIPPUS) *Numismata summorum pontificum templi vaticani*, Rome, 1696.
 (15) Matthew, 16, 18.

reported to have died, in order that the new building might be in a direct line with the place of death. In making this proposal Bramante obviously believed that the place of execution was at least as important, if not more important, than the position of the tomb of the Apostle, for this proposal carried with it the need to move the tomb of the Apostle if it were to remain under the central dome of the new church aligned on the axis of the obelisk and the Vatican. He was not permitted to carry out this proposal, but I believe he did not abandon the idea of depicting the Crucifixion of St. Peter "between two meta" on the facade of the church.

The only possible sources he could have gone to for a representation of the two pyramids were the various paintings and works of sculpture done by the artists of St. Peter's. These works themselves were mere fantasies of the original, for the left hand pyramid, depicted in Filarete's panel, had been stripped of its marble by Pope Donnus I in 675 and levelled to the ground when Alexander VI opened the Borgo Nuovo in 1405, five years before Bramante came to Rome. The right hand structure, the Terebinth of Nero, had also been partly demolished by Donnus I to embellish the quadriporticus of Old St. Peter's. We know from literary evidence that Bramante was used to seeking inspiration from other artists, and Vasari (16) actually refers to an incident in which Bramante borrowed an idea from a door which he saw in Viterbo.

V When we study the facade depicted in Caradosso's medals (17) and notice the striking similarity in that design and motives, it is reasonable to suppose that Bramante got his idea from Filarete and translated it into an architectural composition. The resemblance is too close to require a detailed explanation, but one detail of the composition has not been explained: that is the high pediment which rises above the domed structure containing the entrance doorway, cloaking the end of the nave. Bramante, throughout his work on St. Peter's, was often criticised for the vandalism of pulling down the old basilica, despite the fact that other architects had earlier reported the old church to be in a condition of disrepair which was beyond hope. Any artist would be acutely conscious of this criticism of destroying a work of art, even though he may have had supreme confidence in his own design. I would suggest that this pediment is a sort of debt of honour made by Bramante VIII to the designers of the Early Christian Church. From the drawings in Letarouilly there would appear to be little resemblance between the facade of the old church and that proposed by Bramante, but Letarouilly may not be right, and several early

(16) VASARI, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

(17) The two medals are not identical. One is dated 1517, and has a portrait of Bramante on the reverse side. The other, containing the effigy of Julius II on the reverse side, shows small domes on the towers instead of spires. It is possible that these domes may have been inspired by the dome depicted by some artists on the tower which stood on the outer wall of the atrium of old St. Peter's. There are other medals, but the church is the same as in one or other of these two medals.

paintings suggest otherwise. Benozzo Gozzoli's "Meeting of St. Francis and St. Domenic", in the church of S. Francesco at Montefalco, depicts the pediment of old St. Peter's strikingly similar to that proposed by Bramante on the medals, and in Raphael's "Incendio del Borgo" (1517), in the Vatican, he has shown the same pilaster strips which bind in the end walls of the facade, and the same undecorated band of the entablature (18).

During the High Renaissance centrally planned churches were very popular, in which the attention was concentrated on the central part beneath the dome and any Western extension of the nave or use of western towers was considered distracting from the centrality of the design. On the rare occasions when these towers were used or proposed during that period in Italy, such as Leonardo da Vinci's sketches for a large church, they are used grouped in clusters of four to give support to the central dome. Bramante proposed to use his towers in this manner on St. Peter's.

It is clear, however, that Bramante's followers considered his proposals for St. Peter's as elements in a facade rather than a group of four towers clustered around a dome, for, in 1519, Guidiano da Sangallo reproduced the theme on his competition drawings for the facade of S. Lorenzo at Florence (19). Here Sangallo proposed to use a screen facade for the 15th century church, which had been designed by Brunelleschi, in which the two tall towers surmounted by spires were to act as a western termination of the aisle chapels.

The next time that twin towers appear is in Book V of Serlio's *Architettura* (20), which was first published in Paris by Michel de Vascosan in 1547, and subsequent Italian editions were brought out in 1551, 1557, and 1566, that is, just before Cassar's visit to Rome. Serlio spent his last days in France and may have been influenced by the Gothic cathedrals in that country, nearly all of which have extended naves and western towers; but Bramante is a much more likely source of his design. Serlio had a great admiration for Bramante and considered him the first great architect since Roman times. He was conversant with the design for St. Peter's for he had included two drawings of it in one of his earlier books (21). Serlio produced several plans for large churches, one having a central square building with four circular domed abutments in the centre of each side; but his most important plan shows a Latin cross church with its extended nave flanked by two western towers and, on the next page, the elevation with the two towers.

(18) Later drawings do not usually show these pilasters. See, for example, the map of Rome (1575) by Gianbattista Cavalieri.

(19) *Disegno d'architettura* No. 280, Uffizi, Florence.

(20) *Quinto libro d'architettura di Seb. Serlio Bolognese*, in the edition printed in Venice 1557, 15v.

(21) III, 35, 36, 37. Serlio got most of his material for his books from Baldassare Peruzzi who was Bramante's assistant on St. Peter's.

As I have stated earlier, there are few churches, most particularly in the period of the High Renaissance, in Italy which have western towers, but several churches were built in the tradition of Bramante's design for St. Peter's with four corner towers supporting the central dome. There is, for example, Antonio da Sangallo's the Elder's church of S. Biagio at Montepulciano, built between 1518 and 1528, though only one of the four intended towers was completed. There is also Galeazzo Alessi's S. Maria del Carignano at Genoa which was begun in 1577. But, despite these examples, even in the Baroque period comparatively few western towers were constructed in Italy compared with the tremendous number of new churches which were erected throughout the length and breadth of the country.

On his journey to and from Rome it is likely that Cassar passed through Sicily, and there the story is different. Sicily had for many years been under the dominance of Spain. From the time of the Sicilian Vespers in 1282 Spanish influence began to dominate the arts of the island and throughout the period of the Renaissance in Italy, Sicily had strong Aragonese connections. Cassar had himself been born when Malta still formed a part of the Empire of Charles V, and there were always strong artistic affinities between the two islands. In Spain Late Gothic and Early Baroque architecture link hands and there is practically no High Renaissance work in the pure Italian manner, so that it is understandable that the theme of tall western towers found in the Spanish Gothic cathedrals should have been retained when a veneer of Renaissance was added, and should have persisted in the great Baroque churches which were the glory of her Empire in Mexico and Peru. Nearly all the fine late 16th and 17th century cathedrals have tall western towers, and the same is true in Sicily.

Cassar was sent to Italy to study architecture because Italy was the accepted fountain head of art in the 16th century, but he cannot have been oblivious to the churches of Sicily, and it seems likely that he would have grasped at any Italian example which could legitimize his use of the Sicilian type towers. For this reason, Bramante's facade for St. Peter's, and its developed form as it appears on the pages of Serlio's Book V, would have been of paramount importance to him.

V
III

Sicilian churches boast fine rectangular towers with squat spires, many dating from the 15th century. The towers of Cefalu Cathedral are probably contemporary with Ambroglio da Como's 15th century portico, and there is S. Lucia del Mela, the twin towers of the Santuario di Gibilmanna, and the design of the 16th century campanile of the Matrice Vecchia at Castelbuono. The most striking resemblance between Cassar's facade and the Sicilian churches is found on the cathedral church of S. Michele at Caltanissetta in the centre of Sicily, and here there seems to be a close connection with Cassar's mannerisms. The fat squat pilasters, and the belfry windows are close in design to his work in Malta. This church was not begun until 1570, so that Cassar on his journey to and from

Rome could not have seen its construction, but he may have seen drawings prepared for it, or for another similar church (22).

Once Cassar had set the example on the Conventual Church at Valletta, the most important and influential church of its time in Malta, it was easy for others to follow. First there came the church of St. George in Qormi, begun in 1584, and then a host of others followed, so that this type of facade became the accepted type on the island right up to the reconstruction of the last large church built during the residence of the Knights of St. John, the Church of St. Publius at Floriana.

It will be seen that the Maltese tradition for twin towers is the result of a combination of the traditional influence from nearby Sicily and the impetus of the designs prepared by Bramante for the great central church of Christendom at Rome.

(22) The architect of S. Michele is not known.

THE MALTA DIRECTORY AND TRADE INDEX 1956

In his Foreword to this important reference work the Hon. President of the Malta Chamber of Commerce says that it "not only serves to introduce and display the products of our industries and the range of our market, but includes a great deal of general reference-information in readily accessible form" and "promises to provide an annual survey covering many important aspects of Maltese affairs".

The Malta Publicity Services Ltd. deserve a word of praise for the neat production of the *Malta Directory and Trade Index*, printed in Great Britain by W. S. Cowell Ltd. Its contents, forming a reliable corpus of condensed information concerning Malta past and present, go a long way towards presenting Malta to the business world. At the same time they provide rich material for the future historian of Maltese Trade and Industry.

Melita Historica is mainly concerned with the latter aspect of this useful publication. Section One, which is subdivided into three Parts — I *General*, II *Industry and Commerce*, and III *Tourist Supplement*, contains a number of well-written and reliable articles ranging from *Education in Malta* and *Maltese Commerce and Economy* to *Labour Legislation*, the *History of Banking in Malta* and *Maltese Cooking and its Origin*.

Melita Historica welcomes the appearance of the *Malta Directory and Trade Index* and warmly recommends it to its readers. It is hoped, however, that the next edition will contain at least fewer mistakes in Maltese spelling.

THE EDITOR.