This chapter approaches early modern Valletta from a cultural history perspective. By ranging across themes such as the physical development of the city, its economy and population, its status as a convent-city for the Hospitallers, and the role of audiences in creating perceptions of the city, this study emphasizes the dynamism of the early modern city beyond the label of 'Renaissance town'.

EARLY MODERN VALLETTA: BEYOND THE RENAISSANCE CITY

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INTRODUCTION

> "You take delight not in a city's seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours."[1]

Cities are one of the most complex human creations, and the Hospitallers were accomplished urban planners. Valletta can be said to have been the epitome of early modern Malta, yet there is no straightforward answer to the question: What was early modern Valletta like? Then, as now, the City had different meanings to the various groups and individuals that either lived or made their living in it. The answer it gave depended on who posited the question, and when. Emphasis varies. Some historians might concentrate on the port as crucial to the dynamics of the City, whilst others focus on the grandeur of its structures.[2] Lately there has been a marked interest in the City's underground man-made formations.[3] The Hospitallers themselves regularly described the City as their 'convent'.[4] In 1831, Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) – witnessing a city that must have still carried a strong Hospitaller stamp, whilst possibly bearing scars from the French interlude of 1798-1800 and the plague of 1813, as well as beginning to acquire some form of British feel to it – noted that Malta was "an island, or rather a city, like no other in the world" and that Valletta specifically was "a splendid town".[5] Scott's romantic summation of the City has had an enduring appeal, yet caution is warranted, for myths can easily be mistaken for realities. Periodic proposals for the preservation/resurrection of 'the Renaissance city' ignore the fact that "Valletta is not a city that was built in a decade and then frozen in time. Rather, it displays a breadth of architectural styles,

urban models, and social currents."[6] The City of today is the heir to nearly five centuries of creation and demolition, prosperity and misery, change and continuity. Above all else, it is a community, even if much reduced in numerical terms from previous years.

THE PHYSICAL CITY

The modern (post-)industrial city is different in two key ways from cities of preceding eras. First, the modern city is about access and openness; in contrast, cities in the past emphasized autonomy and controlling access. Hence, the traditional need for ditches, walls, gates and drawbridges, in contrast to the modern emphasis on an infrastructure that eases connectivity. Valletta captures this transition particularly well: from its inception until quite recently it had some form of 'city-gate' to mark its entrance-exit, but this has now been replaced by Renzo Piano's 'breach' in the walls. Second, modern cities are secular; think of developments like Buġibba, for instance, where the urban layout has been dictated by economic factors, tourism in particular. In contrast, cities were traditionally forged by and infused with religion, be it paganism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and so on. Religious buildings used to be at the heart of urban development and daily life revolved around them.[7]

Porta San Giorgio by Paolo de Angelis, 19th century, Heritage Malta Collection, Inv. No. 33769-70, photo: Daniel Cilia
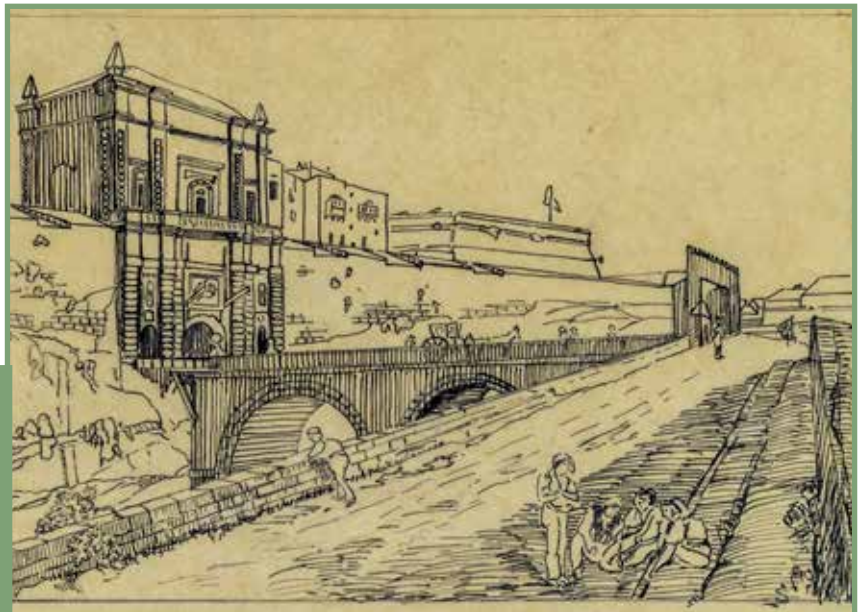
Significantly, the shape of cities and the basic features determining their pattern of life have been powerfully stable over the centuries. The first cities rose in Mesopotamia around 3000/4000 BC, were located on rivers, protected by a wall and contained within them palaces, temples and granaries. In terms of government, these cities possessed town councils which were responsible for the running of civic affairs.[8]

These basic elements – water, defence, administrative and religious structures, food management and some level of civic autonomy – continued to be at the heart of urban development down the centuries and were manifest in early modern Valletta.

During the 16th to the 18th centuries, the medieval city-states gradually made way for larger territorial states. For instance, as the French and English monarchies grew more powerful, and as Paris and London expanded beyond their old walls, rulers demolished fortifications which had stood as symbols of urban autonomy. Instead, new mightier fortifications were erected capable of withstanding cannon fire. These technological developments called for resources which only the increasingly centralizing monarchies of the early modern era were able to garner. Medieval urban centres, which had stood for autonomy and some form of representative government, were replaced or outpaced by cities acting as the nerve centres of absolutist governments. This is evident in the case of Valletta: its rise as the seat of the Hospitaller government of Malta and the administrative heart of its landed-property across Europe was accompanied by the steady decline of Mdina, the medieval centre.[9] The fairly representative and autonomous Mdina *Università* was eclipsed by the new *Università* of Valletta, which operated under the direction of the Grand Master as lay ruler of these islands.

The Order came to have what Victor Mallia-Milanes describes as a 'pathological obsession' with the Ottoman threat of invasion and this had a determining effect on the physical development of Valletta. In the first years, priority was given to the rapid construction of massive fortifications that could withstand a siege. Being on a military-ideological frontier had an overarching impact on urban development throughout the Mediterranean, where Christian-Muslim hostilities were incessant.[10] Once ensconced within Valletta, the Order focused on developing the city itself. The ground was divided into a grid pattern in the manner of a model Renaissance town, which is to-date one of Valletta's hallmarks. The building regulations enforced a standard urban design: all houses had to have a water-tank and sewer; the facades of buildings had to be designed by an architect and corner sites had to be embellished with pilasters or decorations.[11]

Cisterns, as shown in Carapecchio's manuscript preserved at the National Library of Malta, Libr. MS 195

Valletta was born out of the ashes of the Siege of 1565. On 28 March 1566, Grand Master Jean de Valette (r.1557-1568) laid the foundation stone of the city that would come to bear his name. It was common practice in this age for new or re-furbished cities to be named after certain significant individuals in their history. Corsignano, in Italy, was renamed Pienza after Pope Pius II (r.1458-1464), the man who transformed it.[12] Money and aid to build Valletta were obtained from various princes across Europe and in particular from the Papacy, France and Spain. The Pope sent his military engineer Francesco Laparelli (1521-1570) to design a city which, to all intents and purposes, can be described as the designer-city of the 16th century, the archetype of the Renaissance town.[13] A similar example to Valletta is Palmanova in northern Italy, also a designer city, built towards the end of the 16th century by Venice to defend its eastern border.[14] Like Valletta, it was a military town; unlike Valletta, however, Palmanova was never successful in becoming a community. It stands as a lesson that echoes across time: good design, although important, will not by itself lead to the establishment/sustenance of a community. Other factors are needed in the equation, some of which will be discussed here.

Aerial view of Palmanova, Udine, Italy, source: Google Maps

ECONOMY AND POPULATION

Valletta was the seat of the Palace of the Grand Master, the head of the Order and prince of the island; there was also the Conventual Church of the Order, as well as the Hospital, the Bakery, the Treasury, and the *Auberges*. Each *auberge* constituted a distinct ethnic enclave in which those who hailed from similar regions socialised, ate their meals in common and slept. This sort of arrangement was similar to the situation in Venice,

where various ethnic groups lived in separate quarters, most famously perhaps the Jewish Ghetto, and the German and Turkish *fondaci*.[15] Boundaries – both physical and conceptual – were central to the way the early modern mind organized the world around it.

Valletta was also the hub of extensive commercial activities and Christian corsairing. The dues charged to merchants using its harbour were competitive and many used Valletta for entrepôt purposes.[16] Furthermore, Valletta was to Europe what Algiers was to Muslim North Africa: the main base to equip fighting vessels to pillage Muslim shipping. Slavery was common throughout the Mediterranean and the Valletta slave market was considered to be one of the best. Most of the slaves were Muslim and they had a special building reserved for them in Valletta. It is estimated, for instance, that in 1590 there were 3,000 slaves in Malta, whereas in 1632 there were some 2,000.[17] Slaves carried out various tasks, from building fortifications, to rowing on board the galleys, to domestic service. They could also engage in particular paid work to earn some money for their own benefit; many engaged in barbering activities, grooming both slaves and non-slaves.[18] In a case that somewhat prefigures the 2015-2016 debate about the location of the *monti* in Valletta, in 1741, the Grand Master ordered the slave-barbers to remove the tent under which they provided their services from near the Palace to the street behind the Jesuit Church, a decision prompted possibly by both security and aesthetic concerns.[19]

All this economic activity and the safety afforded by the city walls meant that the population of Valletta and its environs was continually growing. By 1632, the total for Malta and Gozo was 51,750. Of these, almost thirty-five percent lived in the urban harbour area. Just over 3,000 people, including Hospitallers, sailors, soldiers and rowers were employed on board the Order of St John's six galleys, highlighting the importance of maritime activities for the local economy.[20] This rapid increase in the population was partly the result of internal migration, with people leaving the countryside and moving to the harbour cities, but mostly due to a constant flow of immigrants coming to Malta from all over the Mediterranean. Most of the immigrants were Italian, especially from Sicily, but there were also Greeks, French, Spanish and many others. A good number of these inter-married with the local population.[21] Valletta was a city deeply influenced by migration patterns.

By 1750, only fifteen percent of Europeans in West and Central Europe lived in cities. Nevertheless, according to Jan de Vries, in early modern Europe the main feature was not an increase in the number of cities, but a trend where the urban population gradually became a larger percentage of the total population. In 1500, 150 cities in Western-Central Europe had populations of circa 10,000, but by 1750, there were 260 cities with populations of about 10,000.[22] The average city in early modern times was one of 5,000-10,000 inhabitants, surrounded by walls and having a town hall,

churches, granaries, some form of civic government and increasingly a university, all features of Valletta. Significantly, early modern Valletta's population was broadly on a par with the average contemporaneous European city: in 1632, Valletta's population was about 8,000. In 1797 – on the eve of the trauma and mobilization of the Maltese uprising against the French-Maltese republican government-garrison – its population stood at just over 20,000.[23] Significantly, in 2013, the population was 5,536.[24]

Early modern observers were fascinated by cities. Contemporary texts, inspired by classical antiquity, emphasized the civility of city life: 'city' meant civility, civilization, citizen. This interest was captured by the *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, a six-volume atlas published between 1572-1617 by Braun and Hogenberg.[25] This was a systematic, comprehensive collection of maps presented in a uniform style; a compilation of the major cities of Europe, including Valletta. The maps in the *Civitates* and similar works captured images of cities as well-ordered spaces of straight lines and cleanliness. Yet the reality in early modern cities like Valletta was far more chaotic and by extension interesting; they were bursting with people and characterised by poverty, dirt and a general frenzy of activity.[26]

THE CONVENT-CITY

Valletta, aside from being a military-administrative centre, was also a 'convent'.[27] In fact, the Hospitallers regularly used the term 'convent' to describe Valletta, which at least in ideal terms, constituted one holy space.[28] Yet this convent contained some unlikely inhabitants, among them, substantial numbers of Muslim slaves. Though they had an area in which they were supposed to stay, many were able to roam freely about town and mix with the population.[29] Muslims recur in the records of the Roman Inquisition of Malta as persons to whom Hospitallers and Maltese turned to for incantations.[30] The official attitude towards Muslims observing their prayers was fairly tolerant; by the 18th century, some travellers reported the existence of a mosque. This building would seem to have been located outside Valletta's walls. In 2012, road works in Marsa unearthed a Muslim cemetery dated around 1675.[31] In 1770, it is reported that the 'Turkish slaves' wanted to gather at this site as a penitential act to ask 'God and Mahomet' to assist the Sultan during the ongoing Russo-Turkish War (1768-1774); this request was turned down.[32] There were also a number of Jews present in Malta. Although most of these were slaves there were also, from time to time, merchants who happened to be passing-by. For this reason, one cannot speak of a properly established community, which also meant that there was no ghetto. Those Jews who were in Malta were expected to make themselves known to the Inquisitor and to wear distinctive clothing, however, some managed to evade the

rules. In the Birgu prison, a small room was set aside for Jewish worship.[33] Hence, while Muslim and Jewish religious practices were allowed, they were circumscribed and located beyond the convent.

Another set of unlikely inhabitants in the convent-city were prostitutes. A decree of 1631 tried to limit the presence of prostitutes to only certain streets within this 'holy convent'.[34] A visitor in 1715 nicknamed (approvingly) Malta as 'Gomorrha parva', recalling the Biblical city destroyed by God for its sexual behaviour.[35] The image below shows an early 17th-century impression of a Maltese prostitute. The woman in the middle is described as a '*Chirazza*', a courtesan when inside the house, whereas the one on the far left covered with a black cloak is described as a '*Chirazza*', when outside the house. The *Chirazza*'s dress was patterned and had embroidery and lace; she also sported a fantastic hairstyle. Here was an instance of a successful entrepreneur. The reports of travellers describing Valletta as 'swarming with prostitutes' need to be considered with caution for they were prone to exaggeration While some women became prostitutes because of poverty, others chose this option as a way of life.[36]

When Valletta was being planned it was meant to have an area called a *collacchio* that would be reserved for the Hospitallers and from which women were barred: in the end, though often considered, no *collacchio* was created.[37] Instead, as in the case of the 1631 decree, attempts were made to regulate where prostitutes could operate and live. As happened in Italian cities, prostitutes in Malta were supposed to wear distinctive clothing to distinguish them from 'honest women' and make it easier for men to identify them.[38] This was an attempt to forge societal boundaries by restricting where prostitutes could live and determine what they could wear. Frequenting prostitutes was not only about sex; particular prostitutes created social networks around them which were regularly

The *Chirazza*, as showned in this drawning by Opizio Guidotti, National Library of Malta, Libr. MS 413

frequented and patronized by Hospitallers and others. Approaching Valletta from the lens of its sex workers provides an opportunity to view the city from the spaces within its fortifications and the rooms in taverns where such encounters occurred, rather than from the more usual view offered from the palaces and churches.

AUDIENCES

Sir Walter Scott was not the first or last to be gripped by Valletta. The novelist Thomas Pynchon (1937-) used Valletta as the backdrop of the final chapters of his novel *V.* (1963).[39] In the popular computer game *Age of Empires III* (c.2005), Valletta and its surrounding areas feature as the base of the protagonist, Morgan Black.[40] None of this should be surprising. From the beginning the Hospitallers wanted their designer city to impress. For instance, from the early 17th century, the Order's armoury was set up inside the Grand Master's Palace, where besides serving as a weapon depository, it was rapidly developed into an antiquarian collection that exalted the Order's historic military past and sacrifices for the Faith.[41]

Model of Birgu highlighting the *Collacchio,* Heritage Malta Collection, Inv No. ETHN/S/670

The Order had a number of audiences in mind that it wanted to impress, not least themselves. This they did by surrounding themselves with an impregnable city encrusted with trophies of their glorious past. Foreign visitors also had to be astounded by their art and architecture designed to convey the Order's glory and commitment in defending the Faith. The third audience consisted of the local population of Malta itself. The island and its people benefited from the Order's presence: jobs were available and the general standard of living was higher when compared to nearby Sicily. The blood spilled by both Hospitallers and Maltese had consecrated Valletta, the city born out of the ashes of 1565 and both had a stake in ensuring the continuing prosperity of the island. The fourth audience consisted of the slave population in Malta. The religious-military symbolism that surrounded them was meant to impress upon them the might of the Order and possibly urge them to embrace Christianity.

CONCLUSION

Valletta was a prototype of the ideal Renaissance town. It was home to the Order of St John, an institution that carried the medieval idea of just and holy war into modernity and to this day Valletta is still a monument to their values and their capabilities. At the same time, it is imperative to emphasize that Valletta's post-Hospitaller history and present are equally important aspects of its identity. Various factors contributed to the physical creation and subsequent development of the city: war, the geography of the frontier, religion, ethnicity, migration, population growth and a desire for immortality. It was above all a city underlined by an obsession with the idea of boundaries: dividing lines, real or imaginary were meant to set the Hospitallers apart from Jews, Muslims, Maltese, bad women, and others; to keep all of these separate and distinct from each other. In reality, such boundaries proved to be doorways as much as they were impediments: on the streets of Valletta and within its buildings, both private and public, the various groups mingled and interacted. Furthermore, Valletta's reality was characterised by apparent contradictions. On

Above: The Pinto trophy above the Auberge de Castille doorway

Left: Grand Master's Palace, Valletta

the one hand, slaves and prostitutes were persons at the margins of society, on the other they were central to that society through the work they performed. Much of early modern Valletta's majestic fabric was built and maintained by slaves. It is perhaps the irony of history that we acknowledge the proud lines of our symmetric city, but forget the humble shoulders of the marginalized who laboured beneath the ignominy of servitude.

Finally, through Valletta, the Order aimed to identify and address key audiences that were important for its survival, for in the end what mattered was not what things were, but what they seemed to be, and the Order wanted to be seen as vital and necessary to Europe.

View of the façade of St John's Conventual Church with the 8 September Procession, Heritage Malta Collection, Inv. No. NMFA/P/37812-3, photo: Daniel Cilia

ENDNOTES

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