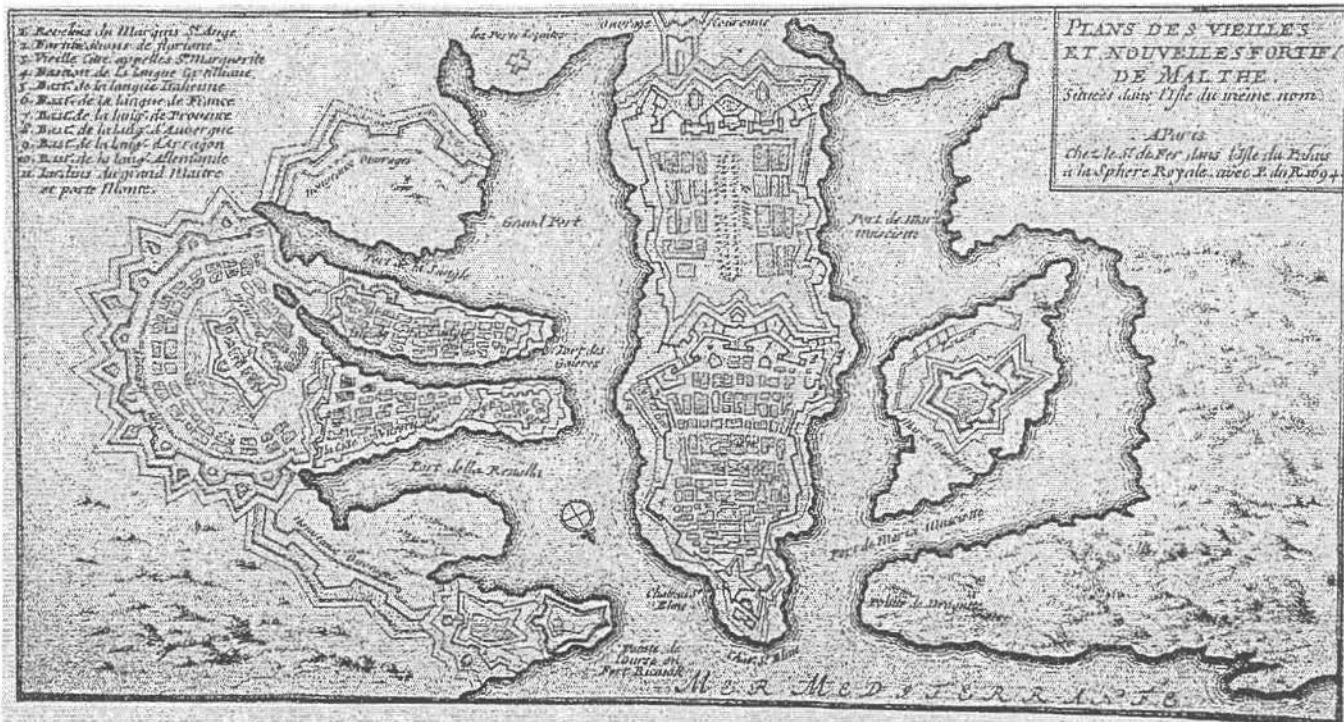


Giovanni Battista Vertova: Diplomacy, Warfare and Military Engineering Practice in Early Seventeenth-Century Malta

by Denis De Lucca

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The book *Giovanni Battista Vertova: Diplomacy, Warfare and Military Engineering Practice in Early Seventeenth-Century Malta* is a fascinating publication that sheds new light on some hitherto nebulous areas in the history of fortress Malta, focusing on Valletta.



Plan of the Grand Harbour fortifications drawn under the supervision of Marshall Vauban (1694)
(Istituto Storico e di Cultura dell'Arma del Genio, Rome)

Authored by Denis De Lucca, head of Architecture and Director of the International Institute for Baroque Studies at the University of Malta, this excellently researched and beautifully illustrated book, published by Midsea Books Ltd, covers three main themes, all related to the defence of Malta in the early seventeenth century.

As implied in the title, the main thrust of this new book concerns the life history of a forgotten brilliant military engineer – Count Giovanni Battista Vertova of Bergamo (1592-1647) – who became a Knight of Malta in 1617 and who, through his excellent connexions with other members of his profession in neighbouring Italy, served well the interests of the Order of St John at a crucial point in its history when the Knights were determined to strengthen the fortifications of Valletta and build the outworks of Floriana and Cospicua.

It was Vertova, a brilliant mathematician and a veteran of the Italian wars of Valtellina and Mantova, who made it possible for Grand Master Lascaris not only to considerably stiffen the bastions of Valletta, but also to obtain the best possible advice with regards to what had to be done to protect Baroque Malta from Muslim occupation.

Not only was Vertova honoured to travel to Italy aboard the flagship of Genova as the personal envoy of Grand Master Lascaris, not only did he manage to put Malta on the forefront of contemporary military engineering thinking and experiment in very troubled times, but through his standing and prestige as a military engineer Vertova also introduced Valletta to Catholic Europe as a veritable laboratory of research and progress in this field of study.

Among other things, Professor De Lucca tells us that one important figure in Vertova's meetings in Italy in 1638-39 was the Jesuit military engineer and famous Professor of Mathematics Oratio Grassi. It now emerges that this person was none other than the architect of the church of St Ignatius in Rome and a tremendously influential figure in contemporary military engineering practice in Baroque Europe.

Vertova's discussions with Oratio Grassi and with other leading military engineers in war-torn Italy revealed the existence of many contemporary projects of the Knights, now lost, to fortify Manoel Island and to displace the Cathedral, the Università, and the people of Mdina to the Floriana area.

There also seems to have been at this time

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great fears of an imminent Muslim slave uprising which led Vertova to propose the isolation of Fort St Elmo with a wet ditch and its use as a last post and as a storehouse for foodstuffs and munitions, complete with a small berthing place for supply and evacuation purposes. Vertova's scheme to encircle the fort with bastioned walls was later on implemented by the Spanish military engineer Don Carlos De Grunenbergh.

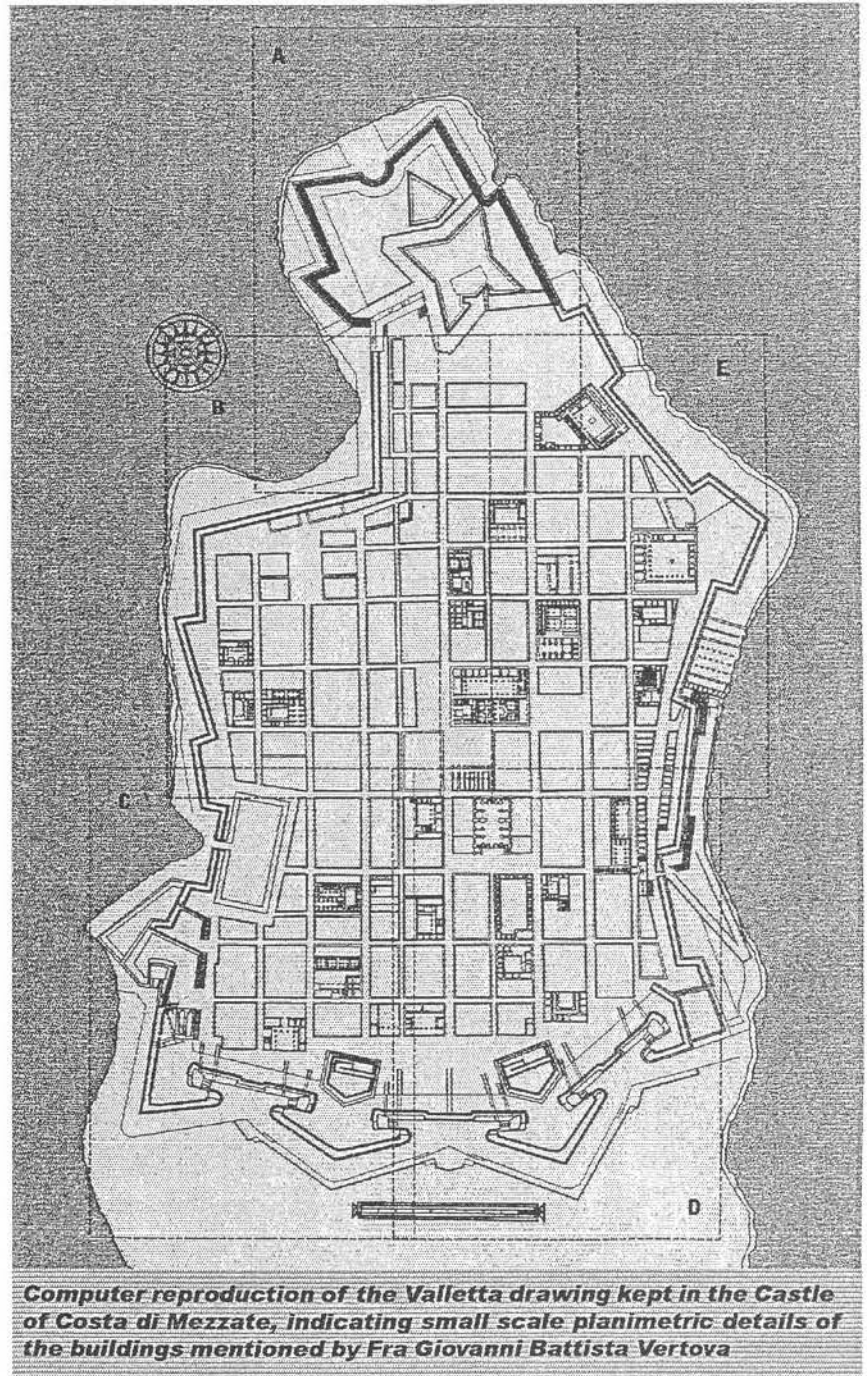
A second purpose of Denis De Lucca's new book about Vertova is to introduce the reader to two plans of the Grand Harbour and Valletta, annotated by the military engineer and discovered by the author some years back in Vertova's family castle at Costa di Mezzate. These plans focus on an unrealised project for the development of the Birgu galley arsenal according to contemporary Italian models and on a very orderly urban experience in Valletta in the early seventeenth century.

Most of the buildings of Vertova's Valletta seem to have been very different from what they are now. There was, for example, a huge prison for slaves facing the lower Barracca approximating the size of the Grand Hospital and the Magisterial Palace.

The church of S. Caterina d'Italia was non-existent, and the church of Our Lady of Victories then faced St James Cavalier. The old Augustinian church faced Old Mint and not Bakery street, and detailed plans shed new light on the original designs of many churches and auberges including those of Italy, France and Castille, which were all restructured in later times.

There is also plenty of graphic information on the old Carmelite monastery and the church of Porto Salvo, and on the layout of the beautifully landscaped courtyards of a very different Magisterial Palace, the Jesuit college, and other buildings, all revealing a hidden Valletta exclusively controlled by the Knights which was not immediately obvious to anyone walking through various streets which then also had very different names.

In the building of Valletta, this book reveals, the Knights made a very conscious attempt to balance the arid conditions of



Computer reproduction of the Valletta drawing kept in the Castle of Costa di Mezzate, indicating small scale planimetric details of the buildings mentioned by Fra Giovanni Battista Vertova

the Maltese Islands to which they had objected in 1530, with luxurious gardens situated right in the centre of their new capital city. The land front fortifications of Valletta were later strengthened by additional outworks including two counterguards designed by Vertova who, we are told, was also responsible for remodelling some bastions.

In the third part of his book, Denis De Lucca provides completely new information about the family history of Vertova's friend, the military engineer, the Marquis of St Angelo who had collaborated with him in Florence to build a model of the new

fortifications of Valletta and who was up to now thought to have been the son of Cosimo I de Medici, the ruler of Florence.

For the first time, reference is also made to the presence in Malta of another friend of Vertova, the then famous Jesuit mathematician and military engineer Giacomo Maso, who not only became the personal adviser of Grand Master Lascaris on fortifications but was also the author of a forgotten treatise about military architecture. This treatise was derived from a collection of very detailed notes on which Fra Maso had based lectures delivered to

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distinguished audiences in Rome and Palermo and to large gatherings of Knights at the Jesuit College in Valletta.

In view of the fact that our present day knowledge on Jesuit military education in Baroque Europe is still very limited, the introductory information about this highly specialised subject in De Lucca's book has already attracted the attention of some Italian universities which will be collaborating with the International Institute for Baroque Studies to intensify research about Jesuit knowledge and teaching on military architecture in early modern Europe.

Meanwhile, Fra Giacomo Maso's 400-page treatise entitled *Trattato dell'Architettura Militare Defensiva et Offensiva* is at present being studied in depth by the Institute in preparation for a publication on this subject as some very revealing correspondence between Vertova and the papal inquisitor concerning the then suppressed works of Galileo Galilei.

Count Vertova, the godfather of Duke Emanuele II and the distant relative of Saint Carlo Borromeo, died in Malta on 14 April 1647, at the relatively young age of 55. Denis De Lucca's book surely does full justice to his forgotten contribution to military engineering knowledge and the development of Valletta during the seventeenth century.

In this respect, one recalls the author's previous book on Carapecchia, described by Francesco Gurrieri and Paolo Portoghesi as having been of great importance to the history of Baroque architecture in Europe. This book was also dedicated to the memory of another great builder of Baroque Malta, the architect Romano Carapecchia.

Considered from this angle, the efforts of the International Institute of Baroque Studies to focus attention on the achievements of these forgotten architects and military engineers who were responsible for shaping our rich architectural heritage is indeed praiseworthy, certainly a welcome contribution to our knowledge of Baroque Malta and its European connexions.

Joe Mercieca ■