

Denis De Lucca. *Mondion. The achievement of a French military engineer working in Malta in the early eighteenth century*. Malta: 2003, pp.viii+86.

In February 1715, the 34-year-old French military engineer Charles François de Mondion arrived in Malta, as deputy head of French military mission headed by René Jacob de Tigné. Having been described to Grand Master Ramon Perellos as a brilliant young military engineer who had studied under the great Vauban, he was to give his opinion regarding the strengthening of the Floriana covered way and glacis and the Santa Margherita outworks.

Thus starts the connection with Malta of an architect and military engineer who was to leave his imprint in a number of landmark buildings mostly during the magistracy of Antonio Manoel de Vilhena. Mondion would spend most of his remaining years in Malta where he died in 1633.

Denis De Lucca's monograph about this important military engineer is the first full-length study about him. Even though it seems to be quite difficult to get plentiful biographical details, the author has still managed to offer an interesting assessment in what is a very beautifully produced book. Moreover, a couple of the appendices consist of contemporary descriptions of the island's actual and proposed fortifications that scholars of military architecture will deem invaluable.

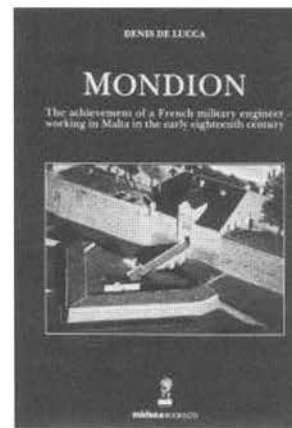
Tigné left soon afterwards but Mondion was granted leave of absence to enable him to stay on the island where he worked on the Floriana landfront turning it into what Tigné himself described as as "one of the most beautiful and feared in Europe". Tigné also lauded Mondion's "ability and intelligence".

Mondion identified the weak points in the Marsamxett harbour and proposed the fortification of *L'Izoletto* (Manoel Island) and Dragut Point (Tigné Point). In later years Mondion would link his name to the fortifications of Manoel Island.

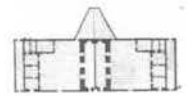
Mondion was also involved in other works until 1722 when a great admirer of his skills, Antonio Manoel, became Grand Master and his outstanding maecenas. In 1718 he submitted plans for an extension of Cospicua and improvements in the coastal fortifications in accordance with the changing strategic vision of the island's defence by the Order.

Like so many visitors to the island, Mondion seems to have fallen in love with the island and strove to be allowed to stay on indefinitely. Ambassador de Mesmes wrote to Manoel from Paris that Mondion preferred to be in Malta "to all the glory and rewards which he had good reason to expect in view of his ability and good service".

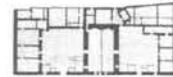
In the first years of Manoel's magistracy, Mondion was entrusted with at least seven major projects which included the preparation of site plans, design drawings and detail sheets and the actual execution of the new fort on *L'Izoletto*. The plans included a novel idea its raised parade ground and its symmetrically-located



*Pianta dell'Espedite del Gesù
projetta dal Cav. Mondion
nel 1726.*



*Le stanze l'Espedite come si trova
nel 1719.*



Spaccato di Ter. Maltese, come sta prima per il Cav. di S. Antonio.



bomb-proof magazines. Another feature was the chapel dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua, the Grand Master's patron saint, and which would become the French engineer's final resting place. Ruined by bombs in the war, the church for many years was also the victim of super-efficient modern Vandals. The on-going restoration at the fort will, one hopes, bring back the fort's former glory and that the church will rise phoenix-like from the rubble to grace the harbour.

Another project was the building of the new suburb of Floriana, more or less on the lines set out by Count Valperga. Mondion's plans included a design for *Porte des Bombes*, a spacious parade ground and a fountain.

Beyond the harbour area, Mondion was employed in the baroque revival of Mdina following the disastrous earthquake of 1693. Mdina was effectively to become Mondion's city. Many of the noble buildings and structures bear testimony to his skills and vision. The main gate, the magisterial palace, the municipal palace and Greek's Gate are some of these works which any visitor to Mdina just cannot escape. De Lucca also suggests that Mondion "was actively involved in the design and building of the Bishop's seminary."

Even Gozo was to receive Mondion's attention. His works included the rebuilding of the Banca Guiratale which would be changed somewhat in following years and an abortive project for the building of an alternative city within Fort Chambray. Mondion was also lucky in having among his assistants Romano Fortunato Carapecchia who had been trained in the *Accademia di San Luca* and the able Maltese *capomastro* Francesco Zerafa. Yet there can be little doubt that he was instrumental in French concepts of baroque architecture, in spite of the fact that he does not seem to have had any formal training in architecture, but which he saw as an extension of his training as an engineer.

Mondion died of a heart attack at 4.30 am on Christmas Day 1733 and was buried in the crypt of the Fort Manoel church. The tombstone has since been destroyed but like most architects, Mondion does not really need one. One has only to look around to

see the results of his genius.

De Lucca's book is lavishly illustrated with many excellent photographs, contemporary plans, and diagrams by Malta's foremost military illustrator, Stephen Spiteri. All of those complement the text admirably while Spiteri's diagrams are invaluable since they give an excellent idea of the fortifications before we did our successful best to ruin most of them. Of great importance to the student of fortifications in Malta are the appendices in the book. One of them, written in 1717 by an anonymous Frenchman, gives a succinct history of the Order's fortifications in Malta which was possibly written to put the newly-arrived Tigné and Mondion in the picture. One of the manuscripts at our National Library, the document is presented in a free translation.

Another appendix consists of the report by Tigné

completed in 1715. Entitled *Discours general sur le fortifications de Malteet ce qui reste a faire pour le mettre en estat d'une bonne deffance*, it is also found in the National Library. It is a very exhaustive report which provided Mondion with a sort of blueprint of the works he was to undertake in the island. The third appendix is Mondion's own report written in 1715 which stresses the importance of the fort on *L'Izoletto*, which would make up for the weakness of the northern side of Valletta. It is also to be found in our National Library.

Louis J. Scerri

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