

# Cultural links between Rhodes and Malta

A team of Maltese and Greek experts in the fields of art, architecture and conservation recently met in Rhodes to discuss the cultural links between Rhodes and Malta. This was the first time that a team of scholars from the two islands met to share information. The one-day meeting was held in the splendid Grand Master's palace in the medieval town of Rhodes.

The meeting was chaired by Dr Ray Bondin of the Valletta Rehabilitation Project, who introduced the talks by emphasising the close links that exist between Malta and Rhodes through the presence of the Knights of St. John on both islands. He argued that this should be the first step in establishing further cultural links. Lea Miniades, deputy mayor of Rhodes, stated that the municipality of Rhodes welcomed the proposals put forward by Dr Bondin, and that she intended to continue to collaborate not only on an academic and research level but also through other links.

Professor Anthony Luttrell gave the first presentation and took the occasion to launch his new publication, *The Town of Rhodes 1306-1356*. His keynote speech concentrated on the move of the Knights to Malta. He appealed for the preventive conservation of the documents from Rhodes currently preserved in the National Archives of Malta, and stressed the importance of joint research ventures between the two islands. He also spoke about the current inadequate system of manuscript retrieval in Maltese archives, making research an expensive and arduous exercise.

Professor Mario Buhagiar gave a paper entitled "The Rhodian Treasure of the Hospitaller Knights in Malta", providing important information on a sample of precious artefacts belonging to the Conventual Church of St. John in Valletta, the Cathedral Museum of Mdina, and the Collegiate Church of St. Lawrence at Birgu, that the Knights brought over from Rhodes. He stated that these bear testimony to the sophisticated patronage patterns that existed in the sixteenth century. He also highlighted the need for an orchestrated programme of cultural collaboration between the two islands.

Professor Denis De Lucca discussed the publication *A Description of Baroque Malta* by Albert Jouvin de Rochefort, which provides a large amount of detail about the architecture and other elements of baroque Malta. Dr Keith Sciberras presented a paper entitled "A Rhodian Relic in a Baroque Macchina", which highlighted the concept of continuity between Rhodes and Malta as perceived through the evolution of artistic expression. He discussed in some detail the important relic of the right hand of St. John the Baptist.

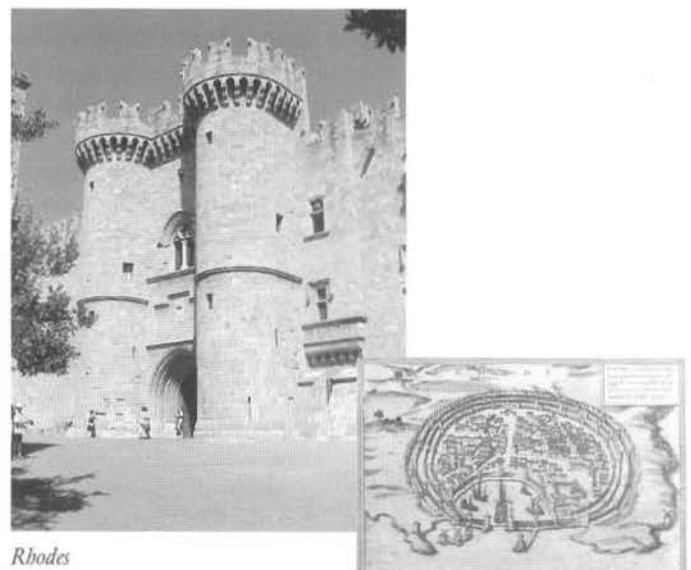
A section of the seminar concentrated on the development of fortifications between Rhodes and Malta through Italy. An expert from Rhodes and one from Naples described the development of the bastion system, while Stephen Spiteri discussed how Rhodian

military architecture reflected that of Malta. Mr Spiteri portrayed the Maltese fortifications as a reflection of a technical revolution brought about by gunpowder artillery.

Other Rhodian scholars highlighted the integrated conservation approach being adopted in Rhodes. Although the historic strata of the town of Rhodes are different from those of Valletta, all case studies refer to the common problems in the preservation of urban fabric – the economic, social and urban pressures caused by disintegration of social cohesion, overgrowth of tourism and leisure, low standards of living and the difficulties of architectural conservation. These points were also highlighted by Dr Ray Bondin, who spoke of the work done over the past fifteen years by the Valletta Rehabilitation Project, and emphasised the problems that still persist in Valletta. He showed appreciation for the work that had been done on the fortification system in Rhodes, and lamented the state of the fortifications in Valletta, particularly at Fort St. Elmo. He stated that while a lot has been carried out to save and conserve buildings and artefacts in Valletta, much work still remains to be done.

The day was concluded with the signing of a protocol of cooperation between the city of Rhodes, represented by its Mayor Dr George Giannopoulos, and Valletta, also represented by its Mayor Dr Paul Borg Olivier, which established further collaboration between the two cities. The Maltese delegation left Rhodes highly impressed by the regeneration and rehabilitation work being carried out. Most of the buildings are in a very good state of conservation and the streets are well paved. While the effects of tourism could not be missed, generally speaking the image the town portrayed was very positive.

The meeting was financed by the European Union, and was held on the initiative of Dr Ray Bondin and Lea Miniadis. It was well attended and received good coverage from the local media.



Rhodes