

International Conference

Sebastien Le Prestre de Vauban

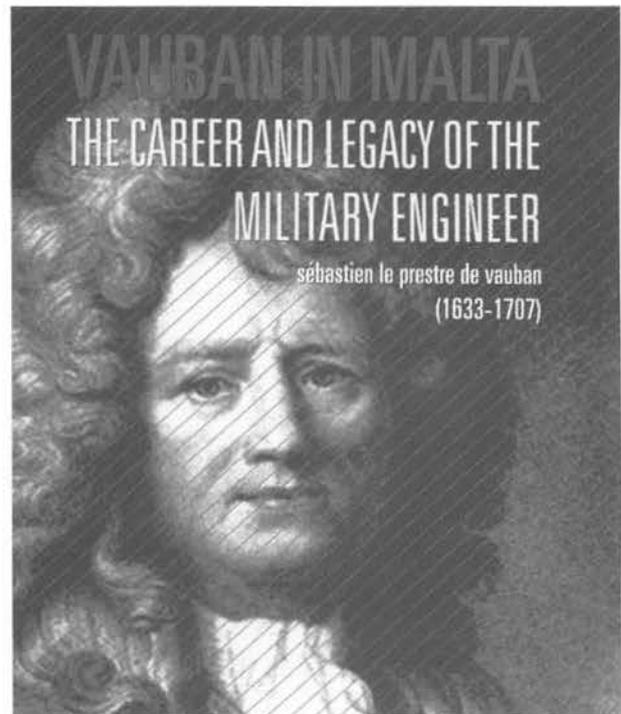
Maria Grazia Cassar

On 22-23 November 2007 Malta joined those European countries who throughout the year commemorated the trecentenary of the death of Sebastien Le Prestre De Vauban in 1707. To mark this occasion, a two-day conference was organised by the Embassy of France in Malta and the International Institute for Baroque Studies of the University of Malta, in collaboration with the Ministry for Resources and Infrastructure, the Malta Tourism Authority and the *Kamra tal-Periti*, together with a number of other entities which supported this event. The venue was the Phoenicia Hotel which is interposed between the Valletta and Floriana landfront fortifications brought to perfection by the 1715 French military mission to Malta, working on the guidelines inherited from Vauban.

The conference was chaired by Dr Claude Busuttill, a conservation architect who lectures in the Department of Architecture and Urban Design. The Hon Ninu Zammit, Minister of Resources and Infrastructure, opened the conference with a depiction of the situation in Malta in 1714, when the fear of invasion spurred the Grand Master of the Order of St. John to seek assistance from France to upgrade the defences. Louis IV responded by sending a military mission to Malta, headed by Brigadier René Jacob de Tigné who assessed and made plans for the improvement of the fortifications. What followed was an intense building spurt of defences and fortifications, which were a direct result of Vauban's school. Thus the designs of the many Baroque gateways, the gunpowder magazines, coastal batteries and redoubts, as well as Fort Manoel and Fort Chambrai are examples of the French influence on military engineering in Malta. These, together with the other secular buildings designed by the military engineer François de Mondion, are testimony to Malta's rich architectural legacy indebted to French expertise. The Minister concluded by mentioning the current restoration projects of these fortifications which are part of our common European legacy.

The next speaker was the Ambassador of France, H.E. Jean Marc Rives, who said that the works of Marshal Vauban were a uniting factor in the diversity and complexity of the European Union. This was manifested in the oeuvre of this great military engineer which is still present with us today, and thanks to which, many countries were able to live in peace and tranquillity within their borders. Vauban was a great personality, a patriot and a military man, whose preoccupation was to improve the lives of his compatriots. The Ambassador augured that the main protagonists of the Mediterranean region would endeavour to restore and suitably re-use these fortifications through mutual co-operation and pooling of resources and expertise.

The first paper to be presented in the conference was by Professor Denis De Lucca of the University of Malta, entitled "French Military Engineers in Malta in the Baroque Age". This portrayed the comings and goings of French military engineers in Malta between 1650 and 1750, when France ascended as leader in European politics. Thus, in 1645 Blaise François Conte de Pagan made a detailed report on the fortifications, joined by other visiting French military engineers. Mederico Blondel was a resident engineer in Malta during the 1660s. Claude de Colongues visited in 1703 and in 1714, and the Grand Master



Ramon Perellos y Rocaful asked for protection from the King of France. This led to the dispatching of a military mission to Malta in 1715, led by René Jacob de Tigné and seconded by François de Mondion. After assessing the situation and drawing up plans for the strengthening of Malta's defences, further help was sought and four other engineers were sent. These were Philippe Maigret, Victor Hyacinthe d'Artus, Lafon and Guillor. The mission was soon recalled to France, but Mondion was given leave to remain and during his stay managed to convert the Floriana landfront "into one of the most beautiful and feared in Europe". Throughout the course of his 20 years of service to the Order, into which he was admitted as a Knight of Grace, Mondion carried out numerous defensive works as well as designing palaces, gateways, hospitals and a theatre in Valletta. Malta greatly benefited by the presence of these military engineers and was pushed to the forefront as a laboratory for their ideas.

The next paper at the conference was by the President of the Association Vauban, Professor Alain Montferrand, who reiterated that this commemoration was being held in many places in Europe and likewise Malta, the "outermost frontier" was also giving Vauban his due. He mentioned that Vauban's fortifications have been proposed as candidate Unesco World Heritage Sites. Malta is unique in that it harbours a condensation of all the different styles of the history of fortification in a limited space, even if these are unfortunately not well protected. Montferrand went on to give a portrayal of Sebastien Le Prestre De Vauban, mainly outlining the three facets of his personality: the builder of fortresses, the conqueror of towns, and the visionary. He talked about his achievements and the places he fortified, as well as explaining the innovations he introduced, always with the main aim of dissuading the enemy from attack.

Dr. Claude Busuttill's paper was entitled "Condition of

the Fortifications – an Assessment” He briefly outlined the French influence on architecture and military engineering in 18th century Malta, which reached all spheres of culture and the arts, and mentioned the damage caused by aerial bombings during World War II - which was surpassed during the past fifty years by neglect and unrestrained building development. He supported his argument by showing a series of photographs of various parts of the fortifications which spoke for themselves. Busuttill stated that this immense legacy of fortifications should be appreciated as one whole, and many parts are in a precarious state of conservation. This is due to the intrinsic nature of the stone used to build them, which is very susceptible to decay. Many restoration interventions of the past were not based on scientific criteria, and this further contributed to their deterioration. He also said that the present situation with regard to development gave little or no assurance for the protection of heritage. Furthermore there existed a conditioning of heritage for cultural consumption, which excluded certain groups and led to its gentrification. He ended by mentioning problems such as a leisure society’s demand for construction and the frustration of the public and NGOs at this situation.

Professor Maria Giuffé from the University of Palermo spoke about the influence of Vauban in Sicily. She began by stating that Vauban was very well known and appreciated in Sicily, especially in the town of Messina. Carlos de Grunenberg, in the employ of the Viceroy of Sicily, was a military engineer who had connections with Louis XIV and wrote about Sicily. Moreover, two famous Sicilian architects of the 18th century, Giovanni Amico and Tommaso Maria Napli, were known to have had treatises relating to Vauban’s works in their libraries. In the designs for the fortification of Palermo of 1722, outworks in accordance with Vauban’s school were incorporated, and the regular polygonal trace was adopted in 1733 because it was the simplest and most effective method of fortification “*del Signor Vauban*”. Sicily was indeed a land of towns, with a long history of construction, starting from the Roman Castrum to the feudal towns. Carlentini and Nuova Avola which was the property of the Dukes of Terranova, as well as Nuova Noto were built to a grid design and a modular layout of piazzas. Avola, being close to the coast, had walls which defined the town and opened it out to the sea, which allowed for an exchange of ideas and experiences. In 18th century Sicily, French culture truly laid its roots, and this may be epitomised by the painting on the panel of a Sicilian cart, which juxtaposed a view of the dome of Florence with the flower market in Paris.

Dr. Stephen C. Spiteri, the Superintendent of Fortifications and author of several books on the subject, spoke about the French influence on the fortifications in Malta. Mondion’s stay in Malta was a seminal period in all aspects of the military arts. The Baroque gateways with their symbolic sculptural details were brought to completion during this time, and much of the final shape and character of Malta’s fortifications is a product of the French school of military architecture. New elements such as drawbridge mechanisms, polveristas, the addition of covered ways and outworks, lunettes and retrenched lunettes were all introduced effectively, as well as the inclusion of countermines in the design of fortresses. The standardisation of forms, the introduction of orders, the use of rustication, the details of the slopes of the ramparts, as well as the building of barracks were all due to the French military engineers who worked here. The French did not simply impart new ideas, but also a new sense of professionalism in architecture and military engineering. They established a surveying department, documented all existing fortifications, and with their methodical, disciplined approach,

raised the standard of technical drawing. This finesse reached its apex in the designs of Fort Manoel and Fort Chambrai, the latter sadly never completed.

Professor Michele Virol, Maitre de Conférences I.U.F.M., Paris Sorbonne, presented a paper on “*Les Oisivetés de Monsieur De Vauban*”. Vauban was an exact contemporary of the French King Louis XIV, and is best known for his teachings in the art of military engineering, of building techniques, mathematics and hydro engineering. He was the first to conceptualise frontiers through a geographical demarcation line. He went through all the stages of his military career from cadet in 1651, to Marchal de France in 1703 and was pronounced Chevalier des Ordres du Roi in 1705. His writings, preserved in the Vauban archives, contain facets of his personality which are not so well known, and portray him also as a political man and a free thinker. He wrote about diverse subjects such as nobility, the economical reflections of the navigability of the canals and rivers of France, forestry, pig farming, the economy of Canada and the reform of the army. Not all his ideas found favour with the King, but nonetheless he spoke out and heralded philosophies of the future. Virol ended the first day of the Conference by stating that Vauban was ‘*un homme de lumière*’.

The second day of the conference began with a presentation by architect Dr. David Mallia, who holds a doctorate in conservation from the *Polytecnico di Milano*. He is a diplomat and a Council Member of the non-governmental organisation *Din l-Art Helwa*, Malta’s National Trust, whose restoration works he oversees. *Din l-Art Helwa* is a member of Europa Nostra and is also affiliated to other international organisations. Mallia outlined the history of the coastal towers, both of the first generation and those built later through the influence of the French military engineers, which included batteries and redoubts. These were situated in the centre of the bay and formed part of the strategy to prevent enemy landings. Mallia said that today many of the minor fortifications are in a state of decay and abandonment and risk being lost. He explained the various types of restoration interventions, making comparisons through the use of photographs between the British period type of plastic repair and the more recent methods of restoration, such as those adopted by *Din l-Art Helwa*. Restoration projects of military structures carried out by *Din l-Art Helwa* include St. Agatha’s Tower in Mellieha (the Red Tower), Torri Mamo in Marsascalea, Wignacourt Tower in St. Paul’s Bay, Dwejra Tower and Isopu Tower in Gozo, Ghallis Tower and Qalet Marku Tower in Bahar ic-Caghaq, and St. Mary’s Tower and Battery on Comino.

Emilie D’Orgeix, military historian and lecturer at the University of Paris, presented a paper on the subject of the profession of the French military engineer, reminding us that it was also previous periods that were instrumental to the catalytic effect which Vauban had in this sphere. She mentioned the many treatises which opened the way to a long-lasting French school of fortification, such as those by Antoine de Ville and Blaise de Pagan. These strong roots of military education in mathematics and geometry were the starting point of Vauban, who rationalised, balanced and organised them into a veritable method of schooling for the young engineer who was to excel both on the battlefield and on the building site. This dual aspect of the French military engineer, who had to be competent both in warfare as well as in building, was what gave them a cutting edge. She explained that the duties of the French military engineers in Malta varied from the alteration and modification of existing fortifications to estimating costs, hiring contractors and the supervision of construction sites. This multi-disciplinary nature of the military engineer was a necessity and Vauban’s genius was

to recognise and organise it, pin-pointing specific problems such as the enormous cost of the transport of earth carried by forced peasant labour, and seeking adequate solutions.

Philippe Prost, conservation architect and lecturer at the *Ecole de l'Architecture* of Paris, spoke about the conservation and restoration of military structures and forts, posing many questions one must ask when looking at a fortification today, regarding its setting in the landscape, whether natural or entirely modelled by man. He said that fortifications were inextricably linked to their landscape, which often formed part of the defences, and it was imperative during the process of their restoration to rediscover these links. Sometimes it was only by seeing them from the air that they could be appreciated in their entirety, since they often became overridden by vegetation. In the restoration and conservation of structures which ceased having a military function, it was important to give them a new life, and one had to be imaginative in finding suitable re-uses. Very often these large open interior spaces were taken up for industrial purposes, and alternative functions, such as their conversion into museums were sought today. The ditches, the forms of the orillons, flanks and escarpments could also be enjoyed as spaces of aesthetic meditation, opening up other possibilities for their re-use.

Architect Hermann Bonnici from the Restoration Unit and lecturer at the International Institute for Baroque Studies, spoke about the factors affecting the present state of the fortifications in Malta. Much of their modification and destruction, apart from war damage and erosion, was due to the introduction of roads for vehicular access through their walls. He presented a very interesting series of photographs showing the fortifications in the past, and the changes made to them up to this present day. He gave a detailed picture of the principles and factors governing a restoration and/or conservation project, and how these were applied in the works undertaken by the Restoration Unit, namely in Fort Ricasoli, in the Birgu Couvre Porte, and the Senglea landfront. He concluded by saying that the MRES was at present undertaking the task of drawing and mapping all the fortifications before embarking on their restoration through EU funds.

Professor Alex Torpiano, Head of the Department of Building and Civil Engineering the University of Malta, presented the project of the restoration of Fort Manoel, which was currently underway for his clients MIDI. He showed photographs of the fort before the damage caused by bombing in WWII, and said that the philosophy behind this project was to recover as much as possible of the 'memory' of the fort. He explained that, after careful documentation the works commenced in 2000, first by propping up those parts that were falling down, and clearing tons of debris. It was decided not to rebuild those parts, such as the *polverista*, which had been removed for a military purpose, that is, to install a gun emplacement. A modern building which had replaced a part of the damaged casemates was demolished, and the casemates reconstructed to their previous Baroque design, in order to provide integrity to the rest of the building. It was a very complex exercise, since the fort had undergone many changes throughout the years and in some cases it was difficult to decide which parts to leave and which to remove in order to uncover an earlier feature. A steel bridge of the British period was dismantled and repaired, and rebuilt on site. Torpiano concluded by remarking that this project required the use of building skills which were almost obsolete today, and the chapel of St. Anthony of Padua was being reconstructed.

Prof. Alain Monferrand concluded the conference with an account of the lengthy process that the Association Vauban had undergone to have the works of Vauban listed as Unesco World Heritage Sites, viewing this as the best way of safeguarding this heritage for posterity. This involved studying all the fourteen sites, and above all the drawing up of a protection plan for the future. Various experts in the field were appointed by Unesco and this process will finally soon be coming to a successful conclusion. He strongly recommended that Malta does the same for the Grand Harbour fortifications because they are unique in that they contain examples of all the styles of fortification from all the centuries up to the present day, in one condensed area.