

# Some Reflections on the Three VIEWS OF VALLETTA AND ITS ENVIRONS at the Malta Chamber of Commerce

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The Maltese Islands have often been the subject of paintings commissioned by travellers and others wanting to keep a memento or record of the place.<sup>1</sup> The Dutch artist Willem Schellinks (1623-1678) carried out, for his countryman Laurens van der Hem, a series of beautiful drawings of Malta and its harbours.<sup>2</sup> The Chevalier De Turgot commissioned the painter Alberto Pullicino, in 1794, a set of Malta views for his family Chateau near Caen in France.<sup>3</sup> The Cardinal Archbishop of Seville don Manuel Arias, himself a Knight of St. John, owned two views of the Island.<sup>4</sup>

Topographical paintings, at times can be excellent propaganda vehicles. They can be made to deliver and propagate ideas and messages with political undertones. The Great Siege frieze, by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio (1547-after 1628), in the Grand Masters' Palace at Valletta is no mere commemoration; it is a celebration and manifestation of the Order of St. John's indispensable role in the defence of Christendom.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, albeit in a less grandiloquent form, the three Views of Valletta and its environs at the Malta Chamber of Commerce appear to reiterate the message inscribed over the Porte des Bombes at Floriana: DUM THRACES UBIQUE PUGNO IN SEDE SIC TUTA CONSTO.<sup>6</sup>

1. Stella Dyer, *Malta Views: a catalogue of topographical prints and drawings of Malta in the Museum of the Order of St. John*, London, 1983.
2. Bernard Aikenna, (ed) *W. Schellinks: Journey to the South 1664 – 1665* Rome, 1983.
3. David M. Boswell, "Alberto Pullicino: his artistic commissions, life, and times in eighteenth-century Malta", in *Melita Historica*. Vol IX no.42 347-367.
4. A.O.M. 931, *Dispropriamenti Spagnuoli*, Pacchetto 4, No. 9 unpaginated.
5. On Matteo Perez d'Aleccio's see: Albert Ganado, "Matteo Perez d'Aleccio's engravings of the Great Siege of Malta of 1565" in *Proceedings of History Week 1983* (ed. Mario Buhagiar) 1984.
6. The English translation of this inscription reads as follows:

The paintings under review form a sort of running frieze, are oblong in format and measure approximately 110 X 180 cm respectively. Competently executed in oil on canvas, they are at a definite higher artistic key to the two large bird's eye views of Valletta at the National Museum of Fine Arts. Recently they have been attributed to an obscure painter called Giovanni Caloriti and given a pre-1695 date.<sup>7</sup> This attribution is, to say the least, hazardous and hasty for it is based on a report by Bernardo De Dominicis according to which Caloriti painted views of Malta and other cities,<sup>8</sup> and the hope that some day a documented veduta by Gio. Battista Caloriti might turn up.<sup>9</sup> According to the *Illustrated Dictionary of Art Terms*, an attribution is "the assignment of a work of art to a particular artist or school on the basis of documentary evidence and stylistic similarities to a work or works of known authorship."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, all considered, the attribution to Caloriti, as it stands, is untenable.

The first of the views represents a detailed rendering of Valletta taken from a raised point opposite the entrance to the Grand Harbour. It encompasses, apart from Valletta and Floriana, the hinterland beyond the fortifications with the Wignacourt Aqueduct clearly indicated, Marsamxett Harbour and Manoel Island without Fort Manoel but including the Lazzaretto or Quarantine Station along which appears the Galley Squadron of the Order consisting of the *Capitana*, or flagship, four galleys, two half galleys and a frigate. Outside Grand Harbour the Galley Squadron reappears sailing in formation led by the *Capitana* and followed by the galley called the *Lascara* recognisable by the pennant bearing the arms of Grand Master Lascaris as it was maintained in commission by the Fondazione Lascaris created for the purpose by that Grand Master. Contemporaneously, as the Galley Squadron enters port, the Squadron of Vessels, comprising four third-rates, is seen leaving port. Fort Ricasoli and Torre Orsi followed by Villa Bichi and other buildings carry the attention of the beholder to the fortified connurbation called the Cottonera. Here, at Kalkara Creek, are moored a frigate of the Order and a foreign vessel. Opposite Wignacourt's fountain, on the Valletta

*While I fight the Turks everywhere, I am secure in my seat.*

7. Dominic Cutajar, "The followers of Mattia Preti in Malta", in *Mid-Med Bank Ltd. Report and Accounts 1988*, 32-34.
8. Bernardo De Dominicis, *Notizie della vita del Cavaliere Fra Mattia Preti*, Malta, 1864. Extracted from *Vite dei Pittori, Scultori ed Architetti Napoletani*.
9. Cutajar, *op. cit.*, 34.
10. Kimberly Reynolds and Richard Seddon, *Illustrated Dictionary of Art Terms*, London, 1981.

waterfront, are two pinks of the Order, a frigate, a *pollacca* and what is possibly a ceremonial barge. Fort St. Angelo and the Three Cities are also represented in some detail although the Machina and the Albergo dei Capitani at Senglea are not very clear.

The second view was taken from a point overlooking Fort Ricasoli and Torre Orsi. To the left is Villa Bichi. In the middle distance is Fort St. Angelo with a section of Vittoriosa visible at its rear. Senglea Point, with its look-out post, the Church of Porto Salvo and even the now demolished Sirena Palace are clearly distinguishable. Valletta and Floriana are rendered in detail. Landmarks are too many to enumerate and a few will suffice as examples: Fort St. Elmo with its lighthouse, the Sacra Infermeria or hospital, the convicts' prison, the Lower and Upper Barrakka Gardens, the Palace Tower flying the personal standard of Grand Master Perellos, the Conventual Church of St. John and many others. Along the Valletta Marina is the Barriera Wharf with the enclosure that gave it its name, the Chapel of Our Saviour, demolished in 1853, Porta del Monte, the Wignacourt fountain, Porto Pidocchio, the Salvago Arsenal, the Lascaris Column, Ġnien is-Sultan and so on. Note along the waterfront a number of boats on the stocks. Inside Grand Harbour we meet again the four third-rate vessels of the Order. In Kalkara Creek an English vessel is moored. In the Porto delle Galere, today Dockyard Creek, is a frigate of the Order with nearby a pentimento. In the middle distance of Grand Harbour is a second foreign vessel whilst the Galley Squadron comprising the *Capitana*, four galleys (including the *Lascara*), and two half galleys is accompanied by small boats. Note the profusion of flags of the Order and standards of Grand Master Perellos proudly fluttering over buildings and ships.

The third view concentrates on Marsamxett Harbour with an extensive panoramic representation of Valletta and Floriana in the middle distance and beyond Grand Harbour with its creeks, cities and fortifications. The view was taken from a point above Manoel Island so that at the foremost plane appears the Lazzaretto or Quarantine Station. Here we find a most interesting array of ships; a foreign frigate and a tartana, the four third-rates of the Order and the Galley Squadron which is bedecked with ceremonial burgees and pendants and proudly faces a fleet of vanquished Moslem ships including a third-rate with its mizzen, fore and main tops missing, marked *CAPITANA DALGERI*. A second third-rate with main top and mizzen top missing, marked *PADRONA DI TUNISI*. The *CAPITANA DI TRIPOLI*, a forty-gun ship

propelled by a combination of sails and oars, is here depicted smoldering and with its mizzen top mast missing. Nearby is a smaller smoldering boat. Traces of the Order's two demi or half galleys are faintly visible near the *CAPITANA DI TRIPOLI*.

The fact that the navy of the Order of St. John features so prominently is an indication of the possible meaning of these three paintings. Particularly revealing is the third canvas where alongside the Order's ships appear a series of important prizes. These are reminders of some of the Order's outstanding successes against Barbary Corsairs. The *PADRONA DI TUNISI* was captured in 1706, the *CAPITANA DI TRIPOLI* was taken in 1709 and the *CAPITANA DALGERI* was seized in 1710. These events are well documented<sup>11</sup> and are depicted in the lunettes that adorn the corridors in the Grand Masters' Palace at Valletta.

The presence of the Order's four third-rates in all three pictures is of some significance. The formation of the *Squadra de Vascelli* and the *Congregazione dei Vascelli* was first authorised by a Papal brief issued on the 15th April, 1701.<sup>12</sup> On the 1st April, 1705 the new Squadron was officially commissioned and placed under the command of Lieutenant General de Saint Pierre.<sup>13</sup> This important addition considerably strengthened the navy and contributed towards its becoming more effective in its perpetual war against Barbary Corsairs and the protection of Christian shipping.

Taken in this context the Chamber of Commerce paintings acquire a different connotation from that of ordinary topographical views. One suspects that they may originally have been commissioned with the specific intent of illustrating and celebrating the Order's unremitting efforts in keeping the Mediterranean Sea free of hostile Corairs in defence of Christianity.

A careful examination and reading of all the components, including topographical features, that make up the three paintings clearly indicate they were produced sometime after 1710.

11. Ettore Rossi, *Storia della Marina dell'Ordine di S. Giovanni de Gerusalemme di Rodi e di Malta*, Rome-Milan, 1926.
12. A.O.M. 1761, ff. 3-12.
13. Rossi. *op. cit.*, 83.