

A Double Act for the ‘Norman House’: Palazzo Falzon or Palazzo Cumbo-Navarra?

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Several years back the ‘Norman House’ attracted my interest, partly because of its importance as a remnant of Mdina’s magnificent history, but also because its deplorable state is a vivid reminder that this building has been the victim of neglect, both physical and scholarly. Its decay is immediately apparent as soon as one sets foot inside the house. On a scholarly level, the lack of interest invested in the house is just as striking if only for the difficulty which surrounds research on the building’s history, and consequently, the rather scant knowledge available on the intriguing mystery regarding the name of the house. That the ‘Norman House’ is also known as Palazzo Falzon would lead one to presume that, at some point in its past, the Palazzo must have belonged to the Falsone family. This would enhance the glory surrounding the building since the Falsones were lauded as a prestigious family, or even notorious, as some would have it, depending on one’s point of view. Whichever the case, none of the documents examined reveal that this family ever actually owned the ‘Norman House’.

Today, the house and its contents form the kernel of the important Captain O. F. Gollcher Art and Archaeological Foundation, which was established on 28th March 1967 following the Captain’s demise.¹ The house had originally been bequeathed to the Venerable Order of St John of Jerusalem, based at Clerkenwell, London.² The Order chose to turn down the bequest. As far as Malta was concerned, this was a fortuitous decision since it made possible the creation of the Gollcher Foundation, whose principal aim is to enrich the archaeological and art collections in the custody of the Museums Department of Malta. Our culture has already benefited from the Foundation with the donation of several important works of art to the Museum of Fine Arts. The Martyrdom of St Agatha, by the XVII century Italian artist Baglione, and the three wooden statuettes by the Florentine sculptor Giovanni Battista Foggini, are just two of these gifts to the nation. The Foundation has also been involved in the acquisition of the Alexander Ball documents for Malta.

The establishment of the Foundation was itself a fitting tribute to Olof Gollcher, an erudite man possessed of exquisite taste and unerring artistic acumen. The Gollcher

1. Will of O.F. Gollcher in the Acts of Not. P. Pullicino dated 1 April 1960.
2. Will of O.F. Gollcher in the Acts of Not. Edward Calleja Schembri dated 14 June 1943 and agreement between the same and the Venerable Order of St. John of Jerusalem dated 15 January 1943 together with a general inventory of the contents of the house.

fortunes had originally been built up on mercantile business. It fell to Olof's brother Frederick to continue the family business while Olof himself, other than serving as Captain in His Majesty's Service, spent his days carrying out research in the major European libraries and pursuing his passion for art. It was thanks to the family wealth that Captain Gollcher was able to collect *objects d'art* and antiquities so avidly. His burgeoning collection eventually demanded a suitable residence in which to display the works of art and, to this end, he acquired an Mdina residence in 1927, renaming the house on the probable assumption that the building had a Norman past, the architectural style of the building being in the so-called 'Siculo-Norman' style as it was then known.

The Captain was well-known for his remarkable generosity. He presented the Sovereign Military Order of St John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta (S.M.O.M) with the original construction drawings of the galleys of the Order. Such a collection was clearly of immense historical importance. Other institutions which benefited from his donations were the National Museum of Archaeology; the Inquisitors' Palace Museum in Birgu; the Vatican Library; the British Academy in Rome; the University College of London; the Royal United Service Institute in London; the Danish Order of St John; and the Venerable Order of St John of Jerusalem in the British Realm.³

In 1927 Olof Gollcher and his mother Elisa Gollcher neé Balbi bought the first part of the 'Norman House', for which they paid the then princely sum of £680.⁴ Part of the house had been leased out and it could not therefore be sold in its entirety. The 1927 acquisition included the part of the house numbered 28 and 29, Villegaignon Street (then Strada Reale) and No. 1, Saviour Street. Gollcher had to wait for eleven years to acquire the second part of the house, by which date his mother had passed away leaving her share of the Palazzo to Olof.⁵ On 7th June 1938 Gollcher acquired No. 2 Saviour Street which had been leased out to a Mrs. Lina Pullicino and for which he had to pay £550.⁶

The previous owner of the Norman House, Count Francesco Palermo Navarra Bonici was resident in Catania and, as the son of Count Raimondo Palermo Stagno Navarra, he had inherited the *fedecommesso primogeniale* which prevented him from selling his property without seeking the consent of the First Hall of the Civil Court

3. Gollcher was in fact a Knight of Grace of the Venerable Order of St. John of Jerusalem in the British Realm.
4. Deed of acquisition dated 27 April 1927 in the Acts of Not. Salvatore Borg Olivier.
5. Secret will of Eliza Gollcher in the Acts of Not. Luigi Fiteni registered on 8 April 1933 and published on 9 October 1935. Not. Luigi Fiteni had in fact presented a recourse on the same day which was approved by the Second Hall of the Civil Court.
6. Deed of acquisition in the Acts of Not. Edwin Pantalleresco.

of Valletta. The *fedecompresso*, or *fideicommissum*, was a deed of trust which ensured that the property would have to remain within the Navarra family and would be entailed to the first born male child on the paternal side. The 1927 deed of acquisition therefore also includes within it a request for the suspension of the *fedecompresso primogeniale* without which it would have been impossible for Count Navarra Bonici to sell his property.⁷ The 1927 deed is itself the key to the history of the house since it gives the details on the line of succession by which the 'Norman House' was passed on from generation to generation within the Navarra family.

On 25th February 1657 Ugolino Cumbo Navarra, in lecto *infirmus corpore*, drew up an inventory of all his property in the Acts of Not. Pasquale Debono by which he declared that his property could only be inherited strictly by rule of primogeniture, as a result of which succession would be *donatione preferendi sunt filii masculus*.⁸ Ugolino Cumbo Navarra's landed wealth consisted mainly of property in Bahria, a fertile area to the north of Malta noted for its abundant crops. Among the other property inventoried was the 'Norman House'. The holder to the right of primogeniture in this *fideicommissum* had to display the coat of arms and surname of the Navarra family. Ugolino Cumbo Navarra was himself childless and he therefore entailed his estates to his two paternal aunts, Guzmana Cassar neé Navarra and Scolastica Falsone neé Navarra.

The 1657 *fedecompresso primogeniale* drawn up by Ugolino Cumbo Navarra itself originated from another *fedecompresso* which went back to 1577, set up by Antonio Cassia and Caterina Cumbo who entailed all their estates on the 1st September 1577 *in favore di loro figlia, moglie di Ugolino Navarra*.⁹ Despite this entail, the Bahria estates only came to form a definite part of the Navarra wealth in 1599, when Cornelia Navarra, the daughter of the above Ugolino Navarra, bought the property from Giovanni Calava.¹⁰ Cornelia was married to her own distant cousin, Dottor Giovanni Cumbo, and from this marriage gave birth to Ugolino Navarra and Ugolino Cumbo Navarra.¹¹ The elder born died without issue so that the right of succession

7. Recourse filed by Dr. Enrico Borg Olivier for the renouncement of the primogenitures against Giovanni Palermo, *unica persona immediatamente vocata alle infraindicate primogeniture e per rappresentare gli altri vocati mediat e futuri ed anche incerti nelle dette primogeniture*.

8. This entail was valued at 69,302 scudi in the last quarter of the XVIII century. Notarial Archives (Valletta), R. 213.

9. J. de Piro Family Archives, Ms., Fedecompresso di Antonia Cassia e Caterina Cumbo; in J. Montalto, *The Nobles of Malta 1530-1800*, Midsea Books, Malta 1979, 292 n. 177.

10. J. Montalto Family Archives, Ms. Atti Notarili, vol. II, p. 242; in J. Montalto, 54 n. 242.

11. *Cornelia figliuola d'Ugolino Navarra ultima di quella casa, nacquero diversi figliuoli, e tra gl'altri due maschi, l'uno de quali nominato Ugolino morì senza posterità, l'altro per ravvivare l'estinta schiatta materna, si fe chiamare Cumbo Navarra*. G. F. Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta isola nel mare siciliano*, Midsea Books, Reprint ed., Lib. IV, Malta 1984; 479.

was then inherited by the second Ugolino, who entailed the Navarra property in the 1657 *fedecompresso primogeniale*.

Ugolino had passed on the *fedecompresso* to his aunt Guzmaná Cassar neé Navarra.¹² Being also without issue Guzmaná drew up an entail on 26th August 1675 registered in the Acts of Nicola Allegritto in favour of her nephew Federico Falsone who was the next in the line of succession.

This Federico Falsone was certainly not a descendent of the principal branch of the Falsone family which had been cut short by the death of Matteolo Falsone, son of Matteo. Matteolo Falsone had been charged with heresy by the Holy Inquisition. He had fled to Sicily and there died totally impoverished, his estates at Girgenti having been seized by the Holy Inquisition.¹³ Hence, the Matteolo Falsone who married Scolastica Navarra and fathered Federico Falsone, could not have been the same Matteolo Falsone who died in Sicily. Federico Falsone was himself on excellent terms with the Holy Inquisition, holding the office of *Promotore Fiscale* which administered the property seized from heretics, and was therefore, unlike the disgraced Matteolo Falsone, a *familiarus* of the Holy Inquisition.¹⁴ Furthermore, the 1561-62 *Status Animarum* of Notabile makes it evident that there were several households bearing the Falsone surname.¹⁵ Therefore Federico could not have been the direct heir of the principal Falsone family.

On 11th January 1681, in the Acts of Not. Andrea Vella, Federico Falsone drew up a document by which he passed the Bahria estates onto his son, Carlo Falsone Navarra in lieu of *proptu nuptias*, since his son was to marry into the Testaferrata family. This document is therefore a wedding contract agreed upon by Federico Falsone and Fabritio Testaferrata, listing the property with which the young couple were to be endowed. Among Federico's property is to be found a reference to the 'Norman House'. *Item locum domorum situm et positum in dicta Civitate Notabile in quarterio della Madonna della Bocca sive del Carmine cum viridario [...] possides a Federico donante, et in quo habitat Donna Scolastica mater di Federici [...]*. A short note on the margin of this deed states that the wedding between Carlo Falsone Navarra and Eleonora Testaferrata took place on 7th August 1684. The contract came into force that same day.

12. Lorenzo Cassar was her second husband. Neither did the first marriage bring forth any progeny.

13. In 1625, Inquisitor Onorato Visconti decided to build his summer residence on this land in the vicinity of Ghajn il-Kbira, limits of Siggiewi. A. P. Vella, *The Tribunal of the Inquisition in Malta*, Malta 1964, 20.

14. *Ho pagato al sig. Dr. Federico Falsone, come promotore fiscale del Sant' Officio, scudi 200 e tari 8, e sono per sua provizione d'anni 4, mesi 4, incominciato al primo gennaio 1690 a ragioni di scudi 47.* Archives of the Inquisition (AIM), Registro dei Pagamenti del Sant'Offizio.

15. Archives of the Cathedral - Mdina (ACM), Status Animarum: Notabile 1561-62.

Carlo Falsone Navarra and Eleonora Testaferrata had a daughter who married into the Muscati family, from which union stemmed the Muscati-Falsone-Navarra family, of whom Ignatio was invested with the title Count of Bahria by Grand Master Emmanuel Pinto de Fonseca on 23rd May 1743.¹⁶ Ignazio had three daughters, Maria Teresa, Elisabetta, and Gerolama. The last two brought honour to the family by marrying the Duke of Castelluccio and the Duke of Paganica.¹⁷ But Maria Teresa, the first born, carried on an illicit liaison with Fra Samuele, the Conventual Chaplain of the Order of St John, with whom she eloped to Corfu in the hope of living off the 30,000 scudi which Fra Samuele had stolen from her father's house. The couple was eventually arrested and sent to Venice for trial where Fra Samuele is said to have died. Maria Teresa was locked up in a convent, then taken to Syracuse where she was given in marriage to a member of the Stagno family. She gave birth to a son, Giuseppe Stagno Navarra, who inherited the *fedecompresso* of the Navarra estates. Count Ignazio, facing bankruptcy, moved to Messina and from then onwards the family resided in Sicily.¹⁸

From this historical *excursus* it is apparent that the Palazzo was only coincidentally occupied by members of the Falsone family, namely Scolastica Falsone neé Navarra and her husband Matteolo. Their son, Federico Falsone, seems to have never lived in the house, and his son, Carlo Falsone Navarra never had any surviving male descendants from his marriage to Eleonora Testaferrata.

Within the 'Norman House' one finds the coat of arms of Grand Master L'Isle Adam in the lounge, surmounting the fireplace, and in the garden, showing a quartered emblem with a white cross on a red background, with a handkerchief hanging from a stretched forearm. These coats of arms are a twentieth-century addition and were the result of Captain Gollcher's belief that his 'Norman House' had really been the seat of the Falsone family. In his *Della Descrizione di Malta* Commendatore Abela states that after the Ceremony of the Investiture of Grand Master Philippe Villiers de L'Isle Adam, which took place on Sunday 13th November 1530, a banquet was hosted by Vice-Admiral Michele Falsone in his residence in Mdina.¹⁹ To date, it has been assumed that this residence was the Norman House, but it is now clear that this Palazzo originally belonged to the Cumbo family and eventually came to form part of the Navarra entail. Palazzo Falzon is therefore a misnomer.

16. The lands of Bahria retained their freehold nature (senza pregiudizio alla sua Allodialità) since Ignatio had possession of them before he was ennobled. Archives of the Order of Malta - AOM 547, ff. 165r-166r; in J. Montalto, 34.

17. L. A. Cassar Desain, *Genealogia della Famiglia Testaferrata*, Malta 1880, 102.

18. J. Attard Montalto, 249-251.

19. *E finalmente menato, e servito in casa di Michele Falsone Viceammiraglio dell' Isole, ove un lauto, e sontuoso convito apparecchiato si era*. G.F. Abela, *Lib. II*, 93.

The 'Norman House', or Palazzo Cumbo-Navarra as it should be more appropriately referred to, was constructed in two phases. Quentin Hughes states that the ground floor was built circa 1495.²⁰ It is indeed more vernacular in character than the *piano nobile*. From various sources it is known that prior to this date the site of the Palazzo was occupied by the Jewish synagogue.²¹ The vernacular character of this storey might imply that it is actually part of the original synagogue. The more ornate *piano nobile* was added on towards the middle of the 16th century.

The character and architectural features of the house have a Spanish quality similar to that found in certain parts of Sicily.²² The typical Catalan mullioned window is to be found in the 'Norman House', having a slender and delicate central column surmounted with a Romanesque capital from which spring two small arches carved out of a unique stone lintel. A distinctive architectural feature of the Palazzo is the *palline losanghe* cornice. The use of this feature in Maltese architecture has not yet been studied in great detail. This type of cornice is also to be found in Palazzo Santa Sofia in Mdina and is identical to that of Palazzo Montalto in Syracuse.²³

In 1929 the facade of the 'Norman House' was radically modified after some so-called restoration work was carried out with the permission of the Antiquities Committee.²⁴ But the lack of attention given to the overall conservation of the building only resulted in confusion between the different architectural features of the facade. This was then the common practice. Such an operation would now be considered a sacrilege, to say the least, and the principal advantage of having an official body to monitor architectural conservation would be the prevention of unwelcome additions to historic buildings, thereby preserving our precious architectural heritage.

20. See J. Quentin Hughes, *The Building of Malta*, Malta 1986.

21. In 1492 all Jews were expelled from those countries which made up the Aragonese and Catalan realms.

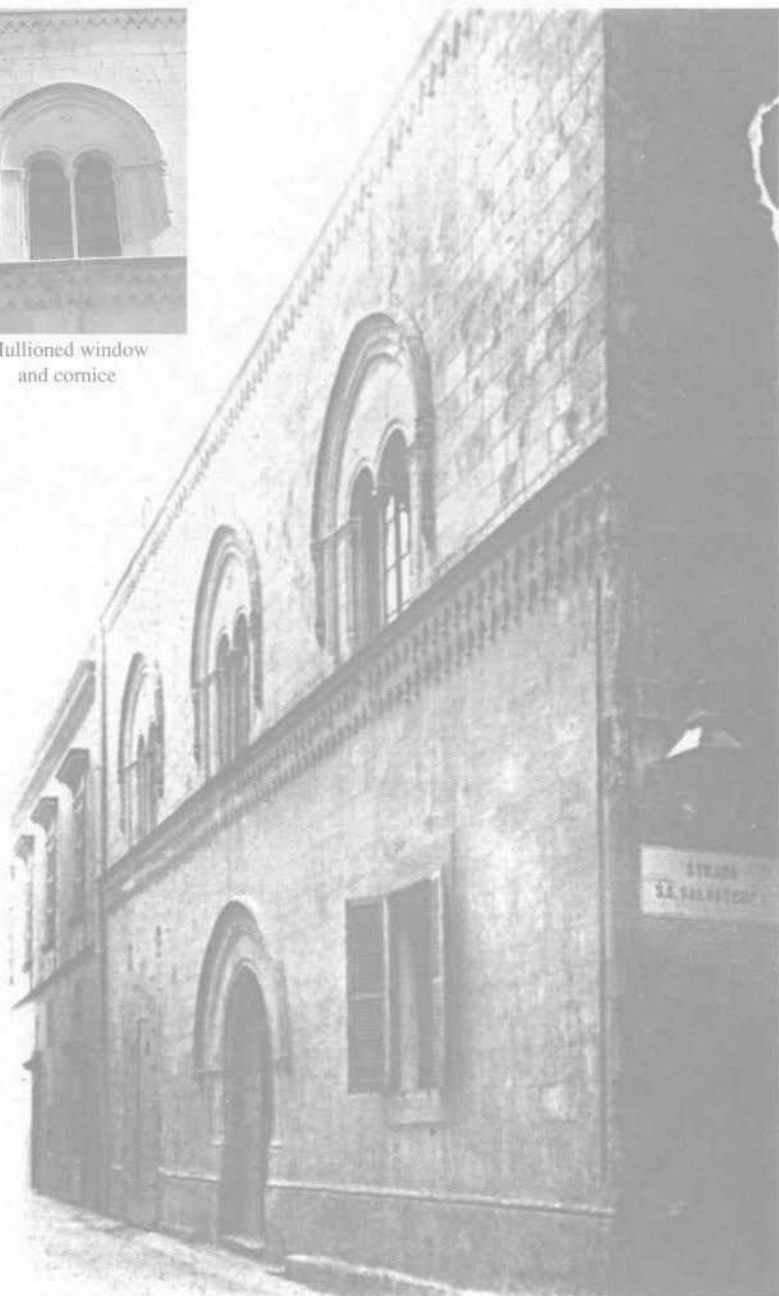
22. In Syracuse, which was exposed to various cultural interactions with Malta, one still finds Palazzo Montalto built in 1387 and Palazzo Bellomo with similar characteristics. L. Mahoney, *A History of Maltese Architecture*, Malta 1988, 88 n. 14.

23. J. Ward-Perkins, *Medieval and Early Renaissance Architecture in Malta*, in, *Medieval Malta*, A.T. Luttrell ed., London 1975, 220.

24. On 19th March 1929, a request for works was filed with the Secretary of the Antiquities Committee by Arch. Emanuele Borg on behalf of Capt. Gollcher.

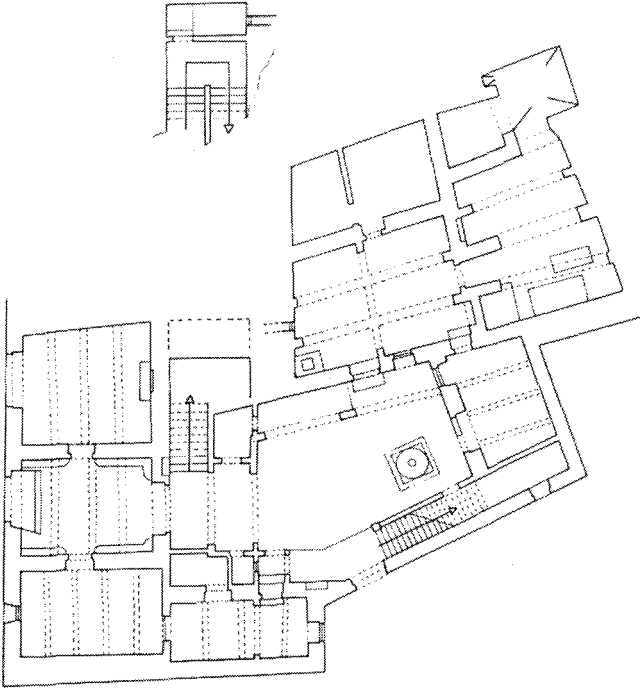


Mullioned window
and cornice

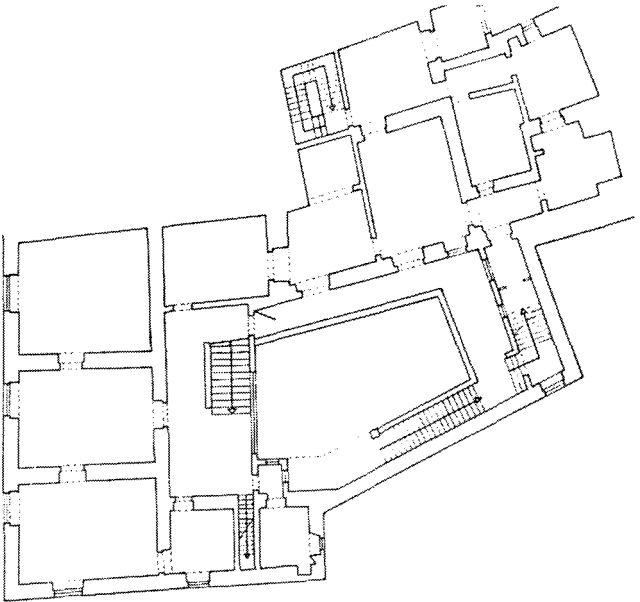


The facade of the 'Norman' House

GROUND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR



Plans of the 'Norman' House