



Fort Manoel: the design & construction of an 18th-century Hospitaller fort. By Dr. Stephen C. Spiteri, Ph.D., ARX Occasional Papers, 4, 2014; Available for online reading at www.militaryarchitecture.com.

This is the latest publication in the online series of ARX Occasional Papers published by Military Architecture.com. In this 208-page study, Dr. Spiteri examines the design and construction of the last of the major bastioned works of fortification built in Malta by the Hospitaller knights of St John. This Baroque fortress was designed by French military engineers in the early 1720s, to the conventions of the French school of military architecture inspired by the genius of Pagan, Vauban and Cormontaigne.

Undeniably, of all the fortifications built by the Order of St. John in the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, Fort Manoel is the one that best fits the description of a Baroque fortress largely because of the sublime manner in which it successfully managed to bring together the different aspects of engineering, architecture and art to create a functional and beautiful work of fortification. For the design of Fort Manoel, as in any Baroque fortress worthy of its name, was not only concerned with functionality and military efficiency, but also, equally important, with aesthetic appeal. The Baroque fortress had to look good and impress its beholder with the visual power of its monumentality, spatial order, and grace.

The military engineers of the time believed in the dramatic effect of artistically designed fortifications on the human eye and most of them sought to apply Vitruvius' criteria of beauty to their creations. The Order's military engineers were able to achieve this formula exceptionally well at Fort Manoel, where their sense of dramatic orchestration, fuelled by the ideas of Baroque *mise-en-scène* and the need to maximize vistas, clearly echoed Alberti's belief that there was 'no greater security' than 'through beauty and dignity'. This effect was accentuated largely by the architectural ensemble created within the ordered symmetry of the fort, focused around the central piazza, with its enveloping barracks and triumphal main entrance. But rather than using the beautiful architecture to disarm an enemy's anger, as had been earlier suggested, perhaps over optimistically by Alberti, however, the visual power of Fort Manoel's architectural ensemble was directed towards Valletta to the rear, in a clear attempt to impress the inhabitants of the city. In this manner, the fort became a veritable work of art, set like the stage of an open theatre facing its audience in Valletta.

It is little wonder that the Comte de Bourslemagne, visiting Malta with his team of French engineers in 1761 after his return from the French colonial wars in North America, could not help but be impressed by this sublime creation, and went on to claim that Fort Manoel was indeed a '*model de fortification fait avec soin, et fini dans toute ses parties*'. Lieutenant Æ Anderson, inspecting the fort in 1801 shortly after the British takeover, by which time ideas on defence had progressed considerably towards new methods of fortification, thought it 'less remarkable perhaps for its defensive utility, than the beauty of its construction'.

This new publication examines in detail the various factors that influenced the design and construction of Fort Manoel, from the defence problem posed by Marsamxett Harbour to the safety of Valletta, down to the various schemes proposed by the Order's military engineers throughout the course of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, as they strove to address the threat posed by the *Isolotto*. The study work draws on new archival and historical material extracted from the records of the Order of St. John and other primary sources, and is the product of many years of dedicated research, study, and observation by the author

based on official accounts and records of the period, plans, and reports, including technical information derived from the various contracts related to its construction, such as the initial *appalto* (tender document/contract) of 1723, which is transcribed and published for the first time. The publication is also amply illustrated with many original plans and documents, three-dimensional graphic reconstructions of the fort and its various features created by the author specifically for this work, as well as old prints, paintings, photographs and diagrams, all brought together to document and shed light on the many issues underlying the central theme.