A Great Siege for the Grand Cardinal
Sante Guido and Giuseppe Mantella

On the occasion of the 450th anniversary of the Siege of Malta, 1565

Translation by Patricia Salomone

Photos of Caprarola Palace reproduced by kind concession of Mr. Luciano Passini

About eleven years after the fateful, torrid and bloody summer of 1565 — the summer of the Great Siege of Malta by the Ottoman troops — the artist Mattia Perez d’Aleccio arrived on the island. It was the year 1576.

Much progress had already been made in the 11 years since the victory over the infidels with the building of the città nuovissima, as Valletta was called until the last century, since its foundation by Fra’ Jean Parisot de Valette and his successor, Fra’ Pietro del Monte. The first building to be erected was the Church of Our Lady of Victory, built in thanksgiving for the great victory achieved in September 1565. This small but significant church is now free of the scaffolding that has enabled its restoration, that included its splendid 18th century vaulted ceiling paintings.

Fra Jean de la Cassière, 51st Grand Master of the Order of St John (1572-1581), entrusted the Italian artist Matteo Perez d’Aleccio with the decoration of the Grand Council Hall in the Grandmaster’s Palace with the famous cycle of frescos depicting allegorical figures as well as the 12 paintings that faithfully illustrate and perpetuate the memory of events during the Great Siege. This extraordinary series of paintings is an example of the Mannerist style which, thanks to the art of Michelangelo, Raffaello and the Italian High Renaissance, became the common idiom amongst artists in the second half of the 16th century. It must be remembered that, as a very young man, Mateo Pérez de Alesi (his name as recorded in ancient chronicles) had been Michelangelo’s collaborator and assistant on the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel.

But, while Matteo Perez d’Aleccio’s paintings are renowned beyond Malta’s shores, the first depiction of the Great Siege is almost completely unknown (fig. 1). Yet it is of great historical and artistic importance within the context of the event, of the diplomatic activities and the history of Malta and the furore that this event created across Europe.
This work of art dates back to 1567, only a very brief 18 months after that terrible summer, and it is found in a place that is central to the diplomatic history of the capital of Christendom. It is a fresco to be found in the atrium of the Palazzo Farnese di Caprarola, one of the most majestic residences in the countryside outside, on the Via Cassia about 62 km north of Rome (fig. 2). In order to comprehend the importance of this Roman fresco depicting the Great Siege, it is necessary to place it within the right context.

The Palazzo in Caprarola was built by Alessandro Farnese. The family name derives from Castrum Ferneti, a small town on the border between Lazio and Tuscany. Alessandro Farnese, who was created Cardinal towards the end of the 15th century, was a personality of fundamental importance in the history of the Roman Catholic Church in the early years of that century. He was elected to the throne of St. Peter in the year 1534, taking the name of Paul III (1534-1549) (fig. 3). Among his numerous initiatives was the convening of the Council of Trent for the reformation of the Roman Church as well as the calling to Rome of Michelangelo, whom he commissioned to paint the Last Judgment for the Sistine Chapel.

Farnese’s intention was to build a palace in Caprarola that would be the political and administrative centre of his family’s possessions in order to consolidate their vast feudal properties in the Tuscia, the territories north of Rome, within the so called ‘Patrimony of St Peter’, namely the Papal State. In 1504, as a result of Francesco Maria Riario della Rovere’s renunciation of the Vicariate of Caprarola, Cardinal Alessandro came into possession of Caprarola and its strategic territory. He therefore conceived the project of a great palace and called the famous architect Antonio da Sangallo the Younger to plan the project for the majestic palace as well as the urban reorganisation of the town of Caprarola. Antonio da Sangallo was the Farnese family’s trusted architect as he had already proven his ability with the building of the marvellous family palazzo in the centre of Rome that today serves as the French Embassy.

The imposing Palazzo at Caprarola is built in the pure military style of the late 15th century, on a pentagonal plan (fig. 4), with towers at the corners and a circular grand court. Construction began in the second decade of the 16th century but was interrupted for several years as, once Alessandro became Pope in 1534, he lost interest in the palazzo – his time being taken up with more complex matters.

The work was resumed some decades later by the Cardinal grandson of Paul III Farnese, also named Alessandro (1520-1589) who had been elevated to Cardinal by his grandfather the Pope when he was only 15 years old. Although so young, he was successively nominated Papal Vice-Chancellor which meant he was in charge of the more delicate matters relating to the papacy. Alessandro Farnese was one of the most fascinating figures of the political and diplomatic history of the 16th Century and his portraits, painted by Titian in Venice (fig. 5), are well-known. Throughout his long life, his fame and his diplomatic ability, coupled with his culture and his patronage of the most important artists living in Rome, was such that he was nominated Grand Cardinal, a unique event in the history of the Catholic Church.
It was not until the middle of the 16th century, however, that Alessandro Farnese renewed his efforts to conclude work on the palazzo at Caprarola by entrusting the task to architect Jacopo Barozzi, better known as 'il Vignola' (after the town of his birth). Vignola is the architect who, years later, was commissioned by the same Grand Cardinal to design his masterpiece – the Chiesa del Gesù, for the Jesuit General House, in the centre of Rome. Here, where we find the burial place of St Ignatius of Loyola – Pope Paul III having officially sanctioned the establishment of the Company of Jesus in 1540 – Vignola set in motion the new style of architecture based on the rules of the Counter-Reformation indicated by the Council of Trent and by St Charles Borromeo.

Much had happened between the first phase of construction of the palazzo and the renewed work: Pope Paul III had died in 1549 and the Farnese family had fallen into disgrace. Following his insubordination to the new Pope Julius III, Cardinal Alessandro had to flee to Paris, where he took refuge with the King of France. All the goods inside Palazzo Farnese, including his art collections, were confiscated and auctioned to replenish the state finances that had been emptied by long wars and also by the building of churches – especially the Basilica of St Peter, Piazza del Campidoglio and the Pauline Chapel.

The Grand Cardinal only returned to Rome in 1554 and at this point in his life he decided to complete his palazzo in Caprarola in order to retire there, away from the dangers of the Roman Curia. Although based on the Sangallo project, the fortress-palace was transformed by Vignola into a magnificent and luxurious holiday residence, surrounded by a large park and garden within the urban context (fig. 6), a place in which to receive dignitaries and ambassadors in the surroundings of the splendid countryside and away from the strain of Papal Rome, centre of European politics. The palazzo was also to be a centre for creating new ambitious political and diplomatic ventures.

The palazzo is divided into four floors (fig. 2). The first, which dates back to Sangallo's plan, is the Prelates' Floor, then comes the Piano Nobile, followed by the Knights' Floor and finally the Grooms' Floor. The first and second floors contain numerous rooms divided into two apartments, one to be used in the summer, facing north, and the other, facing south, for the winter months.

The decoration of the walls of the Prelates' Floor (fig. 4), in pure Mannerist style, began immediately. The Grand Cardinal summoned to Caprarola the most renowned 'fashionable' artists in Rome at the time. The first of these was Taddeo Zuccari who, in 1560, immediately began working at the palazzo until his death in 1566, when he made place for his brother Jacopo Zuccari who was a more capable and imaginative artist. Other artists and artisan decorators worked alongside these two. Worthy of mention are Jacopo Zanguidi, known as 'Bertoja', together with Antonio Tempesta and Giovanni del Vecchi. At Palazzo Caprarola, these artists created one of the masterpieces of Italian Mannerist painting with a grottesche decorations that included mythological and allegorical scenes from ancient Rome. The intention was to create such beauty that it would inspire pleasure and serenity but also, as we shall see later, included precise historic and political innuendos. The first hall of the Palazzo Farnese di Caprarola is of particular interest in this regard.
The main door to the palazzo opens onto the grand Hall of the Guards or Grooms (fig. 4-A in the drawing). The internal walls are frescoed with images of the small towns and villages of the surrounding area in order to portray the various properties that made up the great fiefdom of the princely Farnese family. On the vaulted ceiling are three grand coats of arms belonging to the Farneses. These are in stucco relief and depict six heraldic lilies in blue over a gold background in the centre of which is the emblem of Cardinal Alessandro the Younger, who thus stamps his ownership of the entire edifice. On the side of the great vault are two scenes that had been commissioned by the Grand Cardinal, showing Caprarola as it appeared before Vignola’s urban transformation, executed in order to record the previous state of the small town before its re-modelling.

But the scenes that first draw the eye – and are still the most striking to the visitor – are two great scenes painted on the front wall of the hall. One of these depicts a View of the city of Messina as seen from the heights of Reggio Calabria (fig. 7) and the other a View of Malta during the Great Siege, both painted by Federico Zuccari (1539-1609). They were painted in 1567, as can be deduced from some dated designs that can be found in the same room. This depiction of the Great Siege (fig. 1) is therefore the oldest painting that describes the historical events that took place in Malta and the port of departure of the Soccorso, the relief force.

Federico Zuccari was one of the most famous painters of his time (fig. 8). He was active at St Peter’s in the Vatican, and completed the frescos which had been begun by Michelangelo in the Pauline Chapel. He worked in the cathedral of Orvieto and painted the grand cupola of Brunelleschi’s dome in Florence. He was court painter to Emperor Philip II of Spain, for whom he decorated the new Escorial and by whom he was ennobled. Convened to the English Court, he painted a portrait of Elizabeth I, among others. During his long life he was elected an honorary citizen of Rome and a member of the Design Academy of Florence. In addition, he was Life Regent of the Company of St Joseph of the Holy Land (today known as the Pontificia Accademia dei Virtuosi del Pantheon). He was one of the founders, and subsequently the first head, of the Accademia di San Luca.

The Great Siege scene, painted by this famous Mannerist artist, depicts specific details of the event. There are rich details of the Ottoman fleet at sea, facing Grand Harbour, scenes of the troops besieging Mount Sciberras and bombarding the city of Birgu and the cities close by, locked within their fortifications. There is a detail of the city of Mdina in the centre of the island, while on the other side of the island can be seen the approaching Spanish ships coming to the aid of the Knights of St John and the local inhabitants of the island.

The reason why Alessandro Farnese chose to give such prominence, in the hall of his palace, to the two scenes of Messina and, even more so, to the precise historical moment when the Great Siege took place in Malta, is not altogether clear.

Academics have never given this historic representation sufficient importance, but it is of great importance, given its location in the palace hall. One possible theory, which we hereby wish to promulgate, is that the Great Siege was a determining event in European history that would certainly have been well known to the important and highly cultured guests of the Grand Cardinal. It would, therefore, indicate the exact date of the whole building in much the same way as the coats of arms on the ceiling would determine that the Palazzo was owned by Alessandro Farnese. In other words, the heraldic symbols and historical events illustrated are a sophisticated and eloquent way of informing visitors of the family claim to the property, which is thus dated in a more elegant manner than by the use of the traditional engraved plaque.

However, other possibilities may be considered. At least two incidents in the life of the Grand Cardinal may allow us to hypothesise a particular interest on the part of Alessandro in events in Malta and in the defeat of the Turkish advance through Sicily into Mediterranean Europe.

The first of these possibilities is certainly the close relationship between Alessandro Farnese and the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which followed the Catholic Rite and of which Farnese was Pontifical Administrator for 50 years – from 1539 until his death in 1589 – and for...
which he also held the seat of Patriarch from 1539 to 1550. The Patriarchate followed the fate of the Knights Hospitaller in the alternating conquests and defeats of the territories of the Holy Land and island possessions such as Cyprus, Rhodes, Crete, Chios, Lesbos and Naxos. It is therefore not surprising that the Grand Cardinal, who was a shrewd diplomat, was well aware of the last dramatic, defining, political and bellicose events between the Sultanate and the Knights of St John.

The second possible connection between Farnese and the Great Siege can also be seen through his holding of a highly prestigious ecclesiastical position for 37 years. From 1536 to 1568, the Grand Cardinal was the Administrator of the rich and prestigious Diocese of Monreale (close to Palermo, in Sicily). He was also Archbishop of the same diocese from 1568 to 1573 when he resigned and was replaced by Ludovico I de Torres (1573-1583). So here too it is possible to detect Farnese’s ‘Mediterranean’ interest in relation to the military and political happenings in Malta. The interest would have not only been of a personal nature but would also have been linked to institutional matters between the Order and the Diocese of Monreale, (an area of forthcoming research).

It was not by chance that the Archbishop of Monreale, Ludovico I de Torres, was appointed by Pope Gregory XIII Boncompagni (1572-1585) to consecrate the main Church of the Conventual Order of St John the Baptist, on 5 February 1578, as the highest testimony, at the very centre of the Mediterranean, to the victory of the Roman Catholic Church through the sacrifice of the Knights, as recorded on the inscription on a plaque on the façade of the church.

All photographs courtesy of Luciano Passini whom we thank

Fig. 6: Giuseppe Vasi, plan of Palazzo Farnese and the gardens of Caprarola, 1746

Fig. 7: Federico Zuccari, View of the city of Messina as seen from the heights of Reggio Calabria