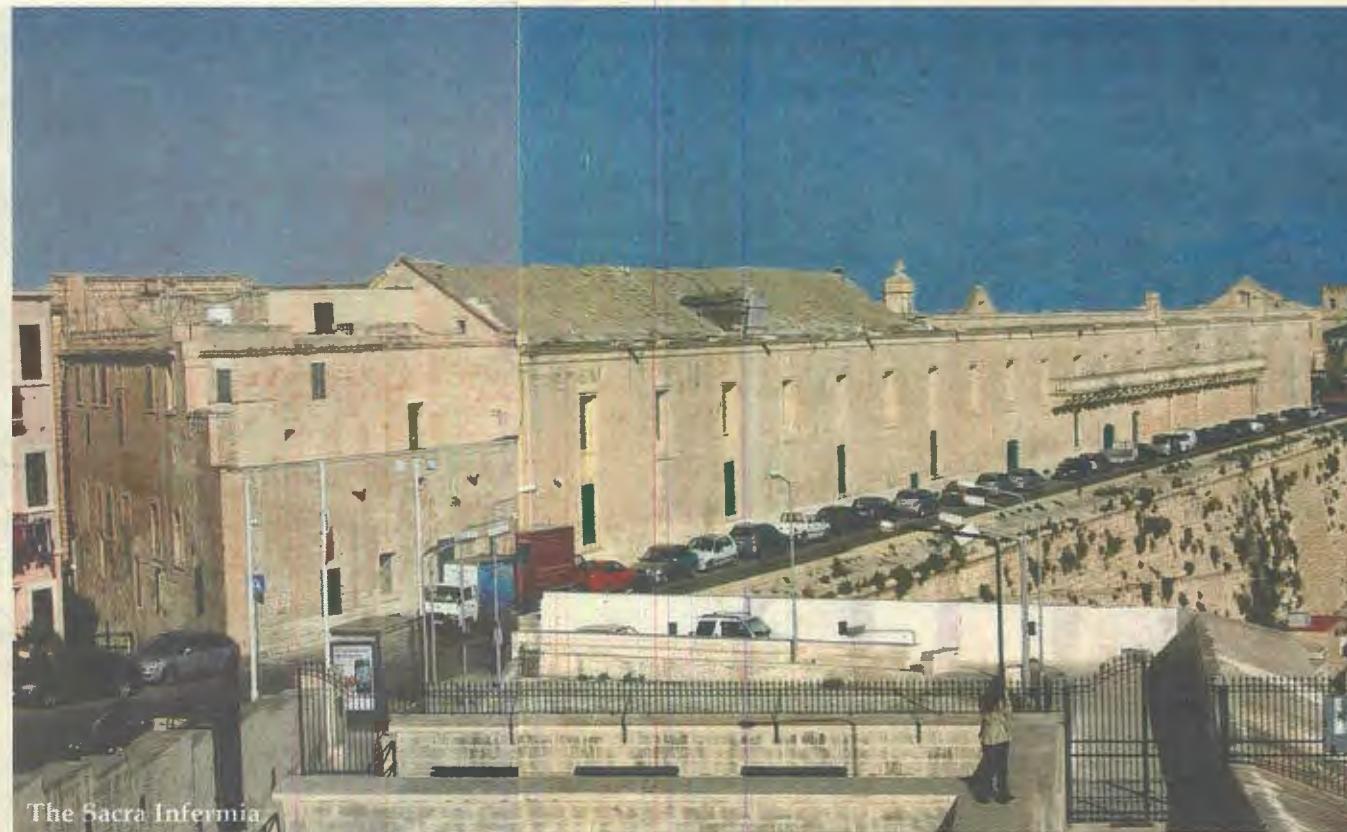
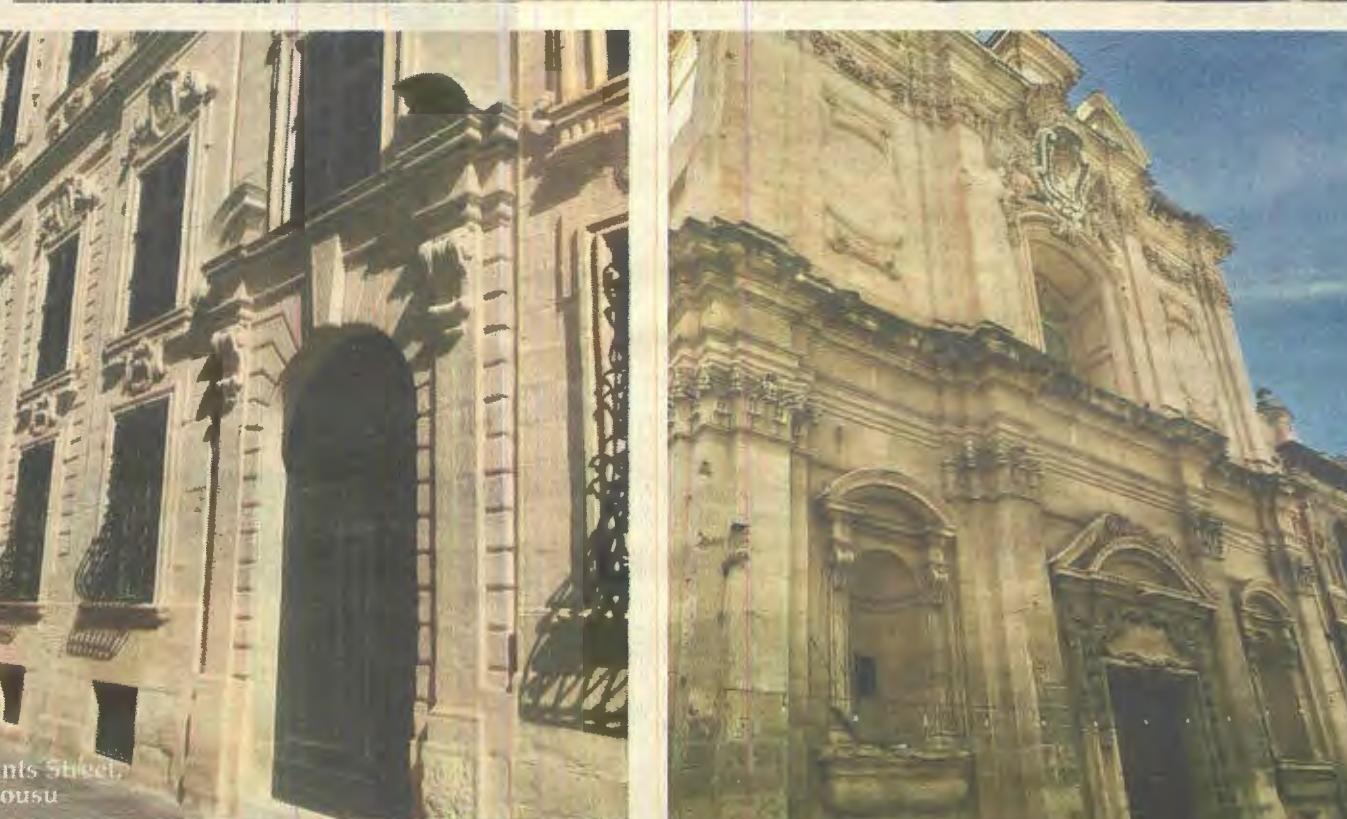




Palazzo Francia. Photo: Ilaria A. Lanfranco Mousu



The Sacra Infermeria

Castille Palace, from Merchants Street.
Photo: Ilaria A. Lanfranco Mousu

Auberge d'Italie

Between valour and VALETTA

By Comm. Salvator Mousu

A Maltese saying goes: If stones could speak, every one would tell you a story!"

This undoubtedly refers to the local millennial history based mainly on the seemingly inexhaustible supply of our honey-coloured, soft *globigerina* limestone. For well over 5,000 years this sedimentary rock has forged and moulded our pre-historic, as well as historic, monumental past.

Compared with such a long passage of time, Valletta indeed seems to be a 'modern' development that does not match the rest of the Island's rich millennial heritage, especially in stone.

But the vicissitudes of the 1565 Great Siege saga and its aftermath germinated, and eventually brought to fulfilment, the idea of a beautiful, prominent and impregnable fortress-city on an erstwhile barren peninsula. So, what was once a battle-ground for one of history's most gruesome and hard-fought sieges was trans-

formed into the Knights' most enduring monument: Valletta – aptly named after the heroic, quasi-mythical, leadership of Jean Parisot de la Valette!

THE CITY'S PLANNING

When plans, discussions and procurement of funds were, quite expeditiously one should say, concluded the Knights, through their 'Commissione' (the Planning Authority of the times) laid down strict rules for the streetscapes, the individual building plots, drains, water provisions and all that was required for an 'exemplar city'. While the reverberations of the Renaissance were still throwing their shadow all over Europe, the Tuscan Renaissance maxim that the roads had to be '*apiae*', '*rectae et pulchrae*', was always at the back of the mind of Valletta's chief planner, Francesco Laparelli, Michelangelo's helper. So, for the time, the Knights did indeed want and managed to build what eventually came to be known as "the city built by gentlemen for gentlemen".

The Knights, pertaining to a religious and military order,

had to have their 'convent' which they had to expand into an area reserved solely for their *Collachio*. But when they came to inhabit this newly-built city, they felt that this was 'their' city, so they discarded their centuries-old tradition of living in a separate enclave. But going, up to a certain extent, a step further they caused their different *langues* to erect their particular auberge. This they did, each with evident gusto not shorn of some patriotic pride on the part of the Knights, who hailed from all national and ethnic groups of Europe. The sole exception was the English *langue* which was caught in the turmoil of England's women-lover Henry VIII, who destroyed, despoiled and murdered all the English Knights that he could lay hands on, so the English *Langue* had become practically non-existent.

Although nobody seems to know exactly who coined the maxim that Valletta is a "city built by gentlemen for gentlemen" such an expression harks back, albeit romantically, to the time of the Knights. That some, if not several, were anything but the 'gentlemanly' type is quite obvious. But, once their regal lineage was a pre-requisite for their admission into the Order, the 'flower of Europe's nobility' considered them, on paper at least, as gentlemen par excellence who, in

Pro-Cathedral. Unfortunately, during the terrific bombing of 1942, the Auberge de France and the Auberge d'Auvergne were totally demolished, being replaced by two mammoth, totally dissonant buildings that today host the headquarters of the General Workers' Union and the Law Courts respectively.

Thus today only five auberges, pertaining to five languages, have survived: Aragon, to the north in Independence Square; Provence, in Republic Street, now housing the National Museum of Archaeology; Italy, in Merchants' Street, aimed to house the Museum of fine arts, and the finest of them all, the Auberge de Castille which serves as the administration centre of Malta's Prime Minister.

It goes without saying that the Order of the Knights had other more important business to take care of than just the homes for every *langue*. Its *raison d'être* was military, with the ever-present dream of re-conquering the Holy Land. But, on an equal footing, stood their other avowed duty i.e. that of providing solace for the sick and needy. And, let no one for-

Saint John's Cathedral
altar. Pallazzo Francia.
Photo: Ilaria A. Lanfranco Mousu

get, that until this very day they are also known as the Knights Hospitallers. For such an important undertaking they also had to cater for a hospitalising organisation and, quite naturally, its building which

they managed to set up in a most efficient manner. So, it's no wonder that their 'hospital', for the times, was indeed considered as Europe's unparalleled hospital venture; the Sacra Infermeria (the Holy Infirmary) which today has been transformed into the newly-labelled Mediterranean Centre, a complex that has preserved what's left of the original structure that, even today, can boast that it has the longest unsupported hall Europe.

THE 'SUPER' MONUMENTS

The chief of the Knights and the Islands was then known as the Grand Master, elected for life by the Knights themselves and in corroboration with the various *langues*, he too had to have his princely abode, and it had to be, of course, more impressive and prominent than the rest of the *langues*. So a palace was born in Valletta's heart, that took several decades to complete until it achieved the splendour we can witness

nowadays. If today we can marvel at the palace building and its riches, as well as admire the official functions performed therein, we can only imagine what a spectacle it used to present with all the Knights' paraphernalia in full regalia on several festive occasions and diplomatic exchanges.

But being a religious Order the Knights had to have, above everything else, an enduringly magnificent temple for their devotion, liturgical functions and the severe ceremonials of the novices that, after some really tough training, had to undergo, especially the most gruelling 'Knight's Vigil'. So, the building of an imposing church, lavishly decorated and enriched with dazzling sculptures, paintings and décor, was of prime importance for the religion itself as well as the aggrandisement of the Order. And this gave us the unique treasure that all Malta is so rightly proud of: the Co-Cathedral of Saint John.

Impressed by such munificence a church-building spree also gripped the people, who vied with each other to create something 'better' and more beautiful. The result was a proliferation of churches and chapels where in an area of less than two square kilometres no less than 30 were erected. Endearingly loved by the people, the churches, following the example of the Order's Conventual Church, were embellished beyond compare or restraint; and Valletta today is regarded with several artistic, architectural gems such as those of Saint Paul, Saint Dominic, and

Running parallel to their 'supposed' religious zeal the knights had, as their main and original aim, the care and succour of the sick – which, as we have said, is the principal '*raison d'être*' of the Knights of Malta today. And the 'Holy Infirmary' became a beacon of light for the medical cures and cares for all sanitary-minded persons to look to and follow.

Not to be outdone in the academic field, the Knights even created a renowned Medical School of Surgery that eventually invented and discovered original ways of surgical interventions that were later adopted all over Europe.

At a time when most of Europe was still, in most cities, a terrible mess of drainage difficulties and problems, the Knights had constructed and adopted an enviable system that, even nowadays, makes us wonder at its efficiency, some three or four centuries ago! In less than half a century of its foundation the provision of water, from quite far-off springs, became a reality for all inhabitants, in the first decade of the 17th century.

This brief overview has merely touched on the major monuments left by the Knights. But, of course, there is more, much more that they have left on this city. Many Knights built their own personal houses there and many, in spite of the terrible onslaught of the last war, are still standing. On the other hand, the local Church authorities, as much as the inhabitants themselves, were not found wanting in their quest to emulate the Knights and have their say as well.