



# Gerolamo Cassar and The Carmelite Church

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## Gerolamo Cassar-The Architect

Gerolamo Cassar (1520-86), together with Grand Master La Valette and the Italian military architect Francesco Laparelli were the driving force for the foundation and the building of the city of Valletta. One has to keep in mind that the Maltese did not enjoy high ranking positions in the Order of Saint John and the fact that Cassar was the only Maltese architect to be trusted by the Order of Saint John for the urbanization of their new city was a prestigious moment for Malta.<sup>1</sup> The Maltese architect's contributions to the building of Valletta, were not only limited to the official buildings of the Order of Saint John, but they also consisted of the design of the seven auberges of the langue, the Grand Master's Magisterial Palace, the *Sacra Infermeria* and the Conventual Church of Saint John. Furthermore, he also contributed in designing other churches in Valletta- namely the Parish church of Saint Paul Shipwreck, of Porto Salvo, the Carmelite church, the church of Sant Augustine and that of Saint Mary of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

After the Great Siege of 1565, Cassar was appointed to serve as the architect of the Order and also became Laparelli's assistant in the building of Valletta. His first specific duties, as a military architect with the Order, were the reconstruction of Saint Michael and his home town Birgu. He was very much trusted- so much so that he was appointed to supervise the building of the fortifications when Laparelli was absent from Malta to participate in the battle of Lepanto. It was at this time that Cassar was promoted as the Order's chief architect.<sup>3</sup> Being the military engineer of the Knights, Cassar was sent to the Italian mainland to study. Here, he came in contact with Mannerism. Being in Italy, and without academic training, the absorption of Mannerist nuances and sophistications would have influenced a lot the up and coming architect. This influence marks his buildings as having a lack of the full understanding of the classical Renaissance style. Unfortunately, it is difficult to conclude Cassar's style from the auberges and palaces as many of them were later remodelled while others were completely destroyed. Gerolamo's Cassar role in the Carmelite history begins with the drafting of the contract when the Carmelites moved from the area known as "San Leonardo" to the new city. When the

contract was drawn on 27<sup>th</sup> July 1570<sup>4</sup>, there was Fr. Cristofano Leboullens on the behalf of the Order of Jerusalem, while Fr Raimondo Fortuin and Fr Giorgio Caccherano represented the Commissioners from Valletta. The Carmelite Order was represented by Fr Giovanni Vella, who was the Sicilian Provincial Vicar. Also present for the contract was the architect Gerolamo Cassar as he was the master architect of the Order. Fr Giovanni Vella, the Sicilian Provincial Vicar, stated that the land was obtained to serve for the new Carmelite Church and adjoining it, there would also be a convent. Both the convent and the Church were to fall under the title of "The Blessed Virgin of the Carmelite Order".<sup>5</sup> Of important note is the fact that in the Carmelite Church, Cassar utilized the system of the naves in the Church for the first time. Besides the naves in the church, the dome was also the first one in Valletta.

## The Old Carmelite Convent and Church

When the Carmelites first arrived on the island, round about the year 1418<sup>6</sup>, they resided in the area known as "San Leonardo". On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 1566, the foundation stone on the plateau of "Xebb ir-Ras" was laid by Grand Master Fra Pietro del Monte.<sup>7</sup> On this initiative, the Carmelites thought it was the ideal time to spread their teachings further from the area off the limits of Rabat, while also taking into consideration the importance and protection the new city would bring about. As a result, Fr. Giovanni Vella, the Prior at the Annunciation church, was responsible both in the buying of the land and also in the construction of the new church.

The entrance of the Carmelite Convent's opened into Theatre Street, which was then known as Saviour's Street, and where currently there is the oratory of Jesus of Nazareth. The first convent (Fig.1) was probably built on two storeys. During the seventeenth century, the convent underwent architectural modifications.<sup>8</sup> Indeed the rooms in the second storey were reduced in height so that an additional storey, above the second storey, would be built. In the meantime, the ground floor rooms were converted into houses and in turn were rented out to the laymen. The land that adjoins Saint Sebastian Street- nowadays known as Zekka Street - with Holy Saviour Street (now Theatre Street), was left empty.



*Side-view from Zekka Street of the old Carmelite Church, World War II. Photo Courtesy of Fr. Martin Schembri.*

was located where the old sacristy was.<sup>13</sup> When the latter was finished, the small chapel was dismembered and in its place, one of the corridors – one part of which was part with loggias facing Saviour Street and the other part facing the convent's backyard - was built.

Cassar's church, which was completed in 1586, was simple in design; consisting of a single nave and side chapels. It was 150 feet in length and 50 feet in width. Topped on four pilasters, there was a small dome. The church had ten altars. These ten altars were: the high altar, three altars in the right naves and four in the left nave.<sup>14</sup> The oratory, which belonged to the Confraternity of the Virgin of Mount Carmel, was richly decorated with sculpture. Apart from the oratory of the Confraternity of the Virgin of Mount Carmel, there was another oratory which belonged to the Confraternity of Saint Joseph. The church also had an ossuary which was still in use until The Addolorata Cemetery, built by Emanuel Luigi Galizia, first opened its gates in 1869.

The first Carmine Church was planned on a simple Latin cross, consisting of one single nave, six chapels and two lateral chapels.<sup>15</sup> This style of building was Gerolamo Cassar's favoured



*View of the nave from the High Altar. Old Carmelite Church, Valletta. Photo Courtesy by Fr. Martin Schembri.*

While Gerolamo Cassar's church was in the process of being built, the Carmelites built a temporary church, with the main purpose of catering for the daily religious and spiritual needs of the community living in Valletta.<sup>9</sup> This temporary chapel was dedicated to the Annunciation of the Virgin. Dusina's reports alludes that the chapel of the Annunciation belonged to the Carmelite Order.<sup>10</sup> The title for the chapel remained that of the Annunciation till Cassar's church was finished and the High Altar was placed in the church in 1608.<sup>11</sup> After this date, the dedication changed to the Virgin of Mount Carmel. From studies and research, the location of the Annunciation Chapel<sup>12</sup> can be deduced and presumed that it

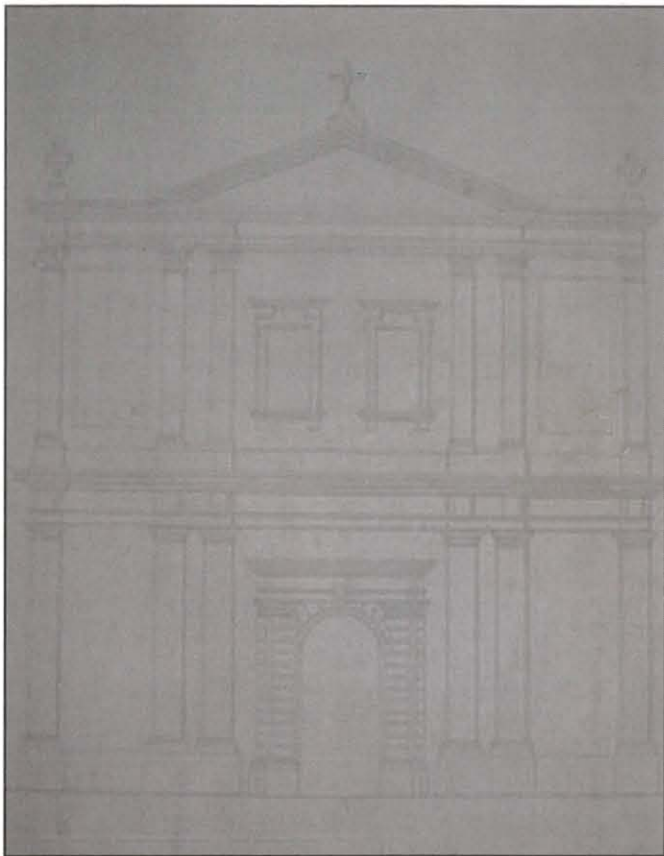


style. The nave was long and narrow which extended 150 feet and 50 feet in width.<sup>16</sup> (Fig.2) Furthermore, the nave rested on eight main pilasters which joined together the presbytery, nave and the lateral chapels. At the crossing there were four double pilasters, which were decorated in 1951. Each of the double pilasters was decorated with two angels and reached just under the dome. The angels carried the coat of arms (*stemmi*) in their hands. Both the angels and the *stemmi* were executed in stucco at a much later stage, in the mid-twentieth century. The dome was decorated by Ramiro Calì (1881-1945), the son of Giuseppe Calì (1846-1930). The Carmelite church in Valletta also comprises a tribune executed by Pietro Paolo Cellini whilst the bracket is the work of Francesco Lo Turco and his sons Isidoro and Mario Antonio.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the Old Carmelite church had two doors: the main door which opened into Theatre Street and was large enough for the processional statue to go out on its feast day while the second door which was not as large as the main door, was used by the pilgrims who came and visited the church. Cassar's church had marble flooring but the exact date for this flooring is unknown. This marble flooring consisted of the entire pavement but only the flooring of the presbytery was of superior quality. The pilasters and the counter pilaster were also given a marble surface. Their marble was grey and they were decorated with a border on their outer side. The marble for the pilaster was greenish in colour while that of the smaller pilasters was yellowish. The use of marble was not limited only to the floor but was used also for the nine altars - in the side chapels.

Behind the choir, there was once an Oratory that belonged to the Confraternity of the Virgin of Mount Carmel. This oratory opened into Zekka Street and was lavishly decorated with sculpture.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, the oratory was dismembered when the Church was elevated to the title of a "*Minoris Basilicae*". Consequently, the choir was changed and the altar was replaced by a Papal Altar. Nowadays, the Confraternity has a smaller oratory dedicated to Jesus of Nazareth, a little further down Theatre Street. The second oratory of the Carmelites belonged to the Confraternity of Saint Joseph. This small oratory was next to the convent's door.

Unfortunately, up till the year 1951, what remained of Cassar's church were the arched vaults of the nave and the capitals of the columns. The capitals were in the Doric style, which was a style at heart to Cassar. These together with the arched vaults were later on remodelled. The church was not the only victim of the change;



*Elevation of the old Carmelite Church's west facade.  
Carmelite Archives, Valletta.*



*The Old Carmelite Church West Elevation,  
Carmelite Archives, Valletta.*



having a frontispiece with a two coat of arms. On one side there was the coat of arms of Pope Leo XIII (the Pope who elevated the Carmelite Sanctuary to a Minor Basilica) and on the other side was the Carmelite coat of arms. The portal was decorated with two pillars, one on each side and had rusticated quoins. Double pilasters were raised on a plinth, and functioned as a division of the bays. The decoration of the lower level was reutilized in the upper section of the facade. The space above the main door was punctured by two windows. Two horizontal bands ran along the entire facade. The facade was topped with a triangular pediment and a Basilica Cross

The facade was restored in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of July of 1848<sup>21</sup>, Prior Fr. Albert Ellul proposed to the Carmelite Community that restoration had to take place immediately as the facade was in an utterly bad state. For the preservation of the outer facade, the Carmelites had spent 1120 *scudi*.<sup>22</sup> For this project the architect Giuseppe Bonavia (1671-1730) was commissioned. The repairs on the facade were completed by the year 1850.<sup>23</sup>

Adorning the corner of the church, at the junction of Theatre Street and Zekka Street, was a statue (Fig.5). The Commission, which was appointed for the supervision of the buildings in Valletta, had issued a set of regulations that each building in Valletta had to abide with. One of the regulations was that every house, situated at the corner of the street, had to be embellished.<sup>4</sup>

Close examination on both Cassar's facades of the auberges and the Carmelite west elevation shows that both share similar characteristics. Both types of facades were sober in appearance which resulted in blank expanses of wall surfaces, with the interruption of elongated rectangular windows adorned by the Melitan triple roll moulding. Whereas the facades for the auberges were bare from decoration; that is there was no use of pilasters and the columns, the Carmelite facade was decorated with half pilasters on both tiers of the facade. Furthermore the only decorations on the outer facade of the auberges were the rusticated quoins as they provided a relief from the complete starkness of the wall. In addition to this, the quoins were also an expression of strength (Fig.6 and 7).

Unfortunately, Cassar's church was subject to many architectural changes of which very little remained within the original church. When the choir of the church was the victim of the enemies' bombs in the Second World War, the Church had already suffered a considerable amount of mutilations that little of what remained could be considered to be of Cassar's hand.

*The first corner statue that used to adorn the Old Carmelite Church.*

*At present it is in the Carmelite Priory, Valletta.*

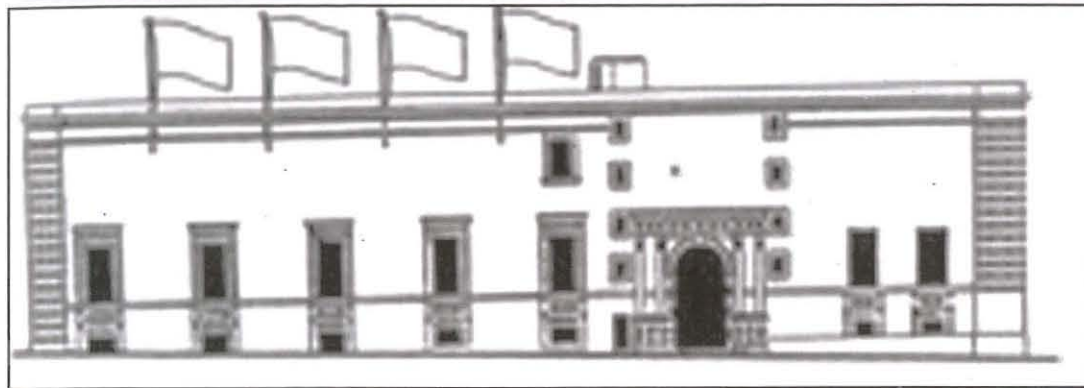
the convent also underwent several changes and consequently little remains of Cassar's original plans.

### **The Front Elevation**

The facade<sup>19</sup> of the Carmine Church was in simple and austere Doric style<sup>20</sup>. It was divided into three bays (Fig.3 and 4) with the central part being punctured by the main portal and



*Auberge d' Auvergne, probably Cassar's earliest auberges, Valletta.  
Taken from: A History of Maltese Architecture from Ancient Times up to 1800, Leonard Mahoney.*



*Auberge de France, rebuilt by Cassar.  
Taken from: A History of Maltese Architecture from Ancient Times up to 1800, Leonard Mahoney.*

(Endnotes)

1 Lecture delivered on Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> February 2010, by Dr Conrad Thake. The lecture was on the Foundation of Valletta.

2 Calleja, 1881 & Programm tal-Madonna tal-Karmnu Valletta, 2005, p. 10 & Liber Bullarum; Arc. 439, fl. 270 NLM.

3 Thake, Treasures of Malta, Easter 2000, no 17, vol VI no 2, p. 30; see also Hughes, 1967, & De Giorgio, 1985.

4 Grech, 1970, p. 4; Sammut, 1951, p.10; Sammut, 1952, p. 18.

5 The title, "The Blessed Virgin of Carmelite Order" was to be the original title of the convent. There are instances where in various documents of the Carmelites, where the convent and the church are referred to by a different title - different from the title given in the contract between the Carmelites and the Knights of the Order of Saint John. Like the Carmelite convent, the Church was also referred to under several titles. In the documents dating to the time when the church was being built, it was referred to as "The Blessed Virgin of the Carmelite Order". The occurrence of the same title was also seen in the religious document made in Dusina's Apostolic Visit. The use of slight variations of the name can also be seen in the convent. This was recorded in various documents of the Carmelites.

6 Mitt Sena Mill-Inkurunazzjoni 1881-1981, Il-Karmelitani F'Malta, p. 33.

7 Grech, 1970, p. 5; C.A.V., Cab. A. 1-3 r & v.

8 Bezzina, Programm tal-Festa tal-Madonna tal-Karmnu, Valletta, 2004, p. 5.

9 C.A.V. Cab. A. f. 181.

10 "... accessit ad Ecclesiam Sanctae Mariae de Carmelo constructam in civitate Vallettae, in qua fratres ordinis Carmelitani..." A.A.F., MS. C, ff. 137.

11 Sammut, 1951, p. 20.

12 For a brief period of time, the chapel functioned as a parish church of the new city. Being a parish church, the chapel had a baptismal font, in which the Holy Oil was contained. Furthermore the chapel had acquired a special permission from the Carmelite Prior to administer the Holy

Sacraments. Don Mariano Briffa, delegate of Rev. Don Antonio Bartoli, the General Vicar, was left in charge of the administration of the Holy Sacraments, December 1570.

13 According to Fr Lawrence Sammut, the Annunciation Chapel was instead the room that there is at the moment. This room leads to the sacristy. Sammut, 1952, p. 20

14 Sammut, 1952, p. 22.

15 From information gathered from a folder in the Archiepiscopal Curia in Floriana, The Carmelite Church, says that the Church consisted of a single nave and four side chapels. It goes on to say that this style was the favoured style of Gerolamo Cassar.

16 Sammut, 1952, p. 22.

17 "...Signori Lo Turco, solidalmente accettanti, l'obbligo di esigere nel Venerando Santario e Basilica di Nostra Signora del Monte Carmelo della Valletta, nel luogo che sarà loro indicato, una tribuna col rispettivo Altare Papale... C.A.V., Cab. B. P. 284.

18 Sammut, 1952, p. 24.

19 In 1952 the facade underwent restoration. During the restoration process, the original plan of the facade was retained. Sammut, 1952, p. 87.

20 The Doric order is one of the three columns used in Ancient Greece. Doric columns are the most basic and undecorative, with a square and circular capital and plain shaft. There is no base leaving this column with a very straightforward but powerful presence in its design.

21 Sammut, 1952, p. 87 & C.A.V., L. Prop. III p. 104.

22 Sammut, L., (1952), p. 87; C.A.V., loose document, A di Venti otto del mese di Marzo dell'anno Mille Ottocento e quaranta-nove, "...capitali di 1120 Scudi Maltese nella restarazione della facciata..."

23 Sammut, 1952, p. 87.

24 According to Albert Ganado, in his book, Valletta: Città Nuova: a map history 1566-1600, says "The owners of houses sited on corner plots were obliged to apply an attractive decorative feature- alcun bello ornament- in such corners, under pain demolition. Ganado, 2003, p 222. See also Sammut, 1970, pp 391-7; de Giorgio, pp 115-17.