

# An Anti-Conformist Proposal Regarding the Fortification of Gozo

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Effective control of Gozo was critical for the defence of the Order's hub in the Grand Harbour area and, whenever opportune, leading military engineers were assigned the job to evaluate the prevailing situation and come up with cost-efficient proposals on how to enhance the sister island's fortifications. Antonio Maurizio Valperga, the then chief military engineer of the Duke of Savoy, had his turn in 1670 (Mahoney, 1996: 326). During his hectic stay he produced the first master plan for the defence of Malta, particularly the Grand Harbour Area. This envisaged the creation of a ring of fortifications around Valletta, securing all the approaches to the fortress and its harbours (Spiteri, 2001: 55).

As regards Gozo, Valperga was asked to re-examine the Castello issue in view of its dual role as refuge for the local population and as a valuable link to Christian Europe during times of distress. Influenced by the happenings at Candia,<sup>1</sup> Valperga discarded the long agreed plan to abandon and demolish the Castello / Rabat settlement and construct a new spacious fortress town at Ghajn Damma as championed by Giovanni Rinaldini in 1599<sup>2</sup> and by Giovanni de Medici in 1640. Conversely, he advocated that the Order retains and stiffens these centrally located and long established settlements.

To this effect, Valperga visited Gozo on 20 April 1670 (Hoppen, 1979: 205). He authored an accurate plan of the Castello and of Rabat's historic core and fitted around them a fairly impressive network of defences reminiscent of the much more extensive Cottonera lines. A brief, but well structured, accompanying report was also compiled by 23 May 1670.

The Order's Council endorsed Valperga's grand scheme, which however it never implemented because of commitment to more pressing fortification projects, particularly the Cottonera lines. Likewise, the plan to fortify Marsalforn was shelved while

the Castello underwent a series of repairs (Hoppen, 1979: 118).

What follows is an overview of said proposal, as well as a free translation of the accompanying report.<sup>3</sup> This is followed by a highlight of the main changes in the urban fabric of the Castello and Rabat's historic core since 1670.

## An Overview of Valperga's Proposal

Valperga's refortification scheme entailed the construction of a screening outwork along the Castello's northwest precipitous cliff, the redesign of St. Martin's and St. John's demi-bastions and of the northeast battery into three capacious bastions, and the extension of the underlying ditch all along its circumference. Likewise, Rabat was to be encircled by an imposing enceinte. A pointed three-bastioned land front was to shield the southern flank and occupy the entire span from the upper sections of present day Palm Street to Dawwara Street respectively, while each of the resultant curtain walls heading northwards and meeting up the ditch of the Castello along the southwest (ravelin area) and southeast flanks (place of arms on covert way area) were to be reinforced by a strategically positioned demi-bastion.

The new fortress town of Rabat was to be serviced by a total of four gates, namely two along the south front and one on each flank. Rabat's main entrance was to shift from Porta Reale<sup>4</sup> to the south end of Charity Street, while traffic in and out of the said gate was to be channelled through a generously proportioned ravelin that was in turn to spill over the footprint of present day Sacred Heart Seminary complex.<sup>5</sup>

Though encapsulated by a common line of fortifications, the strip of land between the Castello

<sup>1</sup> The siege of Candia (modern Heraklion, Crete) lasted from 1648 to 1669. The Ottoman forces besieged the Venetian-ruled maritime city of Candia after conquering the remaining footprint of Crete.

<sup>2</sup> A summary of Rinaldini's reports is published in *The Gozo Observer No. 15*, pp 5-10.

<sup>3</sup> National Library of Malta, Archives of the Order, Vol. 6554, Fols. 310-313 (report) and Fol. 327 (plan).

<sup>4</sup> Present day Republic Street crossroads

<sup>5</sup> Rabat's first windmill was constructed on this site in the 1680's (Attard Tabone, 1996: 152-171). Its milling stones were removed from the Seminary complex in January 1881 (Zammit, J. Diario Vol. I, fol. 177 [Unpublished Author's Collection])

and Rabat's historic core was to remain devoid of buildings, while access to and from the Castello was to retain the existing arrangement except for the re-routing of the approaching passageway's lowermost section.



Valperga's refortification proposal.

### Translation of Accompanying Report

*In fulfilment of Your Eminence's reverend commands, having completed the design of the Gozo Castle and of the adjacent suburb of Rabat it seemed appropriate to me to include a few notes on the considerations that fashioned my conclusions. Conscious of the complexity of the art of war, my sincere judgments are hereby presented with great admiration to the grandeur of Your Eminence and of the Order.*

*A general discussion on the vital need to secure Gozo is deemed superfluous. Your Eminence manifests keen interest and shared with me a host of valid and sound views that need no further elaboration, while various other connoisseurs wrote extensively on the subject. I will limit myself to highlight the main reasons why Gozo must be safeguarded and fortified, namely the protection*

*of its inhabitants from Turkish assaults, the use of Gozo as a communication bridge with Sicily and beyond as attested during the siege of Malta,<sup>6</sup> and the safe storage of supplementary weapons that would save the hurdle to ship them over from distant Trapani, Augusta and Syracuse<sup>7</sup> and successively filter them through as required. Although lacking a proper harbour, any relieving force in transit to mainland Malta can land safely in Gozo's fertile bays and inlets, and take the opportunity to restore its strengths before pursuing its intent with major vigour. Due to the islands' close proximity to each other, a landing in Gozo is effectively setting foot on mainland Malta.*

*As per Your Eminence's instructions, I was allowed to consult various proposals regarding Gozo's fortification, whereby it has been suggested to abandon and knock down both Rabat and the Castello in view of two elevated sites in their immediate vicinity.<sup>8</sup> Said threatening posts lie at a distance of 190 and 500 canne<sup>9</sup> respectively and are not to be feared. The latter is relatively distant, while the breaching of the Castello from the nearer location is no straight forward task since the besieging cannon shots will most probably fall short from retaining a horizontal trajectory and will therefore lose much of their shattering affectivity. Should the enemy resolve to mine and blow up the sheer-cut cliffs along the northern half, the resultant soaring scar will still be impregnable.<sup>10</sup> The claim that the Castello and Rabat cannot be fortified successfully due to the aforementioned lofty posts and that the most proficient solution is to erect a new and expensive fortress at Marsalforn is hereby challenged, even though the latter is a very suitable site and abounds in fresh water supplies.*

*Unlike the Castello and Rabat, Marsalforn occupies a peripheral location whereby during the eventuality of a quick retreat several defenceless peasants risk remaining locked outside its walls alongside the merciless aggressors, while the daily trip to and from their farms and fields will consume more time.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the poor islanders will be constrained to abandon their houses and build new ones within the new fortress, whereas the Order needs to invest heavily*

<sup>6</sup> During the Great Siege of 1565, Gozo served as a staging post along the line of communication with Sicily, facilitating the risky crossings to and from Malta (Spiteri, 2005: 424)

<sup>7</sup> Trapani sits on the Sicilian northwest coast, while Augusta and Syracuse lie along its south-southeast side.

<sup>8</sup> Valperga must be referring to the neighbourhood of the Franciscan Friary and to Ta' Gelmus Hill respectively.

<sup>9</sup> A canna (Maltese qasba) is equivalent to eight spans (Maltese xiber) or 243.84cm (Aquilina, 1990: 1136)

<sup>10</sup> Ironically, following the Order's successful assault on a Turkish convoy en route from Alexandria to Constantinople and the capture of part of the sultan's harem in 1644, the Castello was mined as to have it blown-up should Gozo fall under enemy control (Vella, 2007: 54-9)

<sup>11</sup> A detailed census of Gozo of 1667 shows that some 43% of Gozo's total population inhabited the Castello/Rabat settlement and its immediate environs whereas the island's hilly countryside was peopled by an even scatter of 20 small or medium sized hamlets (Bezzina, 1989: 112-116)

in the construction of a new fortification network and subsequently double the existing garrison complement.<sup>12</sup> Besides, the issue of direct sea accessibility will still remain partially unresolved since Marsalforn Bay accommodates small vessels only.

Marsalforn's fresh water springs flow from the promontory's sloping flanks and their eventual incorporation within the line of defence necessitates the realignment of proposed fortifications to the cliff's foot. Evidently, this will inflate by a wide margin the capital outlay, while the resultant works will be dwarfed by nearby vantage points that fall cosily within musket range, rather than canon-shot breadth as in the case of the Castello. With the proposed refortification of Rabat and of the Castello both the islanders and their livestock can seek shelter therein while the Castello can assume the role of a citadel<sup>13</sup> capable to endure a long-lasting siege.

The main reason why Gozo's fortified town should not be relocated to Marsalforn emerges from the same necessity to render the island secure. As in Candia, the defenders risk becoming cornered on a small promontory that can be reinforced only with great difficulty and via a small inlet, while the greater part of Gozo will automatically be surrendered to the enemy. Your Eminency is therefore humbly advised to abort

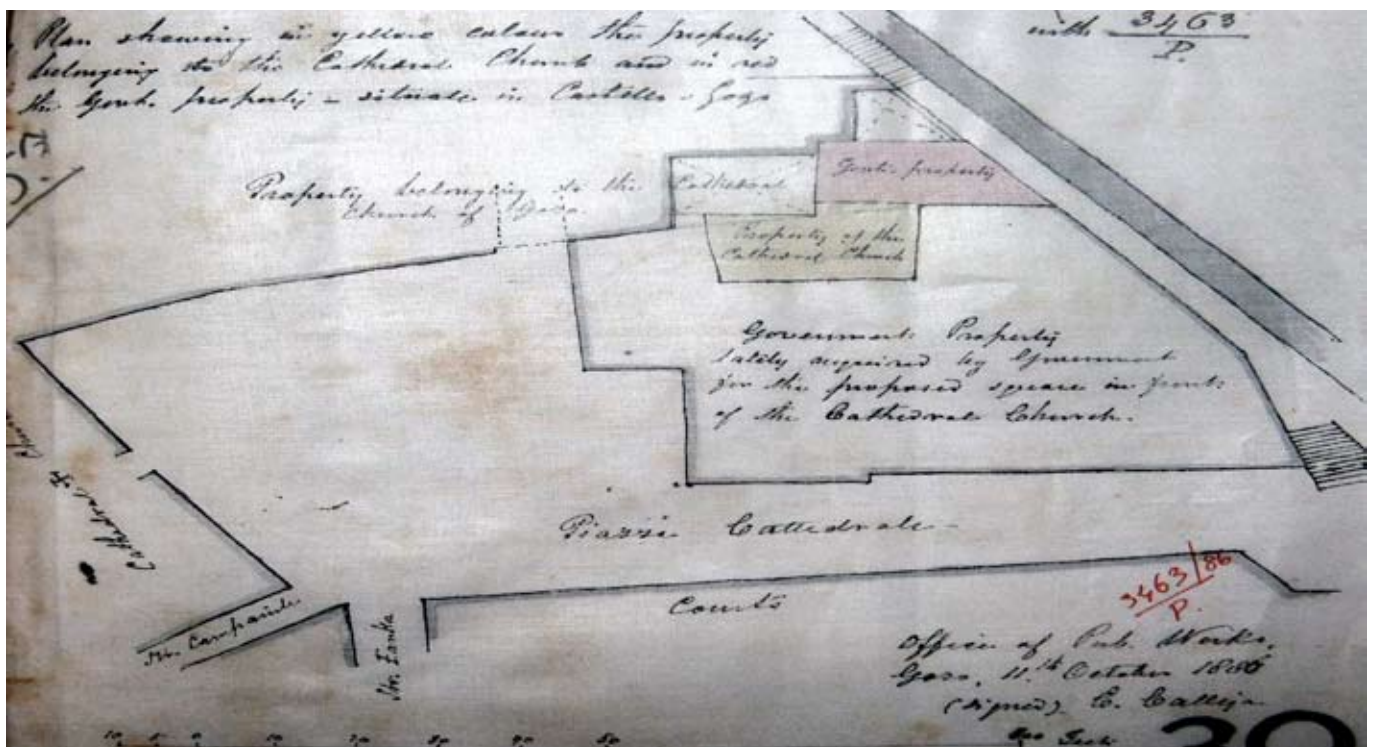
the idea of erecting a new fortress town at Marsalforn and to enhance the existing defences of the Castello and adjoining Rabat as per attached design and accompanying expenditure projections.<sup>14</sup> By so doing, both the local population and the Order stand to reap great benefits.

Malta, 23 May 1670  
Your Humble and Devout Servant  
Antonio Mauritio Valperga

### A Valuable Urban Survey

Valperga's plan is the earliest recorded survey of the Rabat settlement (Camilleri, 1996: 107-120). The level of accuracy is noteworthy and enables us to identify the major changes that were enacted during the past three centuries.

Starting off with the Gran Castello, the most conspicuous alteration is present day Cathedral Square, whereby the then block of houses facing the matrix church and abutting onto the curtain wall was pulled down in 1886. In 1956, Cathedral Square was lowered by several metres in connection with the curtain-breach project (Vella, 2008: 62-9). Of particular significance are the indented recesses along the northeast and southeast walls of the matrix church. These seem to echo the side



1886 plan of demolished buildings in Cathedral Square

<sup>12</sup> In 1704 the Castello's garrison complement consisted of a sergeant and nine soldiers (National Library of Malta, Library Manuscript 142, Fol.172)

<sup>13</sup> The term citadel means a fortress built to protect a town.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted expenditure projections are missing.



chapels erected at the turn of the sixteenth century inside the said matrix by the upper crust of Gozitan society for burial purposes.<sup>15</sup> The medieval matrix compound was severely damaged by an earthquake in January 1693 and was successively rebuilt between 1697 and 1711 on an exquisite plan by the Maltese architect Lorenzo Gafa (Bezzina, 1985: 41).



1937 Aerial view of Rabat's historic core: St George's dome and western aisles were still under construction. St Joseph's dome and belfry are also visible.

The encircling pathway running along and on top of the enceinte was also subjected to modifications since Valperga's drawing. The steep flight of steps linking St. Michael's bastion to the underlying sally ports at the back of Casa Bondi lies partially buried under the bastion's present pavement, whereas the northeast end of Bieb l-Imdina Street was absorbed by the transformation of the former barracks into a detention facility during the mid 19th century. Likewise, the short ramp dividing St. Martin's cavalier from the adjacent University store<sup>16</sup> was eliminated during the latter's reconstruction in 1776.

Turning our attention to the heart of Rabat's historic core, the propagation of St. George's parish compound is strikingly evident. In 1670, its footprint was very much similar to that described by Mgr Pietro Dusina in 1575, namely a modest cubic construction and an adjoining sacristy (Fiorini & Aquilina, 2001: 140). Present day Mgr Giuseppe Farrugia Street intersected Charity Street and extended westwards to reach St. George's Street, while the then parochial edifice stood freestanding on the imprint of the present nave. Soon after Valperga's visit, the fate of St. George's compound changed drastically. Between 1672 and 1678, its old and unpretentious construction was replaced by a monumental baroque temple, featuring for the first time

in Gozo the latin-cross plan and a lofty dome.<sup>17</sup> The side aisles were added between 1935 and 1937.

A further notable modification since the late 17th century is St. George's Square. In 1955, the same destructive inspiration that breached the Castello's main front during the successive year wiped off a substantial chunk of buildings to enlarge the then charming petite square at the heart of Rabat's maze of winding streets (Gauci, 1993: 154). St. Joseph's 18th century church was also demolished in the process.<sup>18</sup>

Except for a few trimmings along the western flank, Valperga's fortification scheme was intended to defend the entire extent of the contemporaneous Rabat settlement core. As a matter of fact, practically all extant buildings aligning the respective urban spaces immediately beyond the footprint of Valperga's plan are datable to the successive centuries, particularly the second half of the nineteenth when Rabat experienced an urban-sprawl wave.

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<sup>15</sup> In his 1575 report Mgr Pietro Duzzina lists three private chapels inside the matrix church. These belonged to the Castella, Navarra and Mompalau families respectively (Fiorini, 2006: xlvi - 1)

<sup>16</sup> Present day Heritage Malta's Gozo Area Office.

<sup>17</sup> The dome and the façade were damaged during the aforementioned earthquake of 1693. Its façade was rebuilt in 1818 on a design by Can. Salvatore Bondi, while the quadripartite vaulted roof and the dome were reconstructed by 1939.

<sup>18</sup> St. Joseph's church was built in 1730 on the site of two smaller chapels.