

Architecture

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It was at the height of the Renaissance, in 1530, when Charles V handed over the two small islands of Malta and Gozo to the Knights of St John. The momentous event was to usher in a long period of building activity which produced some of the island's finest architectural monuments, but it was not the first time that Malta had stood at the peak of architectural achievement. Prof. Colin Renfrew, the famous archaeologist describes the Maltese neolithic temples (ca. 3000 B.C.) as "the earliest free-standing monuments in stone in the world" and the "memorably imposing' facade of the Ġgantija temple, in Gozo, as "perhaps the earliest architecturally conceived exterior in the world".

Very much later, during the days of antiquity, the excellence of Maltese houses, "very beautiful and ambitiously adorned with cornices and stucco works", caught the attention of the Sicilian Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (80-20 B.C.). At the time Malta was ruled by the Romans and, as elsewhere, these built temples, town houses, baths and villas. Malta had an active harbour where, today, there is the Marsa basin, quays built with massive masonry blocks perfectly cut and jointed, and many warehouses. Melita, the capital of the island (the present Mdina and Rabat) was a sprawling city with well built houses, paved streets, and an underground sewage system. The Dark Ages came over Malta as they did over the rest of Europe, but whilst the latter emerged triumphantly out of its torpor to beget the great monuments of the Romanesque and Gothic periods, the Maltese islands slumbered on. All through the Middle Ages, Malta was a desolate, sparsely inhabited island, because

Mediterranean shipping tended to hug the continental coastline, shying away from Malta to avoid shipwreck or pirates that could be lurking in its coves and bays.

Maltese architecture of the medieval period is almost non-existent. Such buildings as there were, were strongly influenced by the Arab tradition, the island having been subjected to Arab domination from 870 A.D. to 1090 A.D., and to a further period of Muslim preponderance which only came to an end in 1127 A.D. with the reconquest of the island by Roger II of Sicily. The island had a number of troglodytic churches with Byzantine figures which probably date from the post-Arab period. Free-standing churches consisting of small flat-roofed cubical structures terminating at their eastern end in an apse, also date, at the earliest, to this period.

The system of construction of these churches was conditioned by the fact that the only available building material was the soft, fine-grained limestone, easily quarried and worked. Driven by necessity, the Maltese stonemason learned to make everything of stone, not only walls, but roofs as well. Arches played a principal part, and interior spaces were covered with slabs laid across slightly-pointed transverse arches. These arches divided the interior into bays of about two metres, which is the maximum space that a slab of soft limestone can span. Internally the walls were plastered over and covered with painted murals in gay colours of red and yellow ochre, verdigris and a dark blue-grey. Only a few of these late medieval churches survived — the Annunciation at Hal Millieri, Sta. Maria of Birmiftuħ, old St Gregory, at Żejtun, and a few others. Externally these churches were very plain,

the only ornamental feature consisting of a deep hood mould over the small, slightly pointed doorway with, sometimes, a small circular window above. In Mdina, at Birgu (Vittoriosa), and in the citadel of Gozo, there are some late medieval houses with windows in the first floor of characteristically Catalan inspiration, with round-headed double lights separated by an excessively slim colonette; the two windows being sometimes contained under a wide, slightly pointed hood mould. There was a Cathedral at Mdina, dating from the thirteenth century, with a three-aisled, five-bayed basilican plan. This church was later enlarged by the addition of transepts and a choir, whilst the roof was raised by the addition of a clerestory.

With the arrival of the Knights, Malta suddenly found itself, once more, linked to the main international currents, and with an owner, to boot, representing, then, a concentration of international wealth combined with an incredible reserve of human resources. The time was soon to come when the wealthy aristocratic Knights, and especially their Grandmasters, would shower their riches on the Maltese islands, endowing them with fine works of art and architecture. Eminent artists, military and civil engineers, architects, doctors and artisans would be 'lured' to Malta by one or other of the Knights or Grandmasters; the Order of St John was a good paymaster and painters (like Mattia Preti and Antoine de Favray) and engineers and architects (like Francesco Buonamici, Mederico Blondel, Charles François de Mondion and others) who called at Malta for a few days would remain for many years to the benefit of the whole island.

The Knights chose Birgu (Vittoriosa) as their residence because of its position athwart a peninsula in the Grand Harbour, with deep creeks on either side providing shelter for their fleet. The immediate task was to secure their base. As they had never paused in their campaign against the Turks they were fully conscious that their new headquarters was regarded as a centre of

Christian piracy calling for a hostile response from the mighty Ottoman. Defence-wise their position was, at first, untenable, but with the help of some of the foremost military engineers that were provided by the Christian states, it was rendered sufficiently strong to withstand repeated attacks by a great Turkish force which was sent to dislodge the Knights by Suleiman the Magnificent. After the Great Siege of 1565 the Order decided to build a new fortified town on the high promontory (Mount Sciberras) which straddled and dominated the island's two main harbours, viz., the Grand Harbour and Marsamxetto Harbour. Pope Pius IV sent to Malta Francesco Laparelli da Cortona, one of his best engineers and an assistant to Michelangelo at St Peter's, to advise on, and supervise, the project. The first stone was laid on March 28, 1566, and the city was named "Valletta" after the hero of the Great Siege. The fortifications which encircle Valletta were completed in less than five years – the local labour force being augmented by foreign labour from Italy. When, in 1569, or the beginning of 1570, Laparelli left the island, the task of completion was left in the hands of his able assistant, the Maltese architect Gerolamo Cassar (ca. 1520-1592). It was this architect who subsequently designed the principal buildings of Valletta, comprising the Grand Master's Palace, the Conventual Church of St John's, the seven auberges of the Knights, the Hospital of the Order, the slaves' prison, the Ferreria or arsenal, the orphan asylum, the bakeries and several churches and monastic buildings.

Before embarking on his task Cassar had been sent on a short tour of the principal cities of Italy, and the buildings designed by him rose up in a severe variant of Italian Mannerism. The austere military style of the Valletta buildings, it should be emphasised, had been adumbrated by the rigid grid-iron layout of its street plan which had been designed by Laparelli. It was Laparelli also who had chosen the

severe Palazzo Farnese, Rome, as a model for the Magisterial Palace. Gerolamo Cassar's buildings which, as it happened, perpetuated many features which had appeared in late fifteenth century and earlier sixteenth century buildings in Mdina and Birgu, were to set the character of all the buildings of Valletta and influenced, to a great measure, all subsequent buildings in the following centuries. Cassar's façades were all astylar (ie. without pilasters or columns), single or double-storied, with an exceedingly high upper floor, a long uniform row of widely-spaced, straight-headed windows, and a shallow crowning cornice. The emphasis was strongly horizontal with huge masses of plain masonry predominating; the whole tied in with rusticated corners. These rusticated corners finally became the hallmark of Cassar's façades and, as he progressed, the rusticated quoins became wider, more ponderous in character, and more deeply cut and powerful than any example he might have seen abroad. The church of St John is Cassar's masterpiece, and there, in its monumentality, its simplicity, its deep solemnity, and its many Mannerist features, one can appreciate the strong personality of its architect. Cassar's church was originally as severe internally as it is externally, a severity which was intended to express the character of the Order whose church it was, as well as the surrounding fortifications of Valletta. Cassar felt that all his buildings should reflect the fact that they were built in a fortified city, and therefore have a military cast.

Subsequently the interior of the church of St John was transformed, mainly by the Calabrese painter Mattia Preti, into the magnificent Baroque interior that it is today.

During the first half of the seventeenth century a number of village parish churches were built in a style strongly reminiscent of the Italian Quattrocento; with elements recalling, as well, the Maltese late medieval churches, particularly in their roofing with serried transverse

arches. These churches which had a cruciform plan and a three-bayed unaisled nave seem to have been inspired by the church of Sta Maria del Calcinaiò, in Cortona (1484-1502). Another church, that of St George, Qormi, has a basilican plan recalling a very similar plan which is to be found in Francesco Laparelli's collection of drawings, the so-called *Codex Laparelli*. As Laparelli hailed from Cortona it is quite possible that all these churches owe their origin to this engineer. Most of these churches were later enlarged and, in the process, partly spoilt. One of them, however, the parish church of Attard, was left practically untouched, and it is still one of the best examples of a Renaissance church in the island. Another church, Sta Maria, in Birkirkara, was saved through the accidental collapse of its vault. This church, which seems to be influenced by the Spanish Plateresque style, is remarkable for the crispness and richness of its carving.

The Baroque style came to Malta quite early: it is said with the water that, in 1615, flowed to Valletta – by means of an aqueduct – all the way from the aquifers of Mdina. An archway at Fleur-de-Lys (now demolished), a watering station at Floriana, and some fountains in Valletta, were designed in the new Baroque style, presumably by Bontadino de Bontadini, the engineer responsible for the water project. However it was Francesco Buonamici, an architect from Lucca, who built the first important Baroque buildings in Valletta and in other parts of the island, and who was largely responsible for the sober Roman character of Maltese Baroque architecture. Buonamici was the Order's resident engineer from 1634 to 1659, and his primary duties were those of overseeing the extension of the Order's fortifications (notably the fortifications of Floriana), and the maintenance of all the other fortifications. His designs in the then current Baroque style include the church of St Nicholas in Valletta, the remodelling of the Jesuit church, Valletta, the plan of the

church of St Paul at Rabat, the adjoining church of St Publius, part of the façade of Zebbug parish church, and several altar retables. His civil buildings include the Jesuit College, Valletta, the Hostel de Verdelin, also in Valletta, Wignacourt's College, at Rabat, and perhaps the façade of the Inquisitor's Palace, in Vittoriosa, as well as some palaces on the Vittoriosa waterfront. In the first two façades Buonamici showed how a long façade could be articulated by means of panelling, retaining at the same time the astylar treatment of Valletta's earlier palaces.

Another architect who worked in Malta in the mid-seventeenth century was the Frenchman Mederico Blondel who succeeded Francesco Buonamici as the Order's resident engineer. Blondel is only recorded as the designer of the splendid Baroque façade of the church of St Mary of Jesus (1689), Valletta, but the Valletta churches of St Rocco (1681) and St Francis (1681) are also thought to be his, whilst he was probably also involved in the Carmelite church (1650-72) at Mдина. This centralised church, with an oval plan similar to Vignola's S. Anna dei Palafrenieri, was built by Francesco Sammut and completed by Lorenzo Gafà. Gafà is Malta's greatest Baroque architect. Like Buonamici's and Blondel's, Gafà's Baroque was a sober, classical kind of Baroque, with straight façades and large areas of undecorated wall surfaces employed both for the sake of contrast as well as that of gravity; a gravity that was usually tempered by the liveliness of the skylines. Beginning life as a sculptor, he later turned to architecture and was responsible for a number of churches including St Nicholas (1676-93), Siggiewi; St Lawrence (1681-97), Vittoriosa; Sta Maria (1685-1712), Qrendi; St Catherine (1692-1778), Żejtun; the Matrice (1697), Gozo; and the Cathedral (1697-1702), Mдина. The latter is Gafà's masterpiece and establishes the apex of the Baroque in Malta. For its dramatic position on the ramparts of Mдина, Gafà's Cathedral has

been said to recall the Baroque monastery of Melk, in Austria, and rightly so, particularly to anyone who approaches Mдина from Valletta. The encircling walls of the old hill town look like parts of the Cathedral building itself, and the whole is surmounted by a beautiful, plastically conceived dome such as only a Baroque sculptor could have fashioned.

Gafà built few secular buildings because churches were his forte. However it is documented that the bishop's palace, in Mдина, Villa Bighi (later screened with a Neo-classical portico on the seaward side and incorporated in the British designed Bighi Hospital) and the Palace of the General of the Galleys, in the Vittoriosa Marina, were designed by him. The last – unfortunately badly battered in World War II but which is still repairable – had a magnificent set of rooms planned symmetrically in the Palladian manner.

Many books have been written to explain how the Baroque style came about and why it became so popular in Roman Catholic countries. Here it is sufficient to say that as this architectural style gained popularity in Malta the Knights tried to transform the austere military character of their city by replacing the original buildings with others in the new flamboyant style, and hence the spate of new churches, new auberges and public buildings in the Baroque style. This transformation was most successful in the two main streets of Valletta, especially so in Merchants Street. The Maltese church had adopted this style before the Knights, and many of the older churches were either remodelled, as, for example, the church of the Annunciation at Tarxien, and the church of the Madonna tal-Ghar, Rabat, or demolished and rebuilt, as in the case of the old Cathedral, at Mдина, and the Matrice, in Gozo.

In keeping with the principles of the Baroque style the austerity of the network of fortifications girdling the harbour towns was interrupted with military gateways communicating the splendour and power of the reigning princes, whilst the sea

approach to Valletta was made to express the opulence of the city by a series of magnificent magazines along the waterfront of Valletta facing the Grand Harbour balanced, on the opposite side, along the Vittoriosa Marina, by a breath-taking succession of splendid palaces ostensibly meant as residences for the galley captains with warehouses on the ground floor.

The Order's architects who were chiefly responsible for the transformation of Valletta and Mdina, during the first decades of the eighteenth century, into the Baroque cities which they are today were

- Roman-born Romano Fortunato Carapeccchia, who worked in Malta from 1706 to 1738, the Frenchman Charles
- François de Mondion, who was the Order's resident engineer from 1715 to 1733, and
- the Valletta-born architect Andrea Belli (1703-1772).

Carapeccchia had studied under Carlo Fontana, one-time assistant to those Baroque giants Cortona, Rainaldi and Bernini. Fontana's work has been described as accomplished but derivative and it has been said that he was largely responsible for the classicizing bookish academism into which the Baroque style declined. Nonetheless his studio was the forcing ground of such formidable architects as Ferdinando San Felice (1675-1748), Filippo Juvarra (1678-1736), Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach (1656-1723), Johann Lukas von Hildebrandt (1668-1745), James Gibbs (1682-1754), and Matheus Daniel Popplemann (1662-1736). Certainly no other architect practising in Malta had such impressive credentials as Carapeccchia. As ill-luck would have it no opportunity presented itself for a really great building. The small jobs which came his way, polished, elegant and sometimes ingenious, brought a new air of sophistication to the streets of Valletta. These included the remodelling or outright rebuilding of the national churches of the various langues – the church of St James (1710) for the Langue of Castille,

the church of St Catherine of Italy (1713) for the Langue of Italy, the church of Our Lady of Pilar (1718) for the Langue of Aragon and the church of St Barbara (1739) for the Provençal Langue – as well as the church and convent of St Catherine in lower Republic Street, the Municipal Palace (1720) (today the Public Registry), the Manoel Theatre (1731) and three houses in South Street (Maison Demandolx). Spinola Palace, in St Julians, was also remodelled after a design by Carapeccchia.

→ Charles François de Mondion who had, from 1701, served his apprenticeship under a renowned military engineer, the field marshal Sebastian le Prestre de Vauban, and then served the French Crown until 1720, was a very versatile man. His architectural designs are characteristic of his age: polished, eclectic and impressively elegant. The crispness of the carving and the contrasting texture of the surfaces of his façades are other qualities which are responsible for the outstanding character of his creations. Mondion's chance came when, in the wake of the 1693 earthquake which shook Mdina and demolished its decrepit houses, Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena decided to replan salient sections of the old capital, update the retrograde design of the fortifications and rebuild a number of official edifices. It is thought that in this way Vilhena sought to impress the might of the Order upon a city which had remained a stronghold of the proud Maltese nobility. The buildings designed by Mondion, the Magisterial Palace, which is right at the entrance to Mdina, the Law Courts, and the Banca Giuritale (or Town-House) contribute in no small way to the Baroque character of present-day Mdina but more impressive, perhaps, than these buildings are the city gates which Mondion designed not only for the main entrance to Mdina, but also for Floriana (Portes des Bombes) and Fort Manoel, this fort having been also constructed under his supervision.

The edifices designed by Mondion and Carapeccchia are all fine buildings and on a

par with those that were being produced on the mainland of Europe. However, the Auberge de Castille (1741-1745), the major baroque palace in Valletta, and the most splendid of all, was designed by a Maltese architect, Andrea Belli. Belli, who was born in Valletta, had spent many years together with his family, in Venice. Thence it is possible that he had visited Austria and southern Germany because some features of his buildings have close parallels with buildings in those countries.

Belli was certainly in Italy when the Palazzo della Consulta, in Rome, was completed (1737). This palace was the source of inspiration of the Auberge de Castille although the Maltese building is no blind copy. Belli was responsible for a number of other splendid Baroque buildings whose paternity had been forgotten. The Bishop's Seminary at Mdina (today the Cathedral Museum), a veritable Baroque jewel, was largely designed by him. Belli's design for the Augustinian priory, a stone's throw away at Rabat, was chosen as the winning design in a competition held for this edifice, by none less than Gabriele Valvassori, one of the great masters of the late Roman Baroque. Belli's, as well, is the Museum of Fine Arts, in Valletta, with its magnificent *treppenhaus* staircase, and the Bishop's Curia in Floriana (originally a Jesuit house of retreat) with its charming chapel which seems to have been inspired by Cosmos Damian Asam's Abbey church in Weltenburg (1716-25).

The last eighteenth century architect to practise in Malta was the Sicilian Stefano Ittar (died Jan. 18, 1790) who designed the Neo-classical National Library (1786-1796), in Valletta, and presumably finished the Customs' House, another striking Neo-classical building, which had been commenced in 1774 by Giuseppe Bonnici.

So far we have said very little about the plans of these buildings. As in other Mediterranean countries Maltese houses were centred upon the courtyard. At first they were single-storied with hardly any

openings on the outside. It seems that there was a time in the late Middle Ages when it was touch-and-go whether our houses would have tiled sloping roofs, as in Sicily, or flat roofs as in North Africa. By the time the Knights came to Malta, in 1530, flat roofs had become general. These were made water-proof, as they were until recently, with a fine layer of 'diffone' – a substance consisting of lime mixed with small pieces of pottery and powdered earthenware. Due to the high cost of land, houses in cities like Valletta and Vittoriosa were multi-storied, with a relatively small internal yard, whilst the plan was very often U-shaped or L-shaped, i.e. the rooms did not quite surround the courtyard. In palaces, however, the *cortile* was fairly spacious with rooms all around and generally with an arcaded gallery between the courtyard and the surrounding rooms. Because of its size the Grand Master's palace had two courtyards but only one has a surrounding arcade. Some of the auberges were originally single-storied but most, very soon, had an extra floor, or more, added to them. At first the staircase was tucked unobtrusively in some angle of the palace so that the entrance vestibule was connected directly to the *cortile*. In the Auberge de Provence, however, perhaps in 1638 or so, the staircase leading to the main floor above was placed between the courtyard and the entrance vestibule. About a century later this arrangement was repeated but with greater scenographic effect in the Inquisitor's Palace, in Vittoriosa, in the Auberge de Castille (1741) and the Museum of Fine Arts (1761). In the last two the staircase branches out into two parallel flights and is of a type which is called imperial.

Very few of these palaces (town houses) had a manifestly symmetrical plan but when it came to the design of country-houses (villas) many had a characteristic plan which was repeated time and again. This consisted of a long central hall with three approximately equal rooms on each side. The second room was usually taken

up by the staircase whilst the room on the opposite side was often turned into a vestibule leading to a side-entrance. This is the plan, for example, of Villa Bologna, Attard (ca. 1747) and Villa Gourgion, Lija (ca. 1700). Sometimes the central hall is preceded by a lobby as at Verdala Palace and Selmun Palace, and sometimes, as at Palazzo Marnisi, Marsaxlokk, an external staircase leads directly to the first floor. This kind of layout fitted well within a square site and thus we find the cubical tower at Bubaqra with a ground floor plan almost identical to that of Villa Bologna and Villa Gourgion. In the first floor, Bubaqra tower has a two-storey high cruciform room with four smaller rooms tucked away in each corner. This layout recalls the perfectly symmetrical layouts of Palladio's villas which also occupied a squarish site. Mamo Tower has a circular central chamber, radiating arms on the main axes and a square room at each of the four ends of the diagonal axes, approaching very nearly, in plan, to Palladio's Villa Rotunda. These country-houses were originally fortified and their façades were necessarily plain. Many had the external appearance of towers – Malta's mini-castles. In due course the danger of corsair attacks subsided and the Maltese nobility and the nouveau riche started building country houses in an even greater number, some clustered in the Three Villages – Lija, Balzan and Attard – and others scattered in various parts of the island, at Gudja, Tarxien, Wardija, Floriana, etc. These country-houses were unfortified although Selmun Castle and some others had the semblance, one imagines for romantic reasons, of the earlier fortified houses.

Up to the mid-eighteenth century most of these country-houses continued the tradition of external simplicity which made them fuse happily with their rustic settings. Some pertinent examples are Palazzo Marnisi at Birżebbuġa, Palazzo Gomerino at Għemieri, Aedes Danielis at Żejtun, the country-house at Djar il-Bniet, the

Inquisitor's Palace at Girgenti, Villa Abela at Tarxien, and Gourgion tower in Gozo.

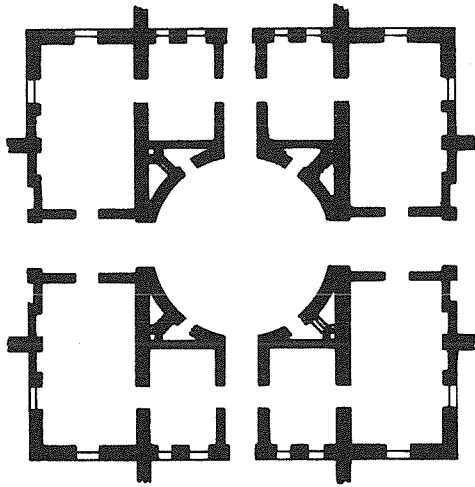
After the mid-eighteenth century these villas were often very ostentatious, e.g. Villa Bologna, in Attard, Villa Preziosi (now Francia), in Lija, and Villa Agata in Floriana. Some of these villas cost so much to build that their ambitious owners ended up bankrupt. Most had very big gardens, some as big, or even bigger, than San Anton, and were generally planned with a strong central axis, and divided by low walls into compartments as a protection against strong winds. Many of these gardens have disappeared but one of the most interesting (Palazzo D'Aurel, Gudja) still survives although its old olive groves were destroyed during World War II when it was occupied by the military. This garden, like the plan of the villa itself, has striking similarities to that of Palazzo Leone, Sta Venera, which had been built by Mondion in 1730 for Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena. It has a well-enclosed open court at the back of the house, with an archway centring on a curious temple-like structure at the far end of the main axis. Another walk in the garden of this country-house was flanked with stone vases and statues of elephants, giraffes, dogs and cats, all about the same size. The owner of this country-house, the Marchesa Bettina Dorell, had been a lady-in-waiting in Naples to Carolina, Queen of the Two Sicilies, sister of Marie Antoinette, and had brought with her the romantic ideas of that court. One of the follies in this garden is a mock *girna* inside which a life-like stone "hermit" gazes stonily at his visitors. The most striking of these romantic follies was a "ruined" tower – tall, circular, and rustic-looking – which glistens in the sun, because pieces of glass were embedded in the mortar. It dates from about 1780 and was built, it is said, around an old watch-tower. The rooms in this tower were frescoed, walls, ceilings, and floors also; whilst one of them had a stone table laid out with typically Maltese dishes, all made of stone and painted to look "natural".

Late Medieval churches had the simplest plan possible, consisting of a rectangle with a semicircular apse at the eastern end where the high altar was situated. Devout people sometimes built other box-like churches next to the first one. If two such churches were placed end to end and the separating walls were removed a longish church would be formed. The second box was sometimes built parallel to the first one with a common side-wall and the churches connected, each to the other, by an opening formed between the piers supporting the transverse arches. The same operation was then repeated on the other side of the church. Sometimes chapels were built with their inner end touching the side of the original church. When a church was sufficiently long a nave with accompanying side chapels might have resulted. The obstacle to this kind of plan lay in the piers supporting the transverse arches because the Maltese roofing technique demanded that the distance between them could not exceed two metres. When the Dominicans settled in Malta, in the mid-fifteenth century, they brought with them just such a plan. To provide a good view into the side chapels they did away with the restricting transverse arches and roofed the nave with wooden beams. As this type of plan was, in Italy, favoured mostly in churches run by friars it is known as a "friary church plan". For an island without a natural supply of timber, or to provide a fire-proof structure, this was not the ideal solution. Gerolamo Cassar adopted this plan on a bigger scale for the Conventual church of St John and solved the problem of the timber roof by spanning the nave with a great barrel-vault which was supported at the sides by buttresses rising from the walls of the side chapels. Some of his churches for the religious orders, however, were still roofed with timber trusses. Vignola's Gesù, the prototype of almost every Cruciform Baroque church, with a barrel-vaulted nave with side-chapels, a domed crossing, and a deep choir, appeared in Malta in about

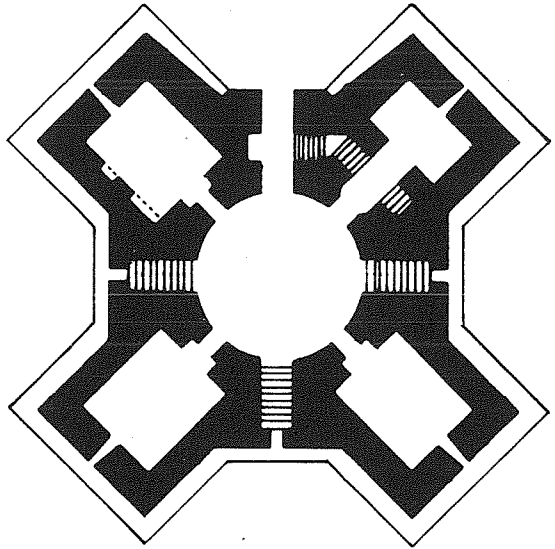
1600 with the building of the Jesuit church to the design of Fra Giuseppe Valeriano, the official architect of the Jesuit Order, but this type of church was too big for most of the village parish churches. As already stated these adopted a cruciform plan with a three-bayed unaisled nave and square-ended transepts and choir similar to that of Francesco di Giorgio Martini's Sta Maria del Calcinaiolo, in Cortona. The architect of these churches was possibly Vittorio Cassar but they are generally attributed to Tommaso Dingli, who is known to have carved the stonework of Sta Maria of Attard, the new Dominican church at Rabat, and several others. It is known for a fact that he completed, as an architect, a number of churches which were possibly designed by Vittorio Cassar (viz. Sta Maria of Birkirkara and St Philip of Żebbuġ) whilst other churches, e.g. Sta Maria of Mosta, St Bartholomew of Gharghur, Our Lady of Graces of Żabbar, and Sta Maria of Gudja, were probably designed by him.

A number of centralised churches were oval (the Carmelite church, Mdina), circular (Our Lady of Sarria, Floriana), octagonal (St Catherine of Italy, Valletta), or in the form of a Greek Cross (St Nicholas church, Valletta). The church of Our Saviour, Lija (1694-1709) had a plan which was identical to that of the hundred-years earlier church of Attard, except that all the four arms (choir, transepts and nave) ended in apses, and the vault rose from attic pedestals. In fact the apsed ends, the attic, and a vault pierced with high vertical windows, were the principal features which differentiated late seventeenth and eighteenth century Baroque churches from the churches of the early seventeenth century. As in the earlier churches vaults were articulated with transverse ribs but instead of being coffered, vaults were now decorated with paintings.

The church of St Lawrence, Vittoriosa (1681-1697), was built from the beginning with wide ambulatories so that space



Andrea Palladio: Villa Rotonda, Vicenza. Perfectly symmetrical layout occupying a squarish site.



Mamo Tower: very similar in plan to Palladio's Villa Rotonda. Many country houses had a characteristic symmetrical plan.



Bay windows on the Sliema promenade during the British period.

circulated freely throughout the length and breadth of the interior. We find the same spatial integration in the Cathedral at Mdina and the Matrice in Gozo. At first the church of St Catherine, Żejtun, was built without aisles, but these were added shortly after. In due course many aisle-less churches had ambulatories added, which were easily connected to the nave by knocking down the thin walls below the arches of the nave chapels, e.g. the parish churches of Żebbuġ, Naxxar, Siggiewi, Żabbar, and many others.

All the main characteristics of Maltese Baroque churches are to be found in the church of St Helen, the new parish church of Birkirkara (1727-45). This church was probably designed by Dun Nikol Borg and his kinsman, Salvu Borg, who was the Capomastro, or master mason. These ambitious men had the idea of copying the Cathedral at Mdina, "improving" on that church in the process. Thus in the interior, all the ends were made apsidal – in the Cathedral only the choir finished with an apse – whilst, in the façade, the clock faces were placed in the middle of the upper panels. A number of other adjustments followed in the heavier, more plastic, modelling of the eighteenth century, a little more ornament was added here and a little there, the triangular pediment at the top was replaced with something lighter and more florid, and statues were added on the skyline. With the incorporation of these elements a new façade was created, monumental, like that of Mdina, but gay and festive, where that had been properly grave.

A class of church which is encountered all over the island is the so-called "wayside chapel". These chapels are small, single-cell structures and may be found anywhere, in isolated and desolate places, some overtaken by urban sprawl, others magnificent little jewels, cherished by the community they serve. These churches belong to two distinct types. Churches of the first type (Type One) are the direct descendants of the late-medieval cubical

churches. In these churches the pointed diaphragm arches have been replaced by a barrel-vault, the façade is crowned with a Spanish-looking bellcot, and low rectangular windows flank the doorway. The medieval simplicity of their ancestors has often given way to a wealth of Renaissance detail, but the fundamental (rectangular) plan remains the same, distinguishing these small vernacular churches from their cousins of foreign inspiration, the domed centralised churches. Churches of this type (Type Two) are rarely much bigger than those of the first type and these, also, are scattered all over the island, embedded in the urban core, at the Marina outside Valletta, or isolated in the open countryside. Of these the most memorable are the churches of Sarria, at Floriana, of Ta' Liesse as seen from the Upper Barrakka Gardens, and of Tal-Providenza in the fields between Siggiewi and Ghar Lapsi. However there are many others which are almost as striking.

During the first fifty years of British rule there was hardly any building activity in the island. The British found themselves well-provided for as regards building. The fortifications could still withstand attack as they had proved during the siege against the French, whilst the palaces and auberges provided all the accommodation that was necessary for the British Civil and Imperial Government. This period coincided with the artistic reaction abroad against the ornateness and frivolity of the Baroque-Rococo style. The return to classical severity, known as the Neo-classical style, did not stop at a revival of the architecture of Ancient Rome but architects went to the original sources of the classical style, that is, to Greece and to the Greek remains of Southern Italy and Sicily. This revival of Greek architecture, primarily of the use of the Greek Doric order gained great popularity in Britain, as it seemed to the British that it represented the purest style of architecture. Thus it was that the Doric Revival was used by the British to assert

their presence in the island and as a symbol of their imperial might and glory. The Main Guard rose in the centre of Valletta, Sir Alexander Ball's monument in the Lower Barrakka and, across the harbour, the Bighi Naval Hospital. Many monuments were built at this time, ostensibly to the memory of naval and army officers, but actually as an excuse by the British to leave an impact on the island's landscape, especially on Valletta and its surroundings; eliciting the remark by an English visitor that "since the English became masters the proud bastions of Valletta have become sepulchral."

These artifacts were mostly designed by British architects, but Giorgio Pullicino, from 1803 Professor of Drawing at the University, had studied at the Accademia di San Luca, in Rome, and is reputed to have designed the entrance of the old University in Valletta, the pavilion at Villa Frere, Pietà, the exedra surrounding Perello's Fountain in Fort St Elmo, Sir Alexander Ball's monument in the Lower Barrakka, and Spencer's obelisk. On documentary evidence, however, only the last one can be definitely established as his.

The first stone of the present Anglican Pro-Cathedral in Valletta was laid in 1842 on the site of Gerolamo Cassar's old Auberge d'Auvergne. This was the third design for this Anglican building. In 1825 Col. Whitmore had prepared a design but nothing came of it. Then, in 1838, Queen Adelaide, who was recuperating in Malta, donated £10,000 for the new cathedral. The building was commenced in 1839 to the design of Richard Lankersheer who was the English Director (then called Superintendent) of Public Works between 1 March 1830 and 13 August 1841. As an architect Lankersheer had considerable talent but unfortunately was unversed in local building construction and, soon after the foundation stage, "cracks, splits, and crushings" in the structure began to appear. The anti-British press capitalised on this incident to attack the occupation of all high posts by Englishmen and, in

particular, the post of Director of Public Works. Lankersheer, disgraced, died of a broken heart at the age of 38. The work was finally entrusted to William Scamp, a young naval architect who had already distinguished himself in the construction of a dry-dock and the Naval Bakery at Vittoriosa. This building, the first and finest example of British industrial architecture in the island, was externally inspired by Kent's Horse Guard in London, and is as Baroque as British architecture was in the mid-eighteenth century (i.e. when the Horse Guards was built).

With such precedents one hardly expected that overnight William Scamp would turn to classical purity. And yet he did, to produce one of the neatest and coldest examples of Neo-classicism in Valletta. But the tower and spire of this church; unclassical and quintessentially English, struck the right vertical note to the emphatical horizontality of the curtains, bastions and buildings of Valletta – which is more than can be said for the Royal Opera House.

This building, of which the Maltese were so proud, was designed by a British architect, in his British studio, principally for the social delectation of British service officers stationed in the island. Columnar façades are foreign to the architecture of Valletta which is overwhelmingly astylar, but the architect of the Royal Opera House – Edward Middleton Barry, the architect of the Royal Opera House of Covent Garden – estranged from everything else that is Maltese struck a sympathetic chord in the common people by endowing it with a massiveness, vigour and floridity, which can only be described as Neo-Baroque. At the time that it was built (1860) there had been a shift in this direction everywhere, e.g. the Opéra, Paris (1861-74), the Exchange (1876) and Palais de Justice (1866-83), Brussels, etc. Classical façades are grave and static. Columns breaking forward from their fellows, column clusters, and vital dynamic skylines, such

as we find in Barry's Opera House, are unclassical. The best view of Barry's Opera House was diagonal and, had it been finished as designed by Barry, the skyline of the Opera House would have been even livelier with its flourish of vases and statues.

Grongnet's Mosta Dome (1833-1860) the only ostensibly Neo-classical building designed by a Maltese architect, won popular approval for the same reason. It was monumental, it was rich with coarsely detailed, excessive, ornament, and it was vital. In the Mosta church the static classical dome of the Pantheon (the original classical model) was enlivened by a dynamic catenary curve and the static centralised plan was given directional emphasis by the addition of a deep eastern choir. This dynamic Baroque vitality is emphasised by the coffering in the dome. In the Pantheon the coffering consists of horizontal bands of gradually diminishing squares. In the Mosta dome these turn into diagonal bands of lozenge-shaped panels which spiral upwards with a whirling movement. The Maltese, who have never taken to the Neo-classical style, took this church to their hearts and, as soon as the stonework was finished, started to decorate it and have continued ever since, in the same way that they have decorated and continue to load with ornament their other Baroque churches.

It was at about this time (ca. 1835) that there appeared a type of villa, or country-house, which was new to Malta. Villa Portelli, at Kalkara, and Capua Palace, in Sliema, were apparently designed by the same architect. Their inspiration was probably British because verandahs on external façades are not a Maltese device. On the other hand, in every part of the Empire, Britons built colonnaded or arcaded porticos to ward off the strong direct sun. These two villas had a progeny of a sort – e.g. Dragonara Palace, Villino Chapelle, and a number of smaller villas but, more often, Maltese architects preferred to combine external colonnaded,

or arcaded, porticos with larger areas of solids.

Verandahs or porticos were popular with the designers of Military Barracks, an important aspect of Maltese architecture during British rule, and a number of Maltese schools with long colonnaded façades, like, for example, the Government Schools of Sliema, Żejtun, etc. (built in the early decades of the twentieth century) may not have been uninfluenced by these military buildings, but the most successful secular, arcaded and porticoed building was designed by British, probably naval, architects. The Dockyard Terrace on the Senglea Marina was originally the Palazzo dei Capitani delle Galere, erected by the Knights of St John as a residence for the Order's Galley Captains. The British put up a screen of arcades and light columns on the façade and converted it into a residence for high-ranking Dockyard officials. During World War II the light Upper Gallery was destroyed and has remained unreplaced. On the opposite side, in the Vittoriosa Marina, the British repeated the same idea but with much less success. In fact they did more harm than good by mutilating some very fine palaces in the process.

After about the mid-nineteenth century architects abroad had grown tired of the Greek revival and eclecticism had set in. The same thing happened in Malta where the local temperament had never favoured classical purity. Soon "the fancy dress ball of architecture" was in full swing with three Maltese architects, in particular, holding the scene during the second half of the nineteenth century. The eldest of these three architects, Nicola Zammit (1815-1889) was a medical doctor by profession and a philosopher by inclination. As an architect Zammit's forte was the designing of new church façades for old churches. These include St Catherine, Żurrieq (1861); St Nicholas, Siggiewi (1862); St Publius, Floriana (1885); and St Paul Shipwrecked, Valletta (1885).

The predominant character of these

façades is Baroque with motifs inspired by Ferdinando Fuga's *Sta Maria Maggiore* and Christopher Wren's *St Paul's Cathedral*. Columns are used with monumental effect in sharp contrast to the characteristic Baroque church façade (of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) in which columns are conspicuously absent. Zammit's influence through his writing extended beyond his excursions in architecture but perhaps his most outstanding success was his introduction of one of the basic tools of the Maltese mason – the stone-scraper (*raxketta*), used for the first time in the façade of Zammit's village parish church of *St Nicholas*. It is a pity that hardly anyone associates this tool with his name.

② The second of the three major architects practising in the second half of the 19th century was *Giuseppe Bonavia* (1821-1885), Bonavia was born in *Valetta* and his most important buildings are actually there. The façade of the *Carmelite church*, rebuilt in 1852 to Bonavia's design, an academic composition remarkable mainly for the unusual double windows which formed its central feature. To Bonavia, then employed as Clerk of Works with the *Royal Engineers*, goes the distinction of being the author of the first Gothic church in Malta – in an island where this style, in its historical period, had manifested itself in isolated features, in windows, in a Gothic system of roofing, etc., but never in an entire building. This Gothic building, commenced in 1854, was the *Presbyterian church of St Andrew*, which is in *South Street* corner with *Old Bakery Street*, and its style and architecture were greatly dictated by Bonavia's client, the Scottish Minister *Rev. George Wisely* who took great pains to give the building a consistently British look. Two years later Bonavia designed the *Carmelite church at Balluta*. Here Bonavia was given an entirely free hand and the result was a rather qualified sort of Gothic. Bonavia's best known building was the *Borsa*, or *Exchange Building*, in lower *Republic*

Street (completed in 1857). The façade of this building is in the Neo-classical style; but in a style so light that it is nearer to the *Rococo-Classical* of *Robert Adam*. The low-relief sculpture, the cornucopia in the spandrels of the arched doorways, the medallions over the windows in the first floor, and the garlands in the wide frieze above, as well as the characteristic cast-iron railings in the long open balconies, are all typical of this light elegant style.

In the records office of the P.W.D. there is a project by Bonavia, dated 1859, for the proposed *Royal Opera House*, in the same light Neo-classical style as for his *Borsa*. Bonavia's façade had three storeys, or rather two and a high attic, but otherwise it was typical of *Valetta's* architecture – astylar, with arcading on the ground floor, straight-headed windows on the other floors, and robust corner pilasters characteristic of *Valetta*. Unfortunately Bonavia's design was rejected for that by *Barry*. A decade and a half after the rejection of Bonavia's project this Maltese architect built the palace or rather twin palaces – opposite the *Royal Opera House*. This time Bonavia was as effusive as his supplanter had been in the *Royal Opera House*. For his palace Bonavia went to *Venice* for inspiration, to produce a façade which, for its richness, is worthy even of that city of rich façades. Bonavia's façade was almost as alien to the *Valetta* scene as *Barry's* had been. However Bonavia's palace was astylar, like the other *Valetta* houses, and, with the addition of the oriental-looking "Maltese" balconies – then in their heyday – the architect established an acceptable compromise – a façade which for all its foreignness was somehow familiar. Soon semicircular-headed binary windows sprouted all over the island, consolidating the "Malteseness" of Bonavia's façade. Of Bonavia's other buildings, which included the church of *Stella Maris at Sliema* (almost totally rebuilt soon afterwards) the most noteworthy is perhaps one of the best examples of Romanticism in Malta – a

combination of a staged tower and a Roman circular temple which was built, as an embellishment, in the garden of Villa Depiro, Lija. This exquisitely proportioned little structure, partly derived from Bramante's Tempietto of S. Pietro in Montorio, and almost as bare of ornament, is now entirely out of context, standing as a traffic island in a vast open space for which it was not meant originally.

3 The third and most prolific of the major architects of the nineteenth century was Emmanuele Luigi Galizia (1830-1906) who made his mark as an architect in the Public Works Department, of which he was Superintendent (or Director) from 1880 to 1888. Galizia's first important work came in 1855 when, at the age of 25 years, he got the prestigious commission to design the chief Protestant cemetery at Ta' Braxia, outside the Floriana fortifications. The Neo-Romanesque chapel of this cemetery is mainly of interest because it signals the appearance in the Maltese architectural scene of yet another period style which was later to become fairly popular in ecclesiastical quarters through its patronage by a Maltese Benedictine monk, Dom Maurus Caruana, who was bishop of Malta from 1915 to 1943.

Galizia's big chance came shortly after, when he was commissioned to design a big Catholic burial ground on Tal-Horr hill outside the village of Tarxien. Recognition of Galizia's masterpiece was immediate. When the cemetery, which was dedicated to the Addolorata, was solemnly consecrated on May 9, 1869, newspaper reports were enthusiastic about the beauty of its architecture, its meticulous planning and the decorative aspect of the small Gothic church crowning the summit of Tal-Horr hill. It is to Galizia's credit that he had identified the potentialities of the site and risen to the occasion. Galizia's success brought him a commission (in 1874) for yet another cemetery; this time for the Muslim community. For this cemetery Galizia sought inspiration in the architecture of Muslim India, which was at hand, or very

nearly, in the Royal Pavilion at Brighton. Galizia's cemetery won the admiration of Abdul-Aziz Khan, the visiting Sultan of Constantinople, who conferred the Order of the Mejidie, in appreciation, on its architect. This excursion in Saracenic architecture produced, at about this time, those quaint "Moorish" houses in Rudolph Street Sliema, which with their horseshoe arches and characteristic fretwork-type carving bring a delightfully exotic touch to one of the oldest corners of Sliema. For the Carmelite church at Balluta (1871) Galizia reverted to Gothic. This church, with its interesting Neo-Gothic rendering of the traditional two-towered Maltese church façade, was particularly remarkable for the rightness of its scale in relation to the flanking row of low terrace houses and for its polychromatic touches so harmoniously complementary to the azure waters of the bay fronting it. This church was replaced by another "Gothic" structure in the 1950's but with less satisfying results.

Galizia's sense of the rightness of his architecture in relation to its setting is again evident in the Gothic chapel of Our Lady of Lourdes at Mgarr, Gozo, which was built between 1888 and 1893. Overlooking a bay, like his church at Balluta, this chapel is isolated and stands on top of a hill. Thus a façade with a single steeple as the crowning feature was just right.

The Gothic style which had been introduced by the British for its Britishness – the church of St Andrew in Valletta (1854), the Trinity Church and adjoining rectory in Sliema (1866), Sliema Point Battery at Għar id-Dud, Sliema (1872-77), and the Methodist church in Floriana (1881) – had been accepted and became even popular in Maltese ecclesiastical circles for its association with Pre-Reformation Society. In the last decades of the nineteenth century it was adopted for its picturesque qualities by the noble and wealthy Maltese families who built turreted and battlemented country villas at

Wardija, Mgarr, Rabat and Lija and elsewhere. But the most fantastic manifestation of the Romantic movement was a public utility building, the mock Neo-Gothic villa which houses the sewage pumping station in Rue d'Argens, Gżira. In domestic architecture the revivalist styles remained in vogue for a considerable time, not only in country villas but, sometimes even in crowded city-scapes where some pretentious façades included not only pointed windows, hood-mouldings, crockets and similar Gothic motifs, but battlements and on occasional corbelled turret as well.

Some Maltese architects amalgamated Gothic and classical motifs to produce refreshingly new combinations. The most interesting example was the church of San Gaetano, Hamrun, built by George Schinas between 1869 and 1875 with medieval elements internally and a façade hailing from Longhena's Baroque Sta Maria della Salute and towers from Laon's Gothic cathedral. The crossing had to be crowned with a Romanesque lantern – such as those of Mayence cathedral and of St Sernin, Toulouse – which would have been a total alien in the Maltese scene. Fortunately this was never built, the present dome being built in 1953-55 by Chev. Gużè Damato to the design of Andrea Vassallo (1856-1928). Taking his cue from the façade, Vassallo had very wisely modelled his dome on that of Sta Maria della Salute, in Venice.

It is no accident that near the end of this article we should meet with the architects Vassallo and Damato associated together in the design and construction of this, the most beautiful dome in Malta, because these two men were, without doubt, the last two great architects of an island which has produced many illustrious architects. Both, as it happens, were self-taught men without any formal training in architecture. Architecture was in their bones. To Vassallo we owe the dome of St Nicholas, Siggiewi, "the most graceful dome in Malta", the dome of St Gaetano, Hamrun,

the church of Ta' Pinu, in Gozo, the government school, Sliema, the church of Tal-Herba in Birkirkara and innumerable interventions in other churches. Vassallo was an eclectic, designing in the different period styles with the same ease. Two of his last works are in the Art Nouveau: the Casa Said, on the Sliema front, which has been demolished recently, and Villa Rosa, in St Andrew's; this last crowning the brow of a hill which was terraced, laid out with exotic trees, walks, pergolas and a nymphaeum.

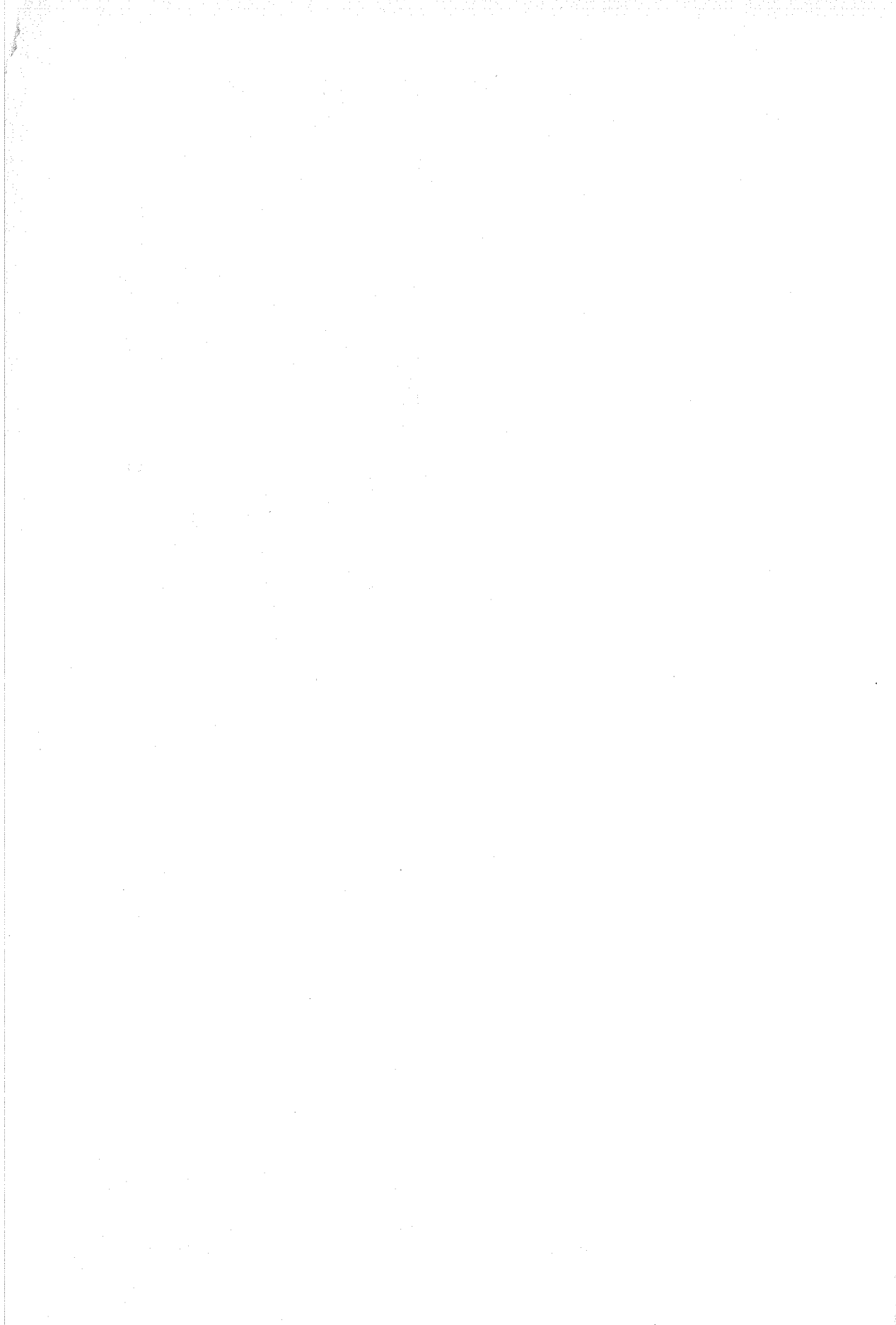
In Maltese history Gużè Damato will be identified as the architect who was mainly responsible for the prolongation of the Renaissance form-language well beyond its natural historical limits. He will be remembered as the architect chiefly responsible for the perpetuation of a tradition which, to an observer coming to Malta from countries where other conceptions of architectural history apply, may seem absurd and even inconceivable. Damato thought big, and all his churches – like Gafà, Damato was mainly a builder of churches – are big, sometimes enormous, often provoking harsh criticism for their obtrusive impact on their environs. Nonetheless for his churches of Casal Paola, the Carmelite church, in Valletta, and the rotunda of Xewkija, Gozo, Damato deserves a secure place in the Hall of Fame.

It is rather sad that this study has to end on a very pessimistic note. Since Independence the Maltese nation has become affluent with the consequence that the island was witnessed a building boom out of all proportion to its size. Already large tracts of countryside, both in Malta and Gozo, have disappeared. Soon there will be no countryside left at all. There cannot be architecture without building but even great architecture is no substitute for the grandeur of nature. Would that the Maltese nation wake up to the impending doom before it is too late! But I have little hope.

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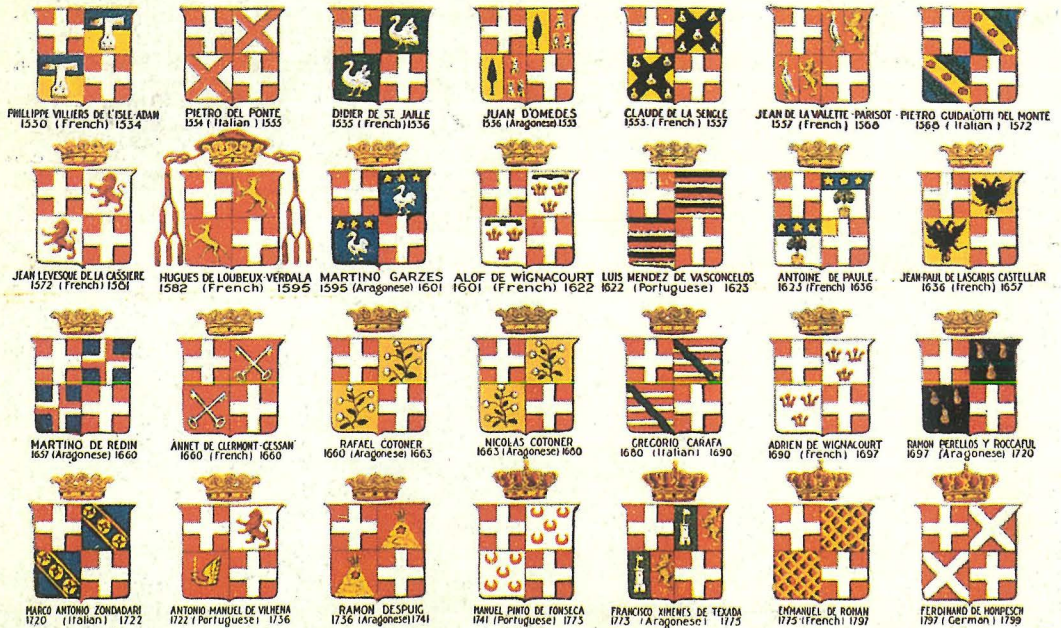


Mdina '93: a re-enactment of the Grand Master's entry into the Città Notabile. On the arch are Malta's three patron saints: Publius, Paul and Agatha.



A detail from Antoine Favray's painting of Grand Master Emanuel Pinto de Fonseca at St John's in Valletta.

COATS of ARMS of the GRAND MASTERS of the ORDER of ST. JOHN of JERUSALEM who have ruled in MALTA.



The Coats of Arms of the Grand Masters who ruled Malta between 1530 and 1798.



Festa fireworks and an Easter Sunday festivity.



Presidents Bush and Gorbachev during their "end of the Cold War" meeting at Marsaxlokk, Malta, in December 1989.



Malta prime minister Eddie Fenech Adami talks to European Commission president Jacques Delors, with Malta's full membership of the European Union in the offing.



Ghar Dalam cave: deposit of a great quantity of bones of Pleistocene animals, later the abode of Neolithic man.



The Ġgantija temples, now considered to be the earliest example of free standing stone architecture in the world.



A large concentration of cart tracks south of Rabat.



Graves with spiral decorations in relief inside one of the Salina hypogea.



Square tower (5.60m. high) of ashlar masonry, datable to the late Punic period, inside a private garden in Żurrieq.



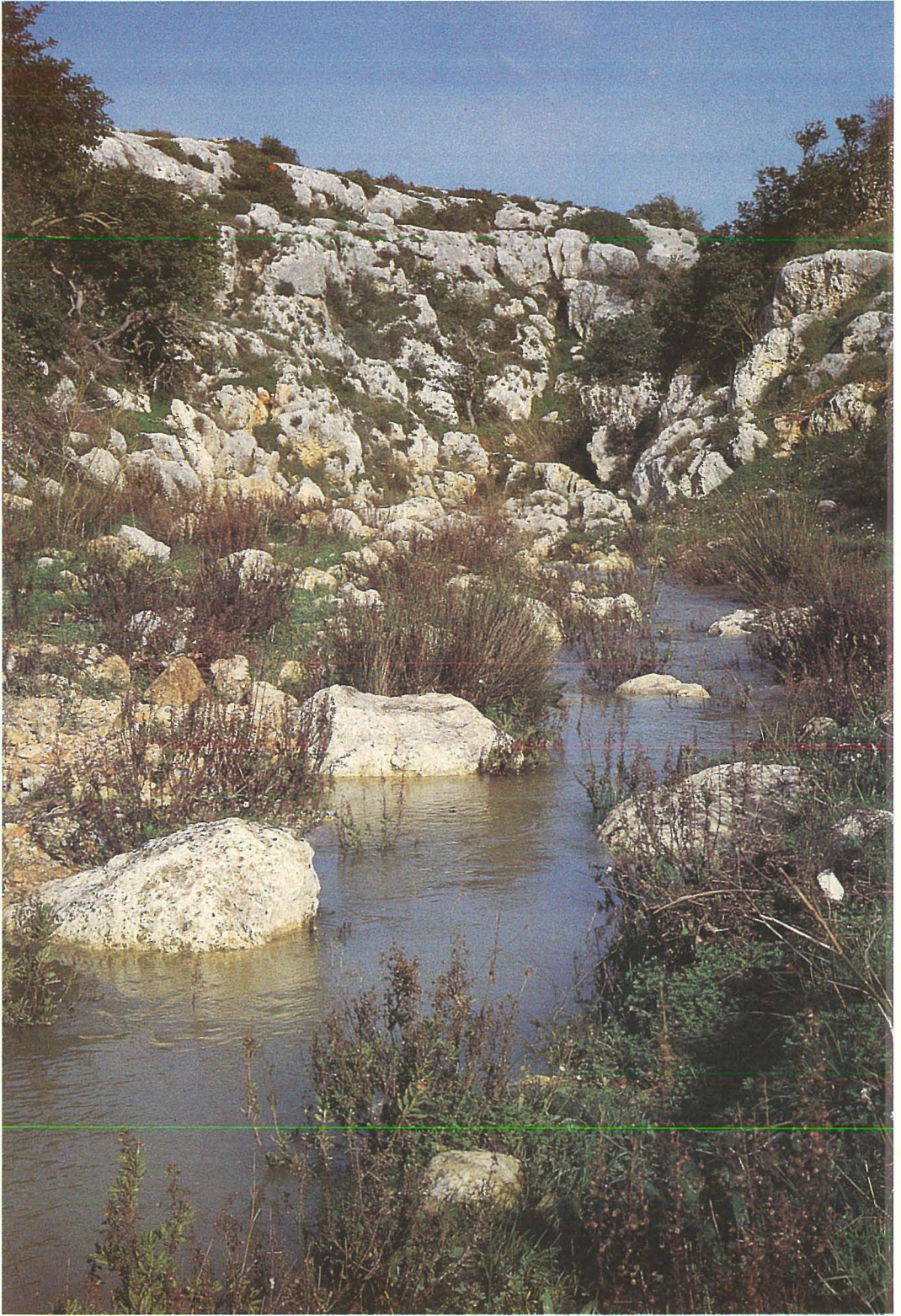
One of the finest portraits of the emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54), found during the 1881 excavations of the Roman "domus" outside Mdina.



Il-Kullana cliffs in the Fawwara area of Dingli Cliffs. Here all five rock types forming the stratigraphic sequence of the Maltese Islands are visible. The island of Filfla is in the background.



Sea arches on the northeast coast of the island of Comino. This is one type of marine erosion feature resulting from the action of the sea on the limestone rock of the Maltese Islands.



The watercourse at Wied il-Ghasel, limits of Mosta, in winter. Because of their abundant supply of water during the wet season, and the shelter they provide, the "widien" are amongst the richest habitats in the Maltese Islands.



Maltese Everlasting (Helichrysum melitense) growing on the cliff edge at Fungus Rock, Gozo. This plant is endemic to the Maltese Islands, where it is found almost exclusively on the cliffs along the western coast of Gozo.



The endemic Filfla door-snail (Lampedusa imitatrix form gattoi), a terrestrial snail found only on the island of Filfla. The scientific name of this animal commemorates Count Alfredo Caruana Gatto, one of the pioneers of the study of the natural history of the Maltese Islands.



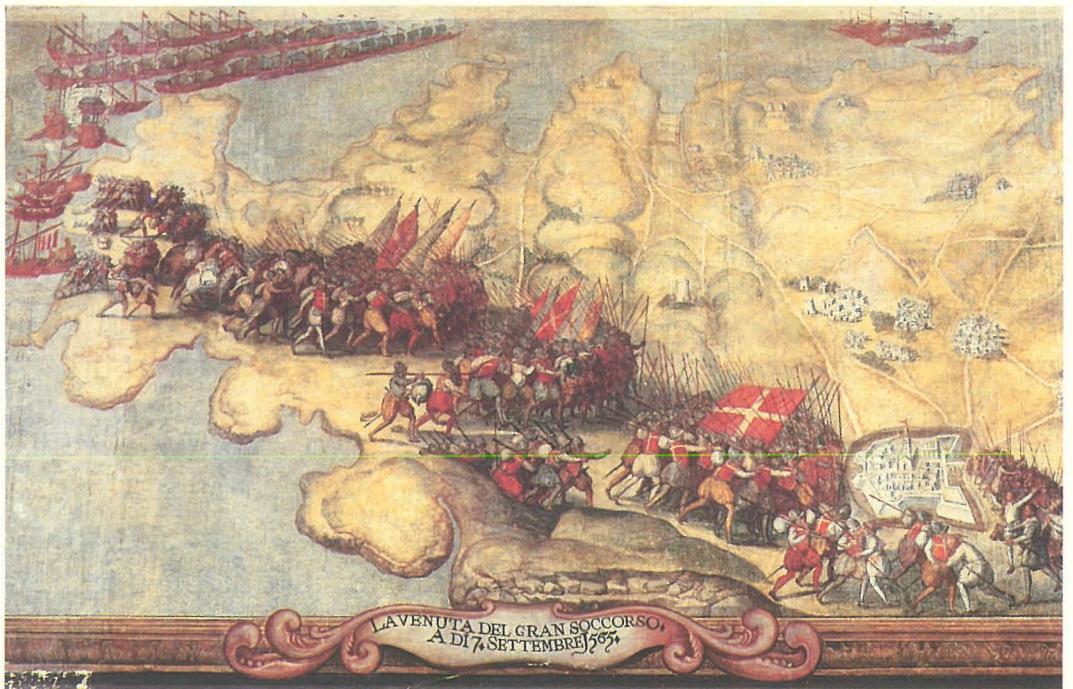
A medieval countryside chapel at Hal Millieri.



The main altar and interior of the Carmelite Church at Mdina.



The main door of a Norman house at Mdina and its courtyard.



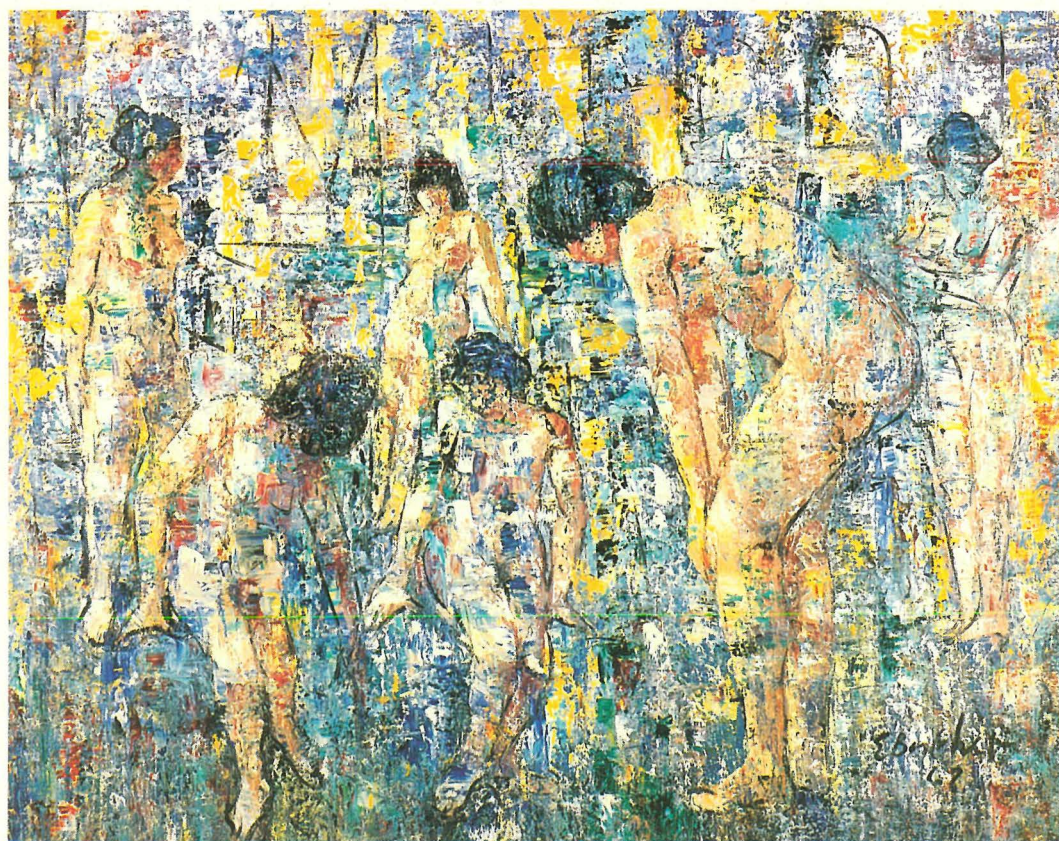
Depictions of the Great Siege of 1565 by Perez d'Aleccio.



Two Maltese artists: a portrait of Giuseppe Cali (1846-1930) by Edward Caruana Dingli (1876-1950).



Detail from "Life under the Soil" by Antoine Camilleri.



Esprit Barthe's "nudi".



Eighteenth century carnival depictions by Antoine Favray, from a private collection.



A folk singer in rustic setting from Caruana Dingli's brush.



A portrait at the Chamber of Commerce of Sir Adriano Dingli (1817-1900): Councillor, jurist and adviser.



The Santo Spirito Hospital, Rabat, now housing Malta's National Archives.



The Holy Infirmary of Valletta, now housing the Mediterranean Conference Centre.

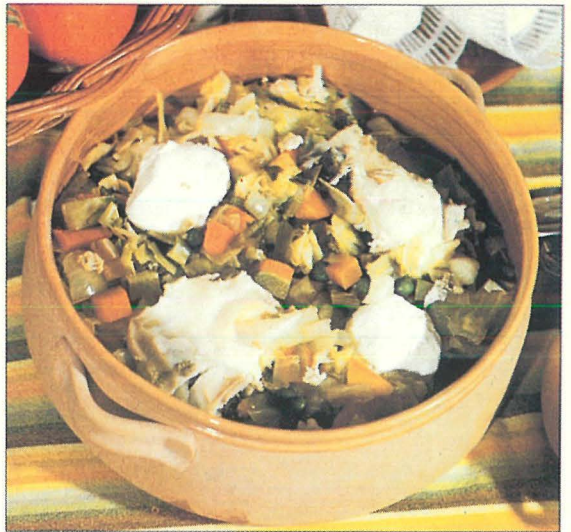


A portrait of the surgeon Michel'Angelo Grima (Museum of Fine Arts).



Seaside and agricultural scenes contrast with one of Malta's industrial estates.





Some Maltese delicacies: "brağoli" (beef olives), "soppa ta' l-armia ("widow's soup"), with fresh "gbejniet" from Gozo; fish, vegetables, Maltese bread and wine.