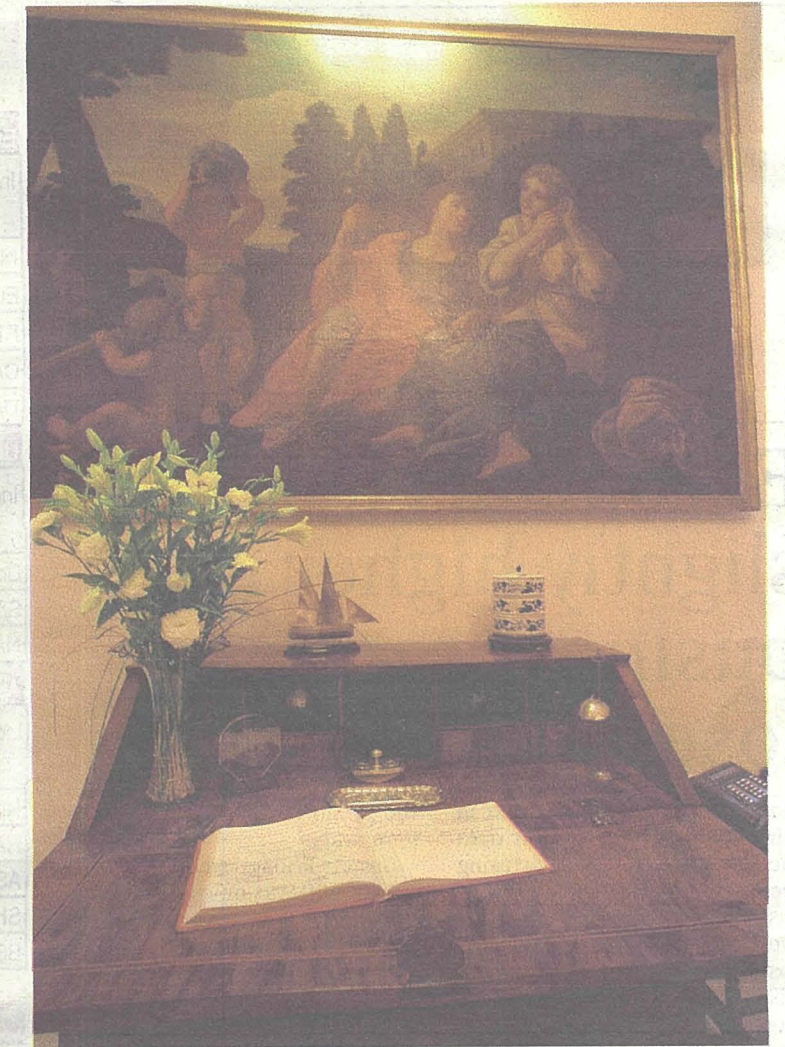


PALAZZO PARISIO IN VALLETTA

Napoléon Bonaparte stayed here



Built in the early 18th century by Bishop Scerberras on the site of two former houses in Merchants Street, then known as Strada San Giacomo, Palazzo Parisio consists of three elements, each two storeys high, enclosing a central courtyard. A new third storey was added after World War I. By the late 18th century the property became the town house of Chavalier Paolo Parisio Muscati, a Neapolitan-Maltese nobleman who had married Donna Anna Muscati, grand-daughter of Donna Maria Scerberras, mother

of Bishop Scerberras.

Paolo Parisio played an influential role during the latter years of the Order of St. John's rule in Malta. It was during this period that the site acquired its lasting epithet of Palazzo Parisio. On 13th June 1798 Napoléon Bonaparte landed in Malta and took residence at the Palazzo. During his seven eventful days' stay at the Palazzo, prior to embarking for his Egyptian campaign, Napoléon dictated the transformation of Malta's ancient legal and administrative structures in the Republican *Code Napoléon*. Less than three

months, later these imposed, deep rooted and abrupt changes instigated the insurrection of the Maltese against the French. With French forces blockaded inside Valletta, Chevalier Parisio left the city to join the Maltese peasant army at the head of the Naxxar battalion. Following the establishment of British rule (1800) Paolo Parisio resumed his involvement in his country's affairs and was held in high esteem by the local British authorities. Visiting British military officers, including Generals Abercrombie and Graham, took up temporary residence at his Palazzo and he was one of the first Maltese to be honoured with the Order of St Michael and St George.

An interesting phase in the Palazzo's history relates to the period preceding the Italian unification, when leading intellectual and artistic personalities of the early 'Risorgimento' became forced exiles in Malta. While in Malta, they found a natural affinity not only with those of a kindred spirit who had been agitating for local self-government, but also with the local intelligentsia.

The French Occupation

The French occupation of Malta lasted from 1798 to 1800. It was established when the Order of Saint John surrendered to Napoléon Bonaparte following the French landing in June 1798. In Malta, the French established a constitutional tradition in Maltese history (as part of the French Republic), granted free education for all, and theoretically established freedom of the press, although only the pro-French newspaper *Journal de Malte* was actually published during the occupation.

The French abolished nobility, slavery, the feudal system, and the Inquisition. The only remaining architectural reminder of the French occupation is probably the defacement of most coat-of-arms on the façades of buildings of the knights. The Maltese soon rebelled against the French and drove the French garrison into Valletta and the Grand Harbour fortifications where they were besieged for more than two years. The French surrendered Malta when their food supplies

were about to run out.

The French domination of the Maltese islands was short and turbulent. Their arrival in 1798 had promised otherwise

since Napoléon and his troops were initially welcomed by the Maltese. However, this was prompted more by a growing dislike of the incumbent rulers,

the Order of St John, than by any real affection for the revolutionary ideals of France.

Napoléon Bonaparte's invasion of Malta was part of a strategic design to conquer Egypt and

then gain India and the Far Eastern colonies of the British Empire. Keen to control the massive fortifications and harbours of Malta, Napoléon managed to get a number of Knights and Maltese on his side. They passed on information and were ready to help promote a popular movement against the Order of St John and their aristocratic style of government. Lack of materials, treacherous captains and general confusion, led to the capitulation of the Order within days. The Maltese Islands became another jewel in the crown of Napoléon.

The radical reforms introduced by the new rulers were excessive in the eyes of the locals who were still largely dominated by two institutions – the aristocracy and

the Church – and loyal to both. Nobles and general populace alike began to see Napoleonic laws as an attack on their beloved Church and a threat to their traditional way of life. Within three months of the French take-over, the Maltese revolted and forced the occupiers to withdraw behind the fortifications of Valletta and the Three Cities. They remained there until September 1800 when they capitulated to the British forces who had been called in to assist the Maltese in gaining their freedom. The British fleet entered Grand Harbour, marking the start of a century and a half of British rule.

Photos: Joe Demanuele in 2007 for *First* magazine

