

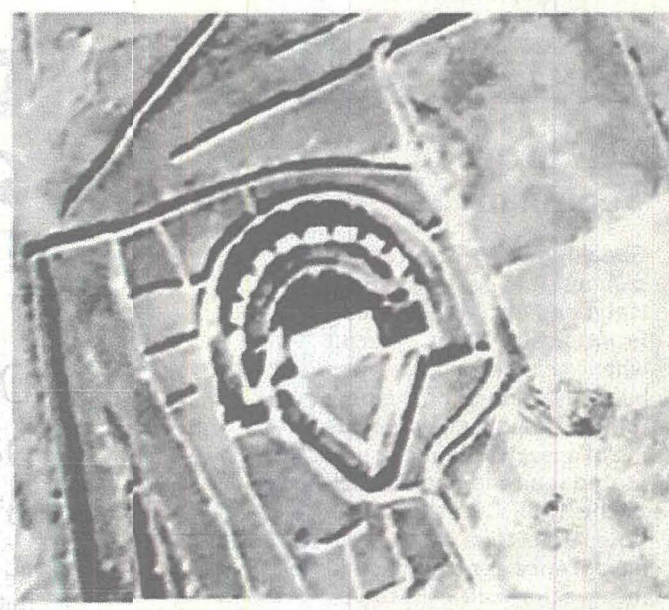
## LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY



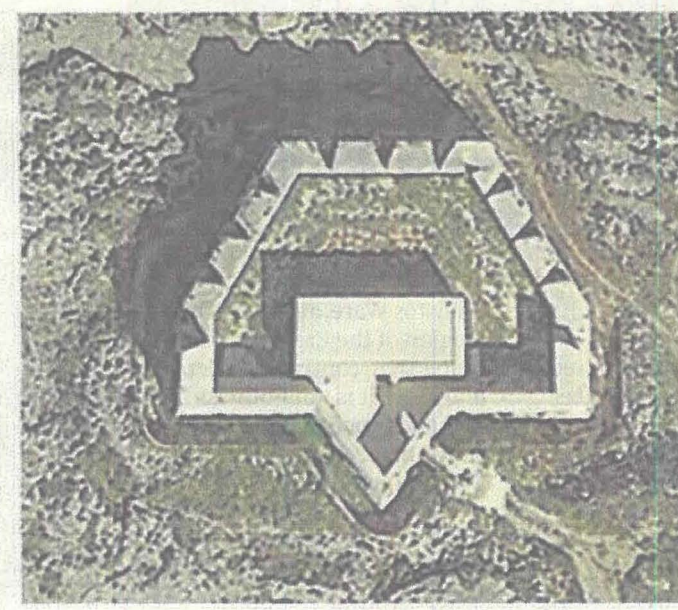
View of part of the *flèche*/redan and the short connecting wall. The red circle reveals the damaged water spout that drains the rain water from the upper part of the *flèche*, indicating that the soil and rubble infill was deposited there during the time of construction.



The borders of the embrasures consist of neatly cut ashlar masonry stones. In addition, one can also appreciate the thin layer of 'deffun' covering one of the 'merlons'.



An aerial pre-World War II photo of Vendôme Battery (left) and St Anthony's Battery in Qala. The two photos reveal the reversed ratio of the connecting wall length and the redan wall length of Vendôme Battery when compared to that of St Anthony's Battery. PHOTOS: JIMMY MUSCAT AND JONATHAN MUSCAT, *FORTIFICATIONS OF THE KNIGHTS HOSPITALLERS IN MELLIEHA, MALTA, 2012*, AND GOOGLE EARTH RESPECTIVELY.



# Celebrating one of Malta's largest coastal batteries

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During the early 18th century, the Knights embarked on a highly ambitious building effort to defend the vulnerable shores of Malta. An impressive network of batteries, redoubts and entrenchments were constructed, highlighting the change in the Order's approach to the defence of the islands.

In the 17th century, the most important type of fortification was the tower. The idea of surrounding the coast with a chain of coastal towers was derived mainly from Spanish dominated Sicily. However, by the 18th century, the Order began to fall more under the influence of France, resulting in adoption of French military ideas.

The Order, under the guidance of the French military engineers who were sent here by Louis XIV, began to construct new types of coastal fortifications in an attempt to upgrade the island's defences. In contrast to the towers, these new type of French-designed fortifications were intended not simply as passive lookout posts, but as active physical obstacles to invasion, capable of denying the enemy the ability to land invading troops.

In plan, coastal batteries followed a general pattern and consisted of three essential elements: a semi-circular or polygonal gun platform, one



The impressive gun platform of Vendôme Battery. PHOTOS: AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

or two blockhouses and an enclosing loopholed wall with a redan or a *flèche*.

The role of the coastal battery was to enable the defenders to fire guns at enemy ships that were attempting to disembark their troops ashore. In order to fulfill this function as effectively as possible, coastal batteries were usually built in pairs on either side of a bay so that the cross fire from their guns would ensure that no enemy ship passed without being sunken or severely damaged. The military engineers also ensured that each coastal battery would be capable of defending itself from a landward based attack; hence the need for an enclosing loopholed wall with a redan or a *flèche*.

The Mellieha coastline along the Comino Channel was heavily fortified with three coastal

batteries, four redoubts and a set of entrenchment walls. This article is concerned with one of the most impressive examples of coastal batteries built along this coastline as well as in the Maltese islands – Vendôme Battery.

Vendôme Battery in Armier is one of the largest coastal batteries built in Malta. The coastal battery was built "dopo il mese di Ottobre 1714, fino al fine di Aprile 1715".

Vendôme Battery had a semi-circular gun platform with a thick-walled parapet pierced with nine embrasures. This allowed it to defend the two adjacent bays, namely Ramlet il-Qortin and Armier Bay, as well as the South Comino Channel, where, in the latter, the cross fire from Vendôme and St Mary's batteries would

repel and halt the passage of

any enemy ship sailing through. Like most other Hospitaller fortifications, Vendôme Battery's 'merlons' – parapet wall and blockhouse walls – were constructed 'a due facciate' following the gabion principle. The word gabion is derived from the Italian word 'gabbione', which means a big cage. The walls were made up of soil and rubble infill sandwiched between two masonry walls or two heavily plastered rubble walls with mortar.

The gabion principle was very beneficial in military architecture. This technique reduced the amount of stones required for the construction of such fortifications and provided the fortifications' walls with the ability to resist punishment without collapsing, as the soil and rubble infill between the two shells

allowed the walls to absorb some of the momentum of the shot.

In order to maintain the structural stability of such 'mure a due facciate', coping was essential. The technique of coping involved placing sloped stone caps over the parapet. These capstones were important to prevent rain water from penetrating into the internal parts of the wall. This was essential as penetrating rain water would weaken the overall structure by washing away the various component of the parapet's infill, such as bonding soil and rock chippings.

In the case of Vendôme Battery, such capstones were never utilised. Instead, the terreplein was covered by a thin layer of 'deffun' mixed with 'pozzolana'. Although, this layer of 'deffun' was waterproof, continuous

exposure to the scorching sun and summer heat made the structure crack, allowing water to seep through. In fact, nowadays, some patches of 'deffun' remain, yet most of it is surrounded by vegetation.

The 'merlons' making up the gun parapet are very interesting. When one inspects the gun parapet closely, one can notice that it does not consist solely of rough rubble stones plastered with mortar but the stones that make up the borders of the embrasure are neatly cut ashlar masonry stones.

In addition, the gun parapet was ringed with a decorative cordon consisting of processed, neatly shaped rounded masonry stones. The cordon stones making up the base of the embrasure consist of large, sloping, neatly-cut ashlar stones (also known as quoins).

The blockhouse of Vendôme Battery has remained relatively intact. It consists of two unequal rooms separated by a dividing wall. The blockhouse was accessed through a single doorway facing the sea. The blockhouse is very similar to that of Rihama Battery. Both consisted of a long rectangular blockhouse and used the same system of diaphragm rib arches to support the roof. The arch over the main doorway was also designed in the same way, namely forking out into two other smaller arches so as to prevent spreading the weight of the roof over the doorway's lintel.

The larger room was equipped with a hearth built within the dividing wall, indicating that this room was used to station the militia soldiers. The smaller room could have served as a temporary 'Santa Barbara' since the gun powder of the fort was stored in the 'Torre Rossa'.

Despite its great offensive qualities to defend the surrounding areas, Vendôme Battery was not as effective when it came to the defence of its landward approach. The battery's landward approach is defended by means of a large *flèche*. This consisted of a thick parapet in the form of a V-shape that is sepa-

rate from the central blockhouse but is connected by means of a system of parapets to the semi-circular gun platform.

The *flèche* of Vendôme Battery is very large when compared to other batteries. While most batteries had a smaller redan and longer connecting walls, the reverse is found at Vendôme Battery.

The landward enclosure of Vendôme Battery is similar to that of St Anthony's Battery in Gozo; however, instead of having a 'muro per impedire la vista' and to secure the landward approach, this large battery with such a crucial role in defending the South Comino Channel was built with a thick, low parapet, leaving Vendôme Battery with a sub-optimally defended landward enclosure.

**“Despite its great offensive qualities to defend the surrounding areas, Vendôme Battery was not as effective when it came to the defence of its landward approach”**

The wall was not unfinished, as the parapet making up the *flèche* was capped with a layer of 'deffun'. In addition, the space linking the blockhouse and the *flèche* was filled with soil and rubble; a feature unique to this battery. The presence of a damaged water spout in the upper part of one of the walls making up the *flèche* is evidence suggesting that the soil and rubble infill between the blockhouse and the *flèche* was deposited there during the time of construction.

Furthermore, in the Order's records of expenses, entitled 'Misura e conto sommario dell' opere di fortificationi fatte nel lido delle marine dell' isole di Malta, Chemunna e Gozzo nell' anni 1715 e 1716', in the case of Vendôme Battery there is no mention of 'feritori', thus implying that no musketry loopholes were ever built in this coastal fortification. This confirms that neither the parapet nor the blockhouse were pierced by musketry loopholes meaning that the soldiers would have been completely exposed to the enemy's fire in case of an enemy landward attack.

Another important issue related to this sub-optimally defended battery is that of the 'opere soldatesche' or field fortifications. It could be that the landward enclosure of Vendôme Battery was constructed hastily as a temporary structure using the most readily available resources on site, namely rubble stones and soil, into a structure that imitates the redans and *flèches* of permanent fortifications.

The whole battery was surrounded by a thick ditch surrounded by a counterscarp and a glacis.

Vendôme Battery is one of the largest Hospitaller coastal batteries ever built in Malta. The battery, together with the rest of the comprehensive system of coastal fortifications erected in Mellieha, provided security to the people living in the northern parts of Malta. As a result, the number of people living and working in the village of Mellieha and Ahrax gradually started to increase.

Unfortunately, nowadays the battery is a victim of its own success. The increasing number of boathouses built in recent years, have engulfed this fortification and have robbed its relationship with the coastline.

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