
Segni, Immagini e Storia dei centri costieri euro-mediterranei

Varianti strategiche e paesistiche

a cura di
Alfredo Buccaro, Ciro Robotti



Federico II University Press



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INDICE

5 **Presentazione** **ALFREDO BUCCARO**

7 **Introduzione** Venezia e Gallipoli nei rapporti tra visione, ragione e rappresentazione Venice and Gallipoli: Relationships between Vision, Reason and Representation **CIRO ROBOTTI**

Contributi / Papers

- 17 Porti del Mediterraneo orientale in epoca preclassica: i dati testuali
Eastern Mediterranean Ports in Pre-Classical Era: Textual Data
Maria Giovanna Biga
- 27 Le calcareniti mediterranee, con particolare riferimento a quelle della Magna Grecia, e un esempio di studio: le Tavole Palatine
The Mediterranean Calcarenites, with particular reference to Magna Graecia, a case study: the Tavole Palatine
Stefano Cancelliere, Lorenzo Lazzarini
- 45 Certezze e dubbi dalle ricerche archeologiche nella basilica di San Marco a Venezia
Certainties and Doubts from Archaeological Research in the Basilica of San Marco in Venice
Ettore Vio
- 53 Arte e architettura nel Mediterraneo della prima età moderna: i poli strategici di Rodi e Creta
Art and Architecture in the Mediterranean of the Early Modern Age: the Strategic Centers of Rhodes and Crete
Emma Maglio
- 67 Valletta città fortezza dei Cavalieri: l'evoluzione di una piazzaforte da Laparelli a De Tigné
Valletta Fortress City of the Knights: the Evolution of a Fortress from Laparelli to De Tigné
Stephen Spiteri
- 75 Dalla battaglia di Gallipoli alla battaglia di Lepanto: vedute scolpite del Mediterraneo sotto assedio
From the Battle of Gallipoli to the Battle of Lepanto: Sculpted Siege of Mediterranean Under Siege
Massimo Visone
- 89 Una mezzaluna rovesciata. Approdi, porti e rotte della navigazione sulle sponde del Mediterraneo orientale
An Inverted Star and Crescent. Docks, Ports and Shipping Routes on the Shores of the Eastern Mediterranean
Marco Ramazzotti
- 101 Un patrimonio da salvaguardare. Il Salento porta del Mediterraneo
A heritage to keep intact. Salento gate of the Mediterranean
Hervé A. Cavallera
- 113 L'Assunta di De Mura e il vescovo Filomarino a Gallipoli. Trionfi artistici, committenza illuminata e un Castrum Doloris da documenti inediti
The Assunta by De Mura and the bishop Filomarino in Gallipoli. Artistic triumphs, illuminated commissions and a Castrum Doloris from unpublished documents
Vincenzo Rizzo
- 119 Evoluzione urbana e immagine del paesaggio sorrentino tra Sette e Ottocento
Urban evolution and image of the Sorrento landscape between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries
Alfredo Buccaro
- 131 L'architettura senza architetti. Ischia nei disegni di Giuseppe Capponi
The architecture without architects. Ischia in Giuseppe Capponi's drawings
Francesco Capano

- 143 La cattura dell'infinito mediterraneo nei disegni di progetto per Villa Oro a Napoli
Capturing the Mediterranean infinity in the project-drawings for Villa Oro in Naples
Maria Ines Pascariello
- 153 Studio minero-petrografico delle malte di allettamento come strumento per stabilire le fasi costruttive della cattedrale di Šibenik (Sebenico), Croazia
Mineral-Petrographic study of bedding mortars as a tool for establishing the construction phases of the Šibenik cathedral
Marina Šimunić Buršić, Stefano Cancelliere
- 165 GRALBeIT. Un collegamento permanente tra la Puglia e l'Albania
GRALBeIT. A permanent link between Puglia and Albania
Enzo Siviero, Michele Culatti
- 173 El Parque de La Ciudadela de Barcelona. Estado actual
The Ciudadela Park in Barcelona. Current state
Margarita Galceràn Vila
- 185 Tabarca isola coralliera e presidio Mediterraneo della Spagna Asburgica
Tabarca: Coralliera Island and Mediterranean Presidium of Hapsburg Spain
Ciro Robotti
- 193 Spettacolo di bellezza del territorio Salentino, immagini e protagonisti
Spectacle of Beauty of the Salento Area, Images and Protagonists
Annamaria Robotti

Valletta città fortezza dei Cavalieri: l'evoluzione di una piazzaforte da Laparelli a De Tigné

Valletta Fortified City of the Knights: the Evolution of a Fortress from Laparelli to De Tigné

STEPHEN SPITERI

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Abstract

Nel 1530 Malta offriva pochi siti naturali che si davano prontamente alla fondazione di una piazzaforte che accoglieva gli obblighi navali dell'Ordine Militare di San Giovanni. Tra questi, il sito più adatto era il Monte Sceberras, una penisola fiancheggiata da due porti eccellenti. La città fortificata di La Valletta che sorgeva nel 1566 su progetto dell'ingegnere Francesco Laparelli trasformò questo sito in una formidabile fortezza che venne lodata come modello di architettura militare. Nei due secoli seguenti, diversi ingegneri furono reclutati dai Cavalieri a mantenere e sviluppare il sistema di fortificazioni della città. Questo breve saggio traccia le fasi principali nello sviluppo delle fortificazioni di La Valletta fino al 1798.

In 1530 Malta offered few natural sites that gave themselves readily to the founding of a piazzaforte capable of accommodating the naval obligations of the Military Order of St. John. Amongst these, the most suitable location was Mount Sceberras, a peninsula flanked by two excellent ports. The fortified city of Valletta which sprang up to the design of the papal military engineer Francesco Laparelli in 1566 transformed the site into a formidable fortress that came to be applauded as a model of military architecture. In the following two centuries, several engineers were recruited by the Knights to maintain and develop its system of fortifications. This brief paper charts the salient phases in the development of Valletta's fortifications until 1798.

Keywords

Valletta, Military Architecture, Fortifications.

Introduction

When the knights of the Order of St John acquired Malta in 1530, they were already well aware of the prospect of Mount Sceberras as the site of their future *piazzaforte*. Its potential as a veritable *sito reale* capable of housing their convent and sheltering their fleet of galleys had been recognized by a commission of Hospitaller Knights sent to explore the island in 1524 [Bosio 1602, 28]. This opinion was reiterated many times by the Order's military planners throughout subsequent decades but it was only after the Great Siege of Malta, in 1566, that the opportunity was finally found to build the desired fortified city. Named Valletta, after the hero of the Great Siege, the new fortress which sprang up to the design of the papal military engineer Francesco Laparelli did not fail to exploit the potential of the site. By a careful combination of man-made bastions and rock-hewn scarps, the rocky promontory was fashioned into a formidable and virtually impregnable fortress. Its construction, moreover, served to signal the Order's determination and commitment to transform the island into a secure bulwark, a front-line naval base poised against Ottoman aggression; secondly, the

STEPHEN SPITERI

new fortified city came to serve as the focal hub in the creation of a vast defensive network of bastioned forts and fortified enceintes enclosing the Grand Harbour and its approaches, totalling some 25 km of ramparts. Over the course of the subsequent two centuries, an uninterrupted string of renowned Italian, Spanish, Dutch, German Flemish and French military engineers would be recruited to help the Knights design, maintain and develop Valletta's defensive system of fortifications to keep it in line with the latest military developments of the age.

Back in 1530, however, when the knights first set foot on the island under the leadership of Grand Master Philippe Villiers de l'Isle Adam, the Hospitallers' future was far from certain. The Order was forced to settle down in what was then the only existing fortification in the harbour area, an old medieval castle-by-the sea, and to enclose the nearby *suburgum* of Birgu within new ramparts in a bid to create a relatively safe convent and city. Already by 1541, however, the Bergamese military engineer Antonio Ferramolino, brought over from Sicily to help advise the Order on how to improve its handful of new defences, could not but inform Grand Master Juan d'Homedes that neither of these two locations were defensible. At that point in time, and for many years to follow, the Order was not to be in a position, both financially and militarily, to embark upon such a massive undertaking. Although a devastating *razzia* in 1551 by a strong Ottoman force, commanded by the notorious corsair Dragut served to expose the defensive deficiencies and led to the building of the small *fortaleza* of St. Elmo on the tip of the promontory, it was only with the election of Jean de Valette to the magistracy in 1558 that a scheme to fortify the Sceberras peninsula finally began to take shape. On this occasion, the newly elected grand master sent a small delegation of knights to Italy with the aim of securing the services of Antonio Quinsani, '*un destro ingegnere di Montalcino*',¹ then in the employ of Guidobaldo II, Duke of Urbino, and, in the case of his unavailability, to proceed to Florence and Milan in search some other experienced architect.² In the event, the Order secured the services of Bartolomeo Genga from the Duke of Urbino, who eventually arrived in Malta in 1558 [Bosio 1602, 398]. Little is known of Genga's design for the new city, however, other than the fact that this was to occupy practically the whole length of the Sceberras peninsula down into the inner reaches of the Grand Harbour [Bosio 1602, 455; de Giorgio 1985, 47] as illustrated, according to the late Professor Quentin Hughes, in an engraving by Nicolo Beatrizet (1563) [Hughes 1997, 17].

Genga's scheme was duly approved by the Grand Master and the Order's council but Genga died shortly after and the project ground to halt.³ By 1561, the Grand Master had managed to secure a promise for the services of Baldassare Lanci from the Duke of Florence but it was not until March 1562 that Lanci finally made it to Malta [Sisi 1991, 173- 4]. He was immediately set to work preparing reports on the existing defences of Birgu and Senglea as well drawing up designs and a wax model for a new proposal for fortifications on Mount Sceberras. Lanci's scheme enclosed a much smaller area of ground than that put forward by Genga, '*quasi per la meta dello spazio del primo*' [Bosio 1602, 455]. Although a copy of Lanci's report can be found amongst Laparelli's papers (in the Codex Laparelli) [de Giorgio 1985, 58], his designs and plans, however, have not survived but it is generally agreed that an engraving by George Braun and Frans Hogenberg, published in *Civitas Orbis Terrarum* (1572), depicts his scheme [Braun and Hogenberg 1572, map 66]. Lanci was back in

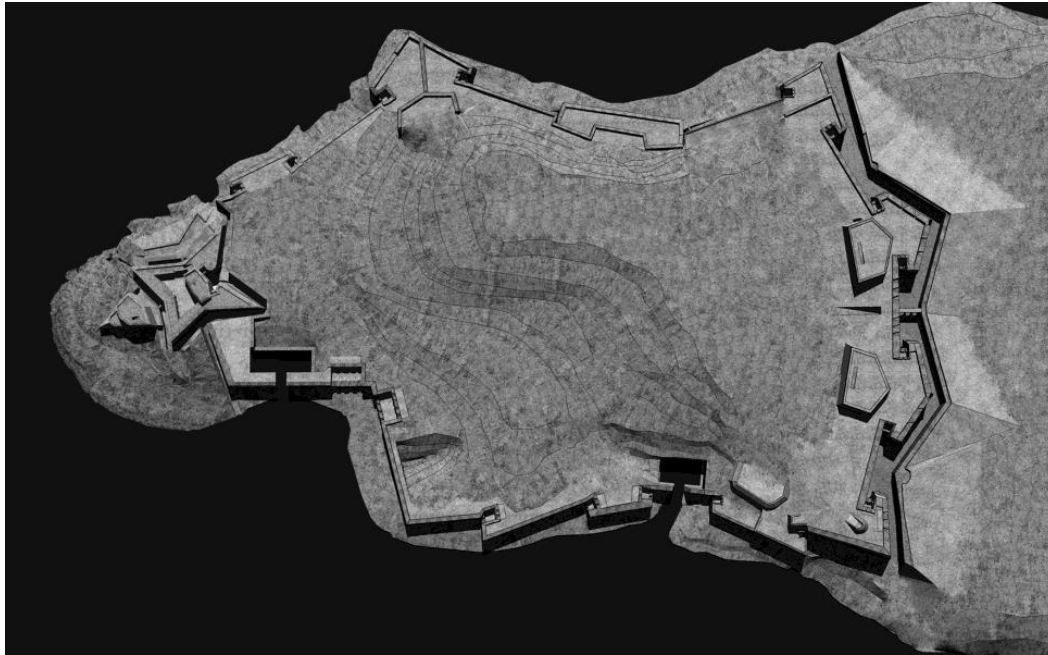
¹ National Library of Malta (NLM), Archives of the Order in Malta (AOM) 426, f.275.

² NLM, AOM 426, f.275.

³ NLM, AOM 90, f.13; AOM 288, f.65v.

Florence after little more than a month [Bosio 1602, 456] and the project once again ground to a halt amid growing fears of an impending attack. [Bosio 1602, 460]

This finally materialized in May 1565 when a large Ottoman armada descended on the island and laid siege to the Hospitaller positions without respite for four months before being forced to retire in September after the arrival of a large Christian relief force sent from Sicily [Balbi di Correggio 1567, 171-9].



1: Author's graphic reconstruction of Francesco Laparelli's scheme for the fortifications of Valletta. (Image source: Stephen C. Spiteri).

1. A New Fortress

The situation which confronted the Order after the Siege developed painfully as the knights found themselves torn between the desire to abandon the island and the need to rebuild its defences [Spiteri 2005, 522]. Nevertheless, Grand Master de Valette realized that amidst all the destruction an opportunity had finally presented itself for the Order to build a new, strategic, and impregnable fortified city on Mount Sceberras, now made possible by the considerable financial assistance from the Pope and other European monarchs. Apart from the money, the Grand Master was able to secure from Pope Pius V the services of one of his ablest military engineers, Capitano Francesco Laparelli from Cortona [Hoppen 1979, 32].

Laparelli arrived in Malta at the end of December 1565 and immediately set about preparing his reports. A shortage of workmen and soldiers, however, seem to have held delayed the commencement of the project and it was not until the arrival of Gabrio Serbelloni, sent by Philip II to examine Laparelli's plans, that the deadlock was broken [Bosio 1602, 739-41] and the works were finally set in motion with the sanctioning of the scheme by the Order's council on 14 March 1566 [Bosio 1602, 744]. The official stone-laying ceremony was held soon after on 28 March and with the foundation ceremony over, the whole peninsula was soon transformed into one massive fortress-building *atelier* that brought together the largest workforce ever assembled by the Knights in the Maltese islands, estimated at some 4,000 men at the peak of the project [Hoppen 1979, 41].

STEPHEN SPITERI

Work on the bastioned land front of the fortified city, which comprised four large bastions, two cavaliers and a ditch, and cut across the highest part of the rocky promontory, took precedence over the rest of the enceinte. The flanks of the promontory, on the other hand, running along the shores of the harbour were designed in a series of relatively low walls laid out in the manner of flat-faced *piatteforme* and ramparts *en cremaillere*. The *fortaleza* of St. Elmo itself was left outside Laparelli's enceinte in order to serve as a sort of citadel guarding the harbour entrance.

By 1569, the works on the fortification of Valletta had progressed steadily enough to allow Laparelli to leave the Malta for good. Yearning for the experience of battle, he joined the naval expedition to Candia and died of plague there on 26 October 1570 [Venuti 1761, 50].



2: View of St. James Bastion with its rounded orecchione, one of the four bulwarks along Valletta's land front enceinte; St James Cavalier is visible in the background, right (Image source: Stephen C. Spiteri).

With Laparelli gone, the responsibility of supervising the building works was handed over to his assistant, the Maltese military engineer Girolamo Cassar, who, after the siege, and following the departure from Malta of Evangelista Menga [Maiorano 1999, 21-40], had been promoted to the post of the Order's resident engineer. Apart from completing the ramparts, Cassar was also tasked with designing and constructing the major public edifices within the city, including the conventual church, the hospital, and the auberges. In preparation for this task, he was sent, early in 1569, on a tour of Italy to study and absorb its mannerist architectural styles.⁴ By this time, work on the fortifications of Valletta appears to have had progressed significantly for the Order to relocate its convent and headquarters to the new city. Although the decision was adopted formally during the Chapter General of November 1569, it was not until 18 March 1571 that the transfer was formally enacted when Grand Master Pietro del Monte and his retinue of knights crossed over by boat from Birgu.

⁴ NLM, AOM 432, ff.251 and 253.

The construction of the houses and the development of the plots of land within the walls of the city necessitated the enactment of regulations, for which purpose a special commission, known as the *Officium Commissariorum Domorum*, was appointed in February 1568.⁵ Laparelli's urban scheme had laid down a gridiron plan of straight streets, with several areas earmarked for the *collachium* (or convent), the grand master's residence, a conventual church, a hospital, bakery, as well as various public squares, a *mandracchio* and an *arsenale*. The initial idea was to divide the city into two main areas, with a *collachio* reserved for the residence of the Hospitaller brethren, and outside it, areas set aside for the public. The notion of the *collachium*, however, was eventually dropped, as were the arsenal and *mandracchio*. Urban considerations imposed upon the layout of the city were made to accommodate defensive needs - the streets, for instance, were to be kept clear of any obstructions which could potentially hinder the passage of troops and artillery while every house was obliged to have an underground cistern, hewn out of the bedrock, for the collection of rain water. The water situation inside the city was improved with the construction of an aqueduct by Grand Master Aloff de Wignacourt in 1615, which brought water from the north of the island.



3: Michael Counterguard on the Marsamxett side of the Valletta land front (Image source: Stephen C. Spiteri).

By the late sixteenth century, Valletta had acquired not only the ability to defend itself but also the appearance of a formidable fortified city. On the continent, it acquired fame as a mighty and impregnable fortress. The military *trattatista* Daniel Speckle would go on to illustrate it in his *Architectura von Vestungen*, published in Strasbourg in 1589 [Speckle 1589, 82-4], and cite it as a model of a fortress built on an irregular site. Still, Laparelli's design did have its shortcomings. The bastions on the flanks of the land front, for instance, presented a very high profile that exposed them to artillery bombardment from the heights across the harbours while a small leaf-shaped island inside the adjoining Marsamxett Harbour (known as the *Isolotto*) provided an ideal location from where enemy siege batteries could pound the

⁵ NLM, AOM 92, f.133.

STEPHEN SPITERI

flank and interior of the city. The latter would continue to worry the Order well into the eighteenth century before it was finally secured by a powerful bastioned fort, named Fort Manoel after the Portuguese Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena who paid for its construction out of his own pocket [Spiteri 2014].

By the beginning of the 1600s, the Order had also begun to recognize the fact that Valletta's bastioned land front enceinte was difficult to adapt to the doctrine of defence in depth and the changing requirements of contemporary siege warfare. The first of the defensive schemes designed to redress this problem was designed by Pietro Paolo Floriani, a papal military engineer from Macerata [Hughes 1994, 44]. Floriani's solution was to enclose Valletta's front within an outer defensive perimeter projected some 600m south from the deep *fosso* of the city. Although eventually approved and initiated, the scheme was heavily criticized for being too costly and ambitious, especially since the problem could have been solved more efficiently with the addition of just '*tre ravellini ... e con poco numero di soldati*',⁶ placed in front of the old enceinte as suggested by the Dominican friar and military engineer Vincenzo Maculano da Firenzuola in 1638.⁷ The Marquis of St. Angelo, Giovanni de Medici, came to the same conclusion and managed to convince the knights to build four such counterguards and a lunette⁸ under the supervision of the then-resident military engineer, Francesco Buonamici, in 1640 [De Lucca 2006]. Even so, Floriani's scheme was not abandoned and work on the massive enceinte was eventually brought to completion in the course of the eighteenth century.



4: The Carafa enceinte and the cavalier of Fort St. Elmo, at the northern tip of the Valletta promontory (Image source: Stephen C. Spiteri).

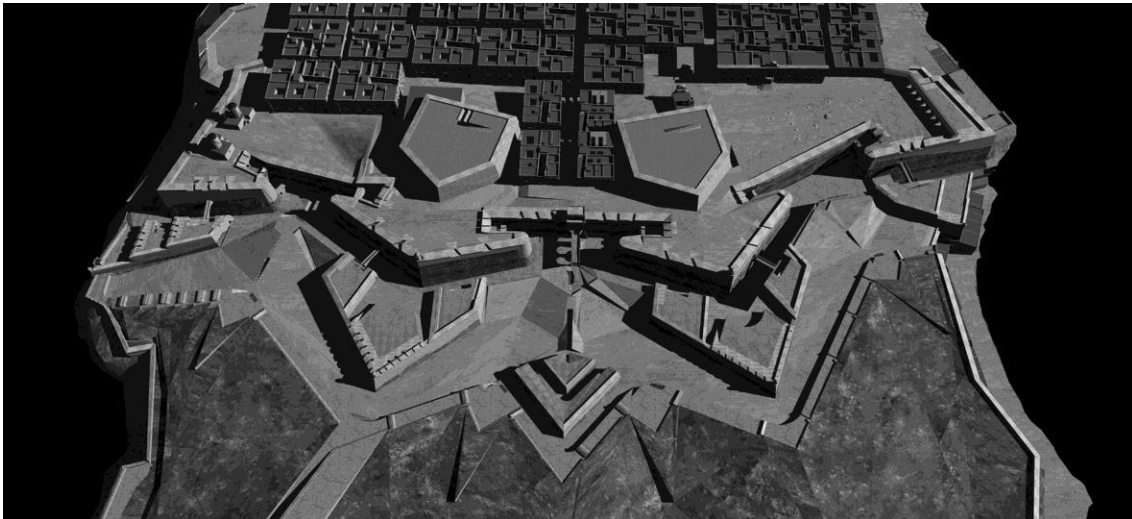
Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the Order was also forced to address the problem posed by the exposed rocky shore at the tip of the peninsula which Laparelli had chosen to leave outside the perimeter of the city. An early attempt to address this issue was

⁶ NLM, AOM 6554, f.49.

⁷ NLM, AOM 256, f.185; AOM 6554, f.47.

⁸ *Ibid.*, f.18.

made in 1614 when an artillery platform, named after Alexandre de Vendôme, was erected there to secure the entrance to Marsamxett harbour [Hoppen 1979, 186] but the issue was only finally settled in the 1680s when a powerful crown of bastions, designed by the Flemish military engineer Don Carlos de Grunenbergh, was built to envelope Fort St. Elmo. This impressive bastioned sea-wall was also meant to emphasize, in the words of the Order's resident engineer Mederico Blondel, the Island's claim as an '*Inespugnabile Fortezza, di Antemurale d'Italia, di Beluardo della Christianità*'.⁹



5: Author's graphic 3D-simulation of Valletta's land front enceinte and its outworks, c.1798. (Image source: Stephen C. Spiteri).

Once the issue of the seaward defenced of the city was settled, the Order's military planners turned their attention to improving the city's land front and its incomplete system of outer works. Valletta's *opere avanzate* had changed little since the addition of the Marquis of St. Angelo's counterguards in 1640. Still sorely lacking, as a matter of fact, was an adequate *strada coperta* capable of sheltering the passage of troops against direct assault and ricochet fire. The opportunity for a rehaul of this system was provided by the defence emergency of 1714 and the subsequent arrival in Malta of a team of French military experts sent by King Louis XIV to assist the Order prepare its defences against a feared Ottoman attack [Cavaliere 1960, 112]. Headed by Brig. Rene Jacob de Tigné, and his deputy Charles François de Mondion, the French military mission subjected the fortifications of Valletta to a thorough review and set in motion, as a priority, the completion of a new system of communication (with caponiers, covertways and traverses) between the main enceinte and its outer works, as well as the building of new gunpowder magazines inside the city.¹⁰

These defences would prove to be amongst the last real major structural interventions made to the city's fortified carapace. No further defensive element would materialize in the course of the last decades of the Knight's rule, where, as a direct consequence of the French revolution in 1789, even the maintenance of the existing defences became a great drain on the Order's fast-dwindling financial resources. Contemporary records reveal that Valletta's fortifications had, by this point in time, fallen victim to urban and social pressures from both

⁹ NLM, AOM 1016, p. 281.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.191.

STEPHEN SPITERI

without and within the fortified enclosure. Roofed recreational structures, for example, set aside for the enjoyment of knights (*barracche*) and various windmills had encroached onto some of the bastions, while rows of warehouses lined and clogged the foreshore at the foot of the ramparts along the length of the Grand Harbour enceinte. Many a flanking battery (*piazza bassa*), as observed by Brigadier de Tigné in 1715, had been converted into '*petits jardins*' with trees blocking up many of the embrasures.¹¹ A large number of vaulted casemates were also given over to house the poorest and destitute sections of the population.¹² The degree of neglect was noticeable also in the many shrubs and trees which had grown along considerable parts of the enceinte.

Conclusion

In some ways, however, this declining state of military readiness of the city was also a result of the wider sense of security induced by the massive network of outlying fortresses, some 25 km of ramparts, which had been built over the course of two centuries in a wide apron around the Valletta and its two harbours. Indeed, by the end of the eighteenth century, the whole harbour area had been converted into one large fortress with Valletta as its inner keep or *mastio*. Ironically, when the much-feared attack finally materialized in 1798, Valletta, for all its fame as the Order's formidable stronghold, played no role whatsoever in the dramatic surrender of the Order of St. John to Napoleon Bonaparte; its gateways were thrown open to the invading French forces with hardly a shot being fired from the many tiers of guns lining its ramparts.

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¹¹ NLM, AOM 1054, f7.

¹² Ibid.