

## **D'Aleccio's Fortifications: Faithful Representation or Artistic Imagination?**

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The pre-nineteenth century chroniclers and war artists had only their eyes and brushes and pens to capture, record and convey the details and narrative of battle. The skills required to portray the complexities and pictorial challenges of the battlefield – be it in the form of Egyptian tomb paintings, Sumerian steles, Assyrian bas reliefs, Greek temple paintings, Roman mosaics, or the tapestries, frescoes, and oil paintings of the Renaissance and later artistic periods – placed special demands on an artist's abilities and ingenuity that were not exerted by other pictorial subject matters; difficulties which increased considerably with the changing nature and growing scale of competing armies and the new technologies of warfare along the centuries. As the small scale wars of antiquity, fought at close quarters with swords, lances, and cavalry charges gave way to gunpowder weaponry and large professional standing armies, the scale of the battlefield expanded and the emphasis shifted from the heroic deeds of elite warriors to the mass formation of huge disciplined bodies of men fighting as automata in a large war machine. The introduction of firearms, and the resultant 'exchange of musketry volleys and artillery across open country'<sup>1</sup> increased not only the distance between the belligerents but also, as a

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1 P. Paret, *Imagined Battles: Reflections of War in European Art* (UNC Press Books, 1992).

result, the compositional difficulties for the artists in their attempts to capture the military action on paper or canvas.

By the mid-sixteenth century, artists in Italy had developed an approach to the portrayal of battle scenes which ‘elevated painterly qualities over narratives that simply described specific historical moments’ in the fighting,<sup>2</sup> inspired by the northern artists like the German painter Albrecht Altdorfer and his *The Battle of Alexander at Issus* (1529)<sup>3</sup> who first experimented with this technique. Termed as the ‘battles without heroes’, these compositions were intended to capture the reality of fighting as well as the geography of the battlefield. This descriptive form of depiction eventually led to a formal convention described as the ‘mapping of battle’ before spilling over into the more ‘naturalistic’ representations of battles found in the seventeenth-century paintings of Adam Francois Van der Meulen and other painters.<sup>4</sup> Among the formal devices that became the staple convention in the depiction of such scenes was the bird’s eye view. This form of representation made the viewer an ‘omniscient observer of the event’ and allowed for the portrayal of accurate panoramas of the battlefields.

In the spectrum of topographical battlefield art, however, it was the siege, rather than the running battle in the open field, which gave itself most readily to artistic depiction and organized composition. The predominantly static nature of siege warfare and the prominent architectural and landscape features which punctuated and dominated such scenes, centred mostly around the figure of the besieged fortresses, enabled choreographed compositions that were more comprehensible and less difficult to portray than the inchoate, unregulated and chaotic nature of melees in the field. Siege views, in contrast to the confused

2 Norton Simon Museum website, *Note on Battle Scene by Luca Giordano* [http://www.nortonsimon.org/collections/browse\\_artist.php?name=Giordano%2C+Luca&resultnum=1](http://www.nortonsimon.org/collections/browse_artist.php?name=Giordano%2C+Luca&resultnum=1)

3 Larry Silver, *Nature and Nature’s God: Landscape and Cosmos of Albrecht Altdorfer*. In *The Art Bulletin*, 81, no. 2 (June, 1999), 204.

4 Van der Meulen was responsible for establishing the official French topographical type of military painting and for fixing its conventions; see J. Plax, *Battling for Representation: Ideology and Military Images*, 207. <http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/Quaderno/Quaderno6/Plax.pdf>,

and messy nature of the battlefield, were regulated by 'the discipline of fortifications' and these depictions came 'to pervade the mental imagery' of the time.<sup>5</sup> The fact, then, that by the sixteenth century the fortified city had become, to cite Martha Pollak, 'the privileged site of war' and the 'siege' itself, the prime military strategy for waging war, also ensured that investment and assault became a common occurrence and a most popular iconographic theme of the period.<sup>6</sup> In the sixteenth century alone, siege warfare inspired countless illustrations, from woodcuts and engravings, such as Behams' 1522 *Siege of Rhodes*, to large mural fescoes such as Vasari's *Storming of the fortress near Porta Camollia in Siena* (1570) in the *Sala di Cosimo I* in the *Palazzo Vecchio* in Florence.

Ranking high amongst this category of illustrations of siege warfare are, undeniably, Matteo Perez d'Aleccio's frescoes of the Ottoman invasion of the island of Malta in 1565, which decorate the frieze of the *Sala del Maggior Consiglio*<sup>7</sup> at the Palace of the Grand Masters in Valletta, complemented by his subsequent prints published in Rome and faithfully re-engraved and reissued by Francesco Lucini in 1631.

This narrative cycle presents the Hospitallers' view of the battle against the mighty Ottoman army in the summer of 1565, as well as the Knights' notion of their own historical role in that momentous struggle. It was also intended to perpetuate the renown of their illustrious military order. Like the ancient Greeks, the mode most central to the Hospitallers' thinking was the idea of *kleos aphthiton*, i.e., continuity through an imperishable renown maintained through the memory of future generations.<sup>8</sup> Matteo Perez D'Aleccio's 'silent poetry' provides

5 Martha Pollak, *Cities at War in Early Modern Europe* (2010), 110.

6 Ibid., 110.

7 These were painted between 1575 and 1581; for an analysis of the paintings see Theresa Vella, *The 1565 Great Siege frescos in the Palace*. In Maroma Camilleri and T. Vella, eds., *Celebratio Amicitiae: Essays in honour of Giovanni Bonello* (Malta: 2006).

8 S.C. Spiteri, *The Armoury of the Knights and its Organization in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Malta*. In Vicki Ann Cremona and Olivier Renaudeau, eds., *Entre le glaive et la croix : chefs-d'oeuvre de l'armurerie de Malte / Between the*

this great medium with which the Order sought to immortalize its military achievements within the magnificent magisterial palace in Valletta – the seat of its government. In this mural sequence, D’Aleccio managed to capture, succinctly and compellingly, the salient elements of the four-month-long struggle, allowing viewers to visualize the important episodes in the conflict and relive the events. His visual repertory, however, also offers an important source of information on many aspects and details of the fighting that would otherwise have been left out of the verbal narrative – such as the nature of the landscape, the layout of the fortifications, the costumes of the combatants and the positioning of the Ottoman camps and batteries.

D’Aleccio’s pictorial history is, undeniably, a unique and enigmatic work of art. The mural cycle overwhelms the viewer by its sheer size and scale and is, in many ways, unparalleled in its artistic experimentation, such that it is now being considered as more of a landmark in western art than was previously thought. D’Aleccio’s masterful artistic treatment makes the flow of events easy to follow as the cycle zooms in and out between wide-ranging aerial views that place the various battles in their geographical context, and soldiers’ ground view perspectives as seen from both the attackers’ and defenders’ sides, providing a human scale to the conflict. His handling of the subject includes both elements of a descriptive style, paying attention to details of landscape, siege works, fortifications, weapons and tactics as well as portraits of military figures, demonstrating the artist’s skills in depicting complicated scenes built around precise chosen moments, such as, for example, the arrival of the *Piccolo Soccorso* led by Col. Robles, a Knight of the Order of Santiago, or Jean de Valette’s heroic defence of the Post of Castile. Moreover, the whole visual narrative imprints itself effortlessly on the memory through a sequence of a small number of scenes, making the progression of events easy to follow.<sup>9</sup>

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*Battlesword and the Cross : Masterpieces from the Armoury of Malta* (Malta: Musée de l’Armée and Heritage Malta, 2008), 101.

9 For a study of the Great Siege of 1565 see S.C. Spiteri, *The Great Siege, Anatomy of a Hospitaller Victory* (Malta, 2005), passim.

Unlike the Palace frescoes, which had a relatively limited viewership and were actually restricted to a select elite, the engraved version benefitted from the proliferation of mass-printed media and became widely disseminated. The power of the printing press, indeed, would prove to be the primary factor which contributed greatly to the rapid and widespread fame of the Great Siege story, overshadowing all of the Hospitallers' earlier and equally-deserving exploits, such as Grand Master Pierre d'Aubusson's valiant defence of Rhodes during the siege of 1480. So much so, that within weeks of the withdrawal of the Ottoman armada from Malta in September 1565, various drawings, maps and broadsheets depicting incidents from the Siege were coming off the printing presses of Europe in their hundreds and sold throughout the continent like modern best-sellers. These pamphlets were then followed by detailed eye-witness accounts such as Francesco Balbi da Correggio's diary<sup>10</sup> and Pietro Gentile de Vendome's *Della Historia Di Malta, Et Successo Della Guerra seguita tra quei Religiosissimi Cauallieri, & il potentissimo gran Turcho Sulthan Solimano*. Still, it was D'Aleccio's graphic depictions produced between 1575 to 1581, and the prints which were published in Rome in 1582 (and later made more popular by Antonio Francesco Lucini's re-issue in the seventeenth century) which crystallized the whole process by capturing and popularizing the salient elements of the story.

### **The Hospitaller Fortifications in 1565**

As a representation of the Great Siege, D'Aleccio's *oeuvre* contends itself with four main protagonists, namely, the Knights of St John and their men, the formidable Turkish armada, army and its siege batteries, and the Hospitaller fortifications, all set, within the context of an insular, and largely barren, landscape (the fourth element).

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10 See Henry A. Balbi, *Siege of Malta 1565* (Copenhagen, 1961) which is a translation in English of Francesco Balbi di Correggio's *La verdadera relacion de todo lo que el anno de MDLXV ha sucedido en la isla de Malta, de antes que llegasse l'armada sobre elle de Soliman gran Turco. Hasta que llego el socorro postrero del Rey catholico nuestro señor don Phelipe segudo deste noble* (Barcelona, 1568).

At the very heart of many of the scenes are the fortifications. It was, after all, the presence of fortifications in the Great Siege equation which gave meaning to the word 'siege' in the title of this epic conflict, for without these defensive elements the confrontation between the two belligerents would have been yet another battle in the open field, an unbalanced contest between two opposing forces varying considerably in numeric and material strength. The fortifications redressed this imbalance and gave the small force of Hospitaller knights and their men a fighting chance and the prospect of surviving the mighty onslaught of the formidable Ottoman war machine. Without the fortifications, therefore, there would have been no siege to begin with.

The arrival of the Turkish armada in 1565 found the Hospitaller Knights entrenched behind a series of strategically placed defences that enabled a degree of control over both the main harbour area and the interior of the Island.<sup>11</sup> This small network of defences comprised a system of detached forts, three inside the harbour and two outposts (formerly the Islands' principal settlements) to the rear. The main Hospitaller stronghold, the mother fortress, so to speak, was the fortified town of Birgu with its adjoining castle of St. Angelo, which now served as the citadel or keep of the defences, where, if all the rest was lost, the Hospitallers could retreat and make their last stand awaiting relief forces. Next came the fortress of Senglea (frequently referred to as Fort St. Michael) on the adjoining Isola Peninsula which was still largely incomplete; and Fort St. Elmo with its cavalier and hastily-built ravelin, which commanded the entrance to the two harbours. Outside the harbour area, the land was much more sparsely defended. To the north, roughly in the centre of the island, stood the old town of Mdina, which although stiffened with a couple of bastions since 1530, was intrinsically still a medieval fortress. Farther to the north, on the neighbouring island of Gozo, stood another small medieval fortress, while a small number of isolated towers, which had been built to provide the rural inhabitants

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11 For a description of Hospitaller fortifications in the sixteenth century see S. C. Spiteri, *Fortresses of the Cross: Hospitaller Military Architecture, 1136-1798* (Malta: 1994), passim..

with some protection against corsair incursions, dotted the landscape.

In one important way, the chief strength of the harbour defences lay in the very manner of their design according to the latest conventions of the bastioned trace, planned by leading Italian military engineers of their age, as well as in the solid manner of construction, carved out from the Island's living rock. On the other hand, however, the whole system was severely handicapped by the high ground which enveloped all the positions, a land feature which the Turkish gunners were quick to exploit. One of these heights in particular, Mount Scerberras, had been earmarked as way back as 1524 as ideal site for their new fortress but the financial, political, and military situations which plagued the Knights of St John throughout the early years of their stay on the island had conspired to ensure that the desired fortress remained simply a blueprint on the drawing board and any tactical advantages offered by the topography, forfeited.

Instead, the Knights had been compelled to invest in the fortification of an existing medieval sea-castle and its *suburgu* straddled along the southern part of the harbour. A strong *razzia* by a large Ottoman fleet in 1551 forced the Order to quicken the pace of its efforts and resulted in the construction of two small forts. The first, called St. Elmo, was sited at the tip of the Scerberras promontory in order to command the entrances to the Grand Harbour and Marsamxett. The second, Fort St. Michael, was planted at the neck of the Isola peninsula so as to protect the town of Birgu and the whole promontory was eventually enclosed within a new bastioned enceinte to form the new fortified town of Senglea, named after Grand Master Claude de la Sengle. The election of Jean de Valette to the magistracy in 1557 was followed by a renewed enthusiasm for the construction of the desired *piazza reale* on Mount Scerberras but the two main occasions on which the Order sought to push the project through, the first in 1558 with the help of the Bartolomeo Genga, military engineer to the Duke of Urbino and then in 1562 to the designs of Baldassere Lanci both fell through. By this time, however, the growing Turkish menace ruled out any major works of fortifications and the Knights had to continue to rely on their

strongholds of Birgu, Senglea and Fort St Elmo as their front lines of defence.

It is these handful of fortifications, then, which punctuate D'Aleccio's visual narrative, albeit with varying degrees of intensity and presence. Their representation is not a formulaic rendering, such as found, for example in the Bayeaux tapestry, nor a purely idealize romantic setting drawn in the artist's studio with little or no bearing to reality as encountered for example, in Bedam's 1522 Siege of Rhodes. D'Aleccio appears to have gone to great efforts to make the setting both legible and credible, and as faithful to what he saw around him as his artistic skills allowed him.

Notwithstanding, D'Aleccio's terse images constantly raise a set of fundamental questions on how we are to treat his pictorial chronicle. In other words, does D'Aleccio provide a reliable representation of the fortifications or is some caution called for? How authentic is this a representation of the layout and details of the bastioned enceintes and can we use his depictions to fill in the gaps of our understanding of the Hospitaller fortifications as these stood in 1565? Were these drawings the product of his efforts to reproduce things as directly seen, and if so, how much did he really understand what he was seeing and how was this, in turn, informed by his knowledge, or lack thereof, of the language of military architecture.

More importantly, how much did he give free reign to his imagination? What, in other words, is the images' mimetic power?

### **Depicting the Bastioned fortress**

By the mid-sixteenth century, the art of portraying the fortress on paper, canvas, or lime-plaster, had become a specialized task in its own right burdened with its own complex set of problems which the artist was required to master. At the heart of it all stood the issue of *disegno*, the ability to draw, the most important basic tool in the artist's *metier* and, one must add, also in that of his fellow practitioner, the military engineer, the designer and builder of the very works of fortifications themselves. Even a courtier-warrior, trying to make his way ahead



in the princely courts, was required to know how to draw and paint, according to Baldassare Castiglione, since a 'knowledge of art' gave one the ability to sketch '*castelles, houldes, fortresses, and suche other matters*',<sup>12</sup> which otherwise could not be easily described to others.

The ability to draw the new architecture of defence, however, had now come to include the need to muster the principles of geometry and the rules of perspective. For the modern bastioned fortress which emerged from the military revolution triggered off by the invention and introduction of gunpowder-operated artillery had created a totally new kind of structure that did not really give itself so readily to painterly depiction. The bastioned fortress '*alla moderna*' as re-engineered by Italian military architects, with its low-profile walls and thick ramparts gave the artist few distinguishing visual features which he could latch onto and exploit graphically. The distinctive and pronounced vertical silhouette of the earlier medieval castles and citadels, with their turreted battlements and crenelated walls were now replaced by flat, low-lying, generally featureless and sterile masses of earth and stone. The traditional graphic codes of representation established by castellated military architecture could not be easily translated to portray the relative blandness of the geometric *trace italienne*.

### **The problems of depicting fortifications**

The challenges which the changes in military architecture of the late-fifteenth and sixteenth centuries presented the artist seeking to depict and represent the fortress were brought about by the radical change in the new forms of fortification which accompanied the introduction of the bastioned trace. This new type of architecture created problems with issues of scale and orientation.

It is true that by the sixteenth century the fortified city had grown considerably in size. Even medieval cities such as Florence had,

12 Baldassare Castiglione, trans. Sir Thomas Hoby, *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), cited in J.R. Hale, *Warfare and Cartography, ca. 1450 to ca. 1640* ([http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/HOC/HOC\\_V3\\_Pt1/HOC\\_VOLUME3\\_Part1\\_chapter29.pdf](http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/HOC/HOC_V3_Pt1/HOC_VOLUME3_Part1_chapter29.pdf)); pdf version at <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/671/courtier.pdf>.

by the fifteenth century achieved huge and unwieldy proportions as amply illustrated by the *della Catena* drawing. These cities' massive scale and extensive enceintes made them difficult to condense and represent on paper. Although the new science of perspective had thought the artist how to resolve some of the issues and allowed him, through foreshortening, to circumvent distances and compress a huge entity onto a few feet of canvas or paper, the diminution of the distant features that inevitably came with this method of portrayal from a single viewpoint (real or imagined) meant that only selected sections of the enceinte could be presented directly to the viewer. The perspective foreshortening, moreover, made the fortress appear short and squat and its distant features occluded by those located in front of them. One way of bypassing the restriction of this convention was through the adoption of bird's eye views. These elevated views of fortified cities or fortresses from above, more often than not, however, were not actually aerial perspectives but axonometric-type of renderings, that combined 'a vertical plan of ground-level features with perspective views of buildings and other standing features, all presented at roughly the same scale'.<sup>13</sup> The fortress thus appeared 'as it would unfold itself to any one passing over it, as in a balloon, at a height sufficient to abolish sharpness of perspective, and yet low enough to allow of distinct view of the scene beneath'.<sup>14</sup>

This technique became very popular among cartographers and map makers of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It is a technique which D'Aleccio commonly employs in his portrayal of the Hospitaller fortifications. Of the 14 instances or so in which the Knights' defences and strongholds are depicted in his panels (and prints), 9 are bird's eye views or map-like depictions. The wider composition of the overall scenes themselves, however, also includes various elements of an arbitrary form of diminution intended to impart a sense of depth

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13 William Ravenhill, *Bird's-eye view & bird's-flight view*. In 'The Map Collector' 35 (1986), 36–7.

14 Herbert Hurst, *Introduction - Oxford Topography: an essay*. In 'Oxford Historical Society' (1899), 1–12 (4–5).



**Figure 1.** Matteo Perez D'Aleccio, *Foglio Sesto*, showing the bombardment and attacks on Senglea (Image source: Courtesy of the National Library of Malta).

and distance to the landscape. An attempt at a form of ‘realistic’ aerial perspective, perhaps inspired by the need to recapture the enemy gunners’ view of the fortifications as they would have been seen from the elevated Turkish camps and batteries positioned on the enveloping hills, is encountered in the depiction of the Birgu land front showing the bombardment of the post of Castile (*Foglio Ottavo*) and Senglea.

In the latter, the sense of depth is actually conveyed by the diminishing size of the figures rather than by the ramparts themselves which retain the same dimensions. Indeed, the bastion and cavalier of Fort St. Angelo, set in the middle ground, have practically the same dimensions as those of the ramparts along the Birgu land front depicted in the foreground. In this manner, D’Aleccio retained a documentary, plan-like quality to his portrayal of the forts. In these two drawings, the artist also sought to employ another convention that was becoming popular with battlefield paintings – the use of the foreground rise. This technique created a ‘stage’, so to speak, which showcased the Turkish



**Figure 2.** Matteo Perez D’Aleccio, *Foglio Ottavo*, showing the bombardment of the Post of Castile (Image source: Courtesy of the National Library of Malta).

commanders and their powerful siege gun batteries. This rise had the effect of endowing the composition with a distinctive ‘basin-shaped foreground’.<sup>15</sup> In D’Aleccio’s depictions, however, the technique is at times somewhat understated.

A similar attempt is found in the scene showing the bombardment and infantry assaults on Fort St. Elmo (*Foglio Quinto*). Here, D’Aleccio likewise uses the rising foreground to show the massive Turkish siege battery which pounded the land front of the small star-shaped fort. The fort itself, however, is shown in practically 3D-plan format, like an axonometric rendering (*perspettiva soldatesca*), rather than in perspective, while the castle of St Angelo, across the harbour, on the other hand, is depicted in profile.

The bastioned ramparts’ low relief brought about a dramatic reduction in the hierarchy of vertical elements and this made the profile of modern gunpowder fortifications difficult to define, with the

<sup>15</sup> Plax, *Battling for Representation*, 207-208.



**Figure 3.** Matteo Perez D'Aleccio, *Foglio Quinto*, showing the Turkish siege battery and the attacks on Fort St Elmo (Image source: Courtesy of the National Library of Malta).

exception of their cavaliers, which projected vertically (but which in any case were relatively few and spaced far between), presenting the viewer with a relatively uneven progression of walls which, on paper, generally translated into little more than a straight line or band of ramparts.

With the modern bastioned fortress, therefore, placing the viewing point at eye level only resulted in a meaningless elevation of sterile walls. Bastioned fortresses, as a result, now required a different placement of the point of view if they were to convey any meaningful complex three-dimensional visual information. This problem was solved by raising the point of view. This not only allowed for a more detailed representation of the whole ensemble but also served to expose and reveal the interior layout within the walled perimeter. Francesco di Giorgio Martini was able to demonstrate this new invention in his *Codex Saluzziano* in the late 1400s,<sup>16</sup> and thereafter most military

16 Miguel Ángel Alonso-Rodríguez and José Calvo-López, *Prospettiva Soldatesca: An Empirical Approach to the Representation of Military Architecture in the*

engineers and illustrators came to rely heavily on it. The reception of Martini's solutions is first encountered in the highly successful treatise *Del modo di fortificar le città* by Giovanni Battista de Zanchi (1554) and by Maggi and Castriotto in 1564,<sup>17</sup> both of which espoused the use of bird's eye views and so-called 'military' or 'cavalier perspectives' (*prospettiva soldatesca*).

In D'Aleccio's drawings, these difficulties of representing the bastioned fortress are best illustrated in his treatment of the land front of Birgu. *Foglio Ottavo*, for instance, highlights the problems of ground-level frontal-viewing that the low profile and silhouette of Birgu's bastioned enceinte presented to the artist. Another profile is encountered in *Foglio Settimo* which shows the eastern Kalkara-facing side of Birgu (highlighting the Post of Castile) and Fort St. Angelo. Within the same picture one finds, similarly in profile but shown as a schematisation of a silhouette in the background, Mdina with the bell tower of its cathedral, and further in the distance, likewise schematized, the Gozo castle.

### **The reliability of D'Aleccio's depictions**

The techniques and conventions of representation, as discussed above, would have dictated and in some ways even taxed D'Aleccio's ability to convey a faithful representation of the fortifications within the narrative nature of his visual space. The extent to which he was able to overcome these difficulties was largely determined not only by his visual powers of observation but also on his ability to 'read' the language of military architecture and understand clearly what he was actually seeing.

Although our present knowledge of the first-generation Hospitaller fortifications, as these stood in 1565, is highly fragmented and incomplete, there is still enough information to allow us to analyse

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*Early Modern Period*. In 'Nexus Network Journal Architecture and Mathematics' (Turin: 2014), <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00004-014-0216-6/fulltext.html>.

17 Girolamo Maggi d'Anghiari and Giacomo Fusto Castriotto, *Della fortificatione delle città* (Venice: 1564).



Figure 4. Matteo Perez D'Aleccio, *Foglio Settimo*, showing the arrival of the *Piccolo Soccorso* and the fortress of Birgu and the Castle of St Angelo in profile in the background (Image source: Courtesy of the National Library of Malta).

the validity of D'Aleccio's graphic statements. There is little argument that, on the whole, D'Aleccio's depictions of the fortifications manage to capture the essence of the various works making up the defensive network. However, there are also various omissions, errors, and inconsistencies which raise a range of questions about the reliability of those features and elements which are represented.

Although D'Aleccio was not an eyewitness to the fighting, he was, nonetheless, able to get a first-hand knowledge of the fortifications as rebuilt in the post-1565 period. These repairs and rebuilding efforts had not really altered the original configuration of the defences to any significant degree, although some of the elements, such as the *ritirate* and the ravelin of Fort St. Elmo, and probably the wooden palisade at Senglea would have already been cleared away by the time of his arrival in Malta in 1575. D'Aleccio's fortifications, therefore, even if based on a post-1565 rebuilding effort, would still have largely comprised the

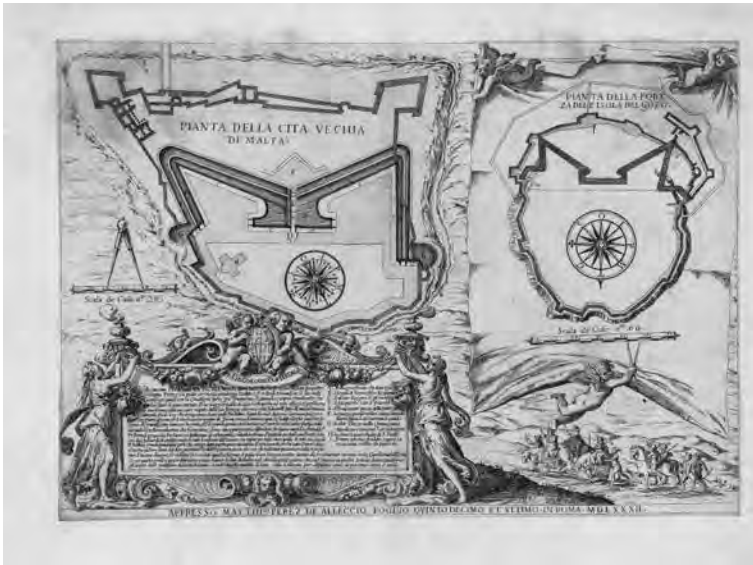


Figure 5. Matteo Perez D'Aleccio, *Foglio Quinto Decimo*, showing the plans with proposed new projects for the old fortifications of Mdina and Gozo (Image source: Courtesy of the National Library of Malta).

original elements that faced the Ottoman attackers a decade earlier.

There is also little doubt that D'Aleccio had some form of access to various military and architectural plans of the defences. The inclusion, in his printed version, for example, of the scaled plans of the Gozo castle and the enceinte of Mdina (probably depicting Francesco Laparalli's / Gerolamo Cassar's proposals for alterations to these two old strongholds with the addition of new bastioned fronts), are based on accurate and detailed architectural plans that had been prepared earlier by experienced military engineers. Indeed, these very plans constitute the earliest planimetric record of these two fortresses. That similar plans of Birgu, Senglea and Fort St Elmo must have also been available for consultation can be deduced from the map-like manner in which D'Aleccio chose to portray these fortified cities in five of his scenes. Their complex geometric layout could not have been clear solely through observation at ground level.

The complex elements making up the irregular enceintes of



Birgu and Senglea, in particular, with their many bastions, curtains, flanks, and spurs, would not have been readily comprehensible to the untrained eye of the non-military observer. At the same time, however, this does not explain the many inconsistencies and omissions which are encountered in some of his depictions, if D'Aleccio, as believed, was working with the benefit of plans. It is also important to draw attention here to the fact there exist significantly large differences in the details of the fortifications as represented in the frescoes at the Grand Master's Palace and those found in his later Rome engravings. The fresco representations have been found by the author to be more accurate than those which are shown in his engravings.

There is even a degree of inconsistency in the engravings themselves. A simple comparison of *Foglio Terzo* and *Foglio Quarto* for example, reveals the great difference in the shape and number of bastions along the Corradino side of Senglea's enceinte and in the Kalkara side of the Birgu's perimeter. Furthermore, when these plans are then compared to the profile and land front aerial views of the same fortifications, they not only fail to corroborate the secondary details, but furthermore, reveal other inconsistencies and omissions of their own.

For example, although Birgu is shown with two towering cavaliers in all the plan-like views, only one cavalier is actually shown (St. John Cavalier) in the perspective and profile views. It is now known that St James Bastion did not have a cavalier in 1565 - there was only one cavalier, that on St. John Bastion. Earlier in 1562, Baldassare Lanci had recommended that one should be built there but this did not materialize until the eighteenth century. D'Aleccio's depiction of this cavalier in his plans, but not in his aerial perspective views and profiles, therefore, seems to have resulted from his inability to read correctly the architectural plans which had been handed to him. Indeed, the structure which D'Aleccio interprets as a cavalier was actually the two-stepped layout of the bastion and its outer protective antemural. This latter feature, a sort of *faussebraye* described by Giacomo Bosio as a *rivellino*, had been grafted onto the faces and flanks of the two bastions of Birgu prior to the Siege in order to provide them with added protection against

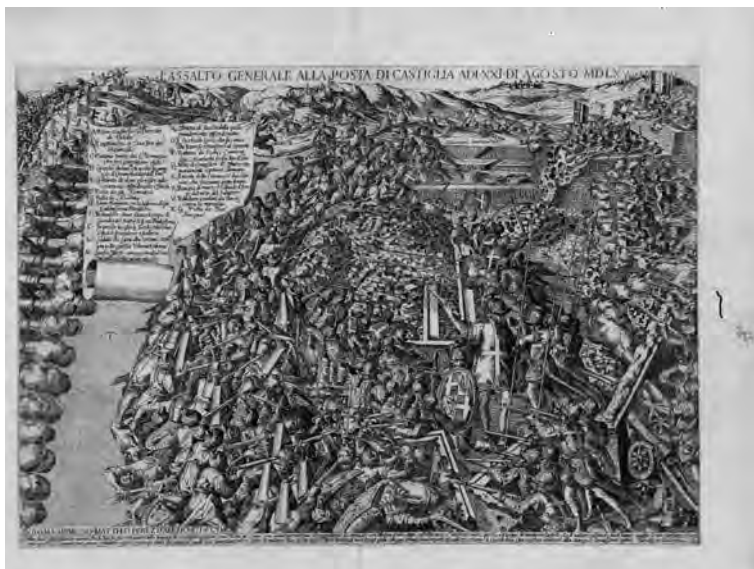


Figure 6. Matteo Perez D'Aleccio, *Foglio Decimo*, showing the attacks on the Post of Castile at Birgu (Image source: Courtesy of the National Library of Malta).

direct bombardment. Although these features no longer exist, they survived well into the eighteenth century and were documented in a number of seventeenth-century plans before they were engulfed within the perimeters of the larger bulwarks erected by Charles François de Mondion. An illustrated report prepared by Mederico Blondel in 14 July 1695 entitled '*Discorso della riparatione necessaria delle rouvine dell' Ala destra della fronte della Città Vittoriosa e della sua Porta Marina*' shows very clearly the '*Baluardo principale di Fronte con Falsabraga*'. Moreover, recent archaeological investigations undertaken at St. John Bastion by the Restoration Directorate, have now confirmed the existence of this two tiered layout.

D'Aleccio actually manages to portray this layout quite faithfully in his fresco but fails miserably to follow his own initial depiction in his later engravings. D'Aleccio's inability to portray this feature

consistently, and to mistake it for a cavalier can, to a certain degree, be excused, for when viewed from within the enceinte itself, as can be seen in *Foglio Decimo* (showing the battle of the Post of Castile), the enceinte descended in three tiers of platforms, the uppermost battery of which was formed by the left flank of the Bastion of St James. Looking at this image, one would be forgiven for thinking that the upper tier was some kind of cavalier. D'Aleccio gets this feature totally wrong in the profile view of Birgu in *Foglio Settimo*, where he depicts the *rivellino* as a sort of rectangular tower rising from within the ditch in front of the bastion.

In *Foglio Sesto*, however, D'Aleccio does manage to depict very clearly the *rivellino* grafted onto the Cavalier of Fort St. Michael in Senglea. In his original fresco version he portrays some arquebusiers lodged inside this triangular spur-like screen protecting the face of the cavalier, a detail which is missing in the engraving. The one aspect about the Senglea cavalier that immediately strikes the viewer, however, is its enormity in relation to the rest of the enceinte. It was evidently drawn exaggeratedly and out of proportion, for in reality, this cavalier (the original tower-like Fort St. Michael) was actually a very small structure. Evidently, this amplification was intended, above all else, to emphasize the crucial role played by Fort St. Michael in the defence of Senglea. Curiously, the plan-like views of Senglea in some of the etchings also omit to show another important feature of the land front – the counterguard. This triangular outerwork, nonetheless, is depicted by D'Aleccio in *Foglio Sesto*, which shows the Turkish gunners' viewpoint of Senglea's land front. This counterguard is no longer standing, unfortunately, and there are no known plans of this work prior to the late 1600s, by which time it appears to have been actually linked securely to the main enceinte immediately behind it.

The greatest degree of inconsistency, however, is encountered in the depiction of Fort St. Angelo. Although D'Aleccio manages to correctly portray this fort's bastioned front with its cavalier, bulwark and curtain, as well as De Guiral's Battery at the tip of the promontory, his depiction of the rest of the stronghold, particularly its medieval



Figure 7. Matteo Perez D'Aleccio, *Foglio Nono*, showing the seaborne attack on Senglea with Fort St. Angelo in the background (upper left) (Image source: Courtesy of the National Library of Malta).

elements, is very chaotic and incoherent. In 1565 (and in 1575), Fort St. Angelo was still intrinsically the same medieval castle which the Knights of St. John had inherited upon their arrival in Malta in 1530. Most of its enceinte was then still an irregular perimeter of ramparts punctuated with a handful of wall-towers, a barbican, and a few gateways *all'antica*, all hugging the contours of the rocky promontory.<sup>18</sup> As such, it was still, in essence, a complex multi-layered castle, with at least two, but probably even three, baileys or wards. The core of the stronghold formed the inner *castrum*, a sort of shell-keep commanded by a tower-like castral residence that had been converted into a magistral palace after 1530. There was then, at a lower level, a second ward housing the

18 For a good description of the defences of Fort St Angelo in 1565, particularly the medieval elements of the castle, see G. Wettinger, *The Castrum Maris*. In Lino Bugeja, Mario Buhagiar, Stanley Fiorini, eds., *Birgu, a Maritime City* (Malta, Malta University Press, 1993).

garrison and the main stores. This contained a main entrance protected by a barbican and, in 1541, was fitted with Ferramolino's cavalier. D'Aleccio also shows a third, sea-level outer ward reaching down into the creek fitted with wall-towers and a gateway. To date there is still very little evidence to corroborate this enceinte, but the author's view is that it is very likely that this feature did really exist.

The multi-tiered configuration of Fort St Angelo is perhaps best captured by D'Aleccio in *Foglio Nono* where he provides a credible profile. Here again, however, the details of the medieval enceinte are too sketchy and fleeting to be taken literally. Fortunately, there exists a very realistic artistic portrayal of Fort St Angelo, drawn in the 1660s by Willem Schellinx, which gives us an excellent bench mark with which to compare D'Aleccio's representations.<sup>19</sup> What we find, however, is that there is little correlation in the detail of various ramparts, although some features within castle, such as the magistral residence (formerly the de Nava residential quarters), clearly stand out in both representations. D'Aleccio struggled considerably to remain consistent even in the details of the buildings within the stronghold. Look, for example, at the different ways in which he depicts the gable tiled roof of the magistral residence. It seems, that as far as Fort St Angelo was concerned – or more precisely, its medieval part – D'Aleccio was working without the benefit of a basic plan. None of his plan-like depictions, in actual fact, manage to agree on the layout of the medieval enceinte and the various features within this stronghold.

One of the elements on which both D'Aleccio and Schellinx do agree, on the other hand, is what appears to have been a covered sea-level type of battery facing the mouth of the Grand Harbour. This battery stood on the northern slope of the promontory immediately below the Magistral palace, facing out to sea and was a sort of *myne* such as had been built by the Hospitallers at Bodrum castle in the late

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19 Bernard Aikema ed., *W. Schellinks: viaggio al sud, 1664-1665* (Rome, 1983), with preface in French and Italian Alessandro Marabottini, and parallel texts in Italian and English.

fifteenth century. It is not yet clear, however, if this battery was a pre-Hospitaller structure or if it was added by the Knights after 1530. The structure remained standing until the late seventeenth century when it was replaced by a new multi-tiered enceinte designed and built by the Flemish engineer Colonel Don Carlos de Grunenberg. Once again one finds a marked difference in the manner in which both the *myne* and northern side of the castle are represented in D'Aleccio's frescoes and in *Foglio Quinto* of the engravings.

Among the other defensive features which are shown by D'Aleccio is the wooden stockade (*stoccado*) which the Knights had planted in the sea along the Corradino side of the enceinte of Senglea. This obstacle consisted of a line of thick wooden piles (a sort of palisade) driven into the water some 10 metres apart and some ten paces from the shore, braced together with cross-pieces of wood protected with iron and fitted with a suspended chain passed through holes in the piles for all its length. It was contrived to prevent the Turkish boats from reaching the shore, thereby obliging the assailants to get into the water before gaining the shore, wetting their arquebusiers, powder and equipment – much in the manner of the anti-invasion obstacles on the beaches of Normandy during the D-Day invasions of occupied France during the Second World War. Balbi states that this obstacle was built strong enough to arrest a galley rowing at full speed. An expert Maltese shipbuilder by the name of Orlando Zabbar had been roped in to assist in its rapid construction.

It is interesting to note that this wooden palisade was only constructed along the Senglea shoreline and that no similar device was placed in front of the Posts of Castile, Germany, or England which were situated along the Birgu sea-walls in Kalkara creek. These posts were equally exposed, if not more, to a seaborne assault. Senglea, one must remember, was under the command of the Admiral and his Italian knights, and many of these men would have been quite familiar with the *porporella* system of palisades and *abattis* that had long been employed by the Venetians in their coastal and harbour forts. The inspiration for the construction of the *stoccado*, therefore, may have come directly

from the Italian Knights of the Priory of Venice.

The most poorly depicted of all the fortifications shown by D'Aleccio is, undoubtedly, Mdina, the *Citta' Vecchia*, the old fortified town in the centre of the Island. In 1565, this old fortress was, like Fort St Angelo, still largely a medieval stronghold despite the grafting of three bastions and the terrepleining of parts of the walls by the Knights from around the 1540s onwards. D'Aleccio, in fact, concentrates on these structural elements and portrays them, albeit out of scale in relation to their true proportions and dimensions. Indeed, the old city is shown with practically no land front curtain when the distance between the two bastion was around 250m. What is also curious here is that D'Aleccio did actually have a detailed plan of the old city at his disposal so much so that he actually reproduces this in his engravings together with the plan of the Gozo castle (*Foglio Quinto Decimo*). D'Aleccio omits all reference to the city's old medieval enceinte and its system of double walls – these were still standing well into the eighteenth century. D'Aleccio's very schematic depiction of Mdina, nonetheless, manages to capture the salient defensive features of the old city's walls, namely the two land front bastions (St. Paul or D'Homedes Bastion, and St. Peter Bastion), the small bastion and adjoining curtain facing Mtarfa (Sta. Maria ta' Bachar), as well as a medieval wall-tower which still survives on the northern part of the enceinte. The land front, however did have one other Hospitaller feature which D'Aleccio missed out upon. This was a small improvised redoubt which, according to Francesco Laparelli, had been erected inside the ditch roughly in the centre of the land front in the area later occupied by De Redin Bastion.<sup>20</sup> Its omission may, perhaps, be partly explained by the fact that this improvised defensive work could have been swept away by the time D'Aleccio was commissioned to come up with his illustrations.

Of all D'Aleccio's fortifications, it is perhaps the depiction of Fort St. Elmo which is the most architecturally faithful and the one that contains the most structural details. Here, we are fortunate to have both

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20 Verbal communication by Dr. Roger Vella Bonavita.

what is believed by many to be Pietro Prado's original plan for the fort, as preserved in the Simancas Archives in Spain, as well as Francesco Laparelli's sketch-plan prepared immediately after the Siege. Both these documents corroborate many of the details depicted by D'Aleccio. The fort, perhaps because of its smallness, regular shape, and distinctive features, is also consistently depicted, except for the cavalier, which when shown in profile in the engraved version, is represented in the form a rectangular tower with heavily buttressed front facing the main fort. It is *Foglio Quinto*, however, which provides the most important depiction of Fort St. Elmo. Here D'Aleccio picked up on many of the finer structural features of the fort, such as the casemated nature of the ramparts (where the casemates open up onto the parade ground), the hollow sunken *piazza*, the buttressed faces of the ravelin, and most authentically of all, the fact that the guns were mounted *a barba* (*en barbette*), or as Laparelli also calls them, *a mezza rota*, that is, firing over the parapet. According to Laparelli these parapets were also built of poor material (*di cattiva materia*), thereby placing the defenders at a considerable disadvantage and exposing them to enemy fire. It is not surprising, therefore, to read that many soldiers fell to sharpshooters (there was a day when 21 sentries were killed). Consequently, the defenders were obliged to put up many improvised breastworks to compensate for this deficiency. On 16 June, for example, the Grand Maser sent over 200 mattresses, blankets, tents, ropes and sails as material to be used for improvised cover. Although providing some measure of protection against musketry fire, these *opere soldatesche* would have been very vulnerable to artillery bombardment and incendiaries. Guns mounted *a mezza ruota* can also be seen depicted on the bastions of Mdina in D'Aleccio's fresco version of the scene showing the plan-like aerial representation of the old city.

Even so D'Aleccio still manages to omit some salient features. Amongst these, perhaps the most important, is his failure to depict the covertway, or *strada coperta*. This feature was constructed from the same earth and rock chippings generated during the excavation of the ditch. The debris was also used to create a glacis but this was so crudely



laid out that the '*gitto di terra*' (as Laparelli calls it) literally created a mound which served to shield the Turkish soldiers as they approached the fort, '*... il gitto ch'era stato fatto delle materie cavate dal fosso così à caso gittate e male asette erano in loro favore, dietro al quale potevano starsi grosso numero di soldati senza poter esser visti dai luoghi à loro vicini e nemici.*' According to this military engineer, the covertway, which was served by a banquette, was practically useless and unreachable from within the body of the fort owing to the lack of sally-ports. According to Cirmi, there was also an improvised barrier built in the form of a rubble wall entrenchment ('*una trincea di muro à secco*') which the defenders hastily erected in the area extending from the covertway behind the ravelin to the point of the spur of the cavalier. This was large enough to hold 50 soldiers. This defensive work is also mentioned by Balbi but it is not shown in any of the plans and maps of the Great Siege. Presumably many of these improvised elements had already been cleared away by 1575.

### **Features only found in D'Aleccio**

There are then those features which only D'Aleccio's depictions seem to document and record. Amongst these one finds the depiction of the gateways and sally-ports, the casemated batteries, the entrenchments (*ritirate*) and the *Sperone* of Senglea.

#### *(i) Gateways and Sally-ports:*

A sally-port in the cavalier of Fort St Elmo, which opens onto the harbour side of the structure. There is as yet no other confirmation for this feature.

A gateway or sally-port in the rampart today known as the Macina, in Senglea, which at the time appears to have gone by the name of *Porta Marina* and opened directly into the ditch, practically at sea level.

A Sally-port in flank of bastion of the hornwork of the Post of Castile. After the rebuilding of the Post of Castile in the 1700s, this sally-port was relocated.

Two sally-ports along the Kalkara-facing enceinte, one of which is situated beneath the *Sacra Infermeria*.

#### *Escutcheons and coat-of-arms*

Escutcheons with coat-of-arms on the right face of D'Homedes bastion at Fort St Angelo. These appear to refer to the escutcheons of Grand Masters L'Isle Adam, Del Ponte and Saint Jaille known to have been placed there by the knight Jaconio Pellequin. Today, together with a fort escutcheon, these are to be found on the parapet surmounting the left face of the same bastion.

Land front gate of Senglea shown surmounted by an escutcheon (in the fresco version only).

#### *Casemated batteries*

A Casemated battery with two embrasures closing off the mouth of the ditch of Birgu on the Kalkara side.

A Casemated battery with three embrasures in the curtain near the main entrance or *Porta Superiore* of Birgu

A Sea-level battery at the foot of the right face of D'Homedes Bastion, Fort St Angelo.

#### *Entrenchments*

A *trinceramento* of earthworks surrounding the two windmills at Senglea

#### *Sperone* of Senglea

D'Aleccio's depiction raises issues about the actual configuration of the Spur of Senglea, *Lo Sperone*, which is somehow shown as a flat-faced platform rather than the structure which is seen today. This configuration is also shown in Schellinx's more detailed depiction (see image) although the bulwark itself is strangely located very far inland on the rising ground at the tip of the promontory.

## **Conclusion**

As has been shown by this brief analysis, D'Aleccio uses a hybrid form of representation in the depiction of the fortifications throughout his scenes, drawing on and combining the graphic techniques of both the military engineer and the artist. His attempts to convey true and accurate representations vary in intensity and consistency, depending on the fortifications' prominence and role in the narrative being portrayed in the respective scenes in which they feature, acquiring greater authenticity the closer they are made to figure in the foreground.

D'Aleccio's reductionist technique and skilful attempts to combine both painterly and military-engineering modes of representation of fortifications manage to capture the essence of the shape, form, and details of the salient elements of the defences. On the whole, D'Aleccio's drawings do successfully manage to convey a credible portrayal of the fortifications and their setting with the landscape as these would have been visible to all the protagonists in 1565. Many of his depictions, and the details of the defences contained therein, are confirmed by various other historical documents. D'Aleccio's depictions, however, are perhaps at their most successful in their ability to create a graphic representation that easily latches onto to our memory.

