

THE MALTESE 'PERIT' IN HISTORY

by

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The Maltese architect-engineer belongs to a profession which has given an excellent service to the island in the past. While in the rest of Europe, the current trend lies towards the creation of separate architectural and engineering specialists, the persistent survival of the architect-engineer in Malta may at a first glance seem rather odd. Yet the idea of a single person exercising the dual role of architectural designer and civil engineer is one of the main constants in the history of the profession in Malta and is mainly the result of the restricted economy of an insular society which was, and still is, numerically small, aesthetically unambitious and intensely practical and conservative in its everyday building needs. The purpose of the present paper is to show how and why the concept of the architect-engineer originated with the coming of the Knights in the 16th century, was developed in the 18th and was finally reinforced in the 20th century with the timely introduction of a formal course for architect-engineers at the Royal University of Malta.

The initial installation of the military Order of St John in Malta in 1530 brought about three important changes in the Maltese settlement patterns. In the first place, there was the foundation and the subsequent development of a number of new towns and fortresses around the Grand Harbour and Manoel Island in the Eastern part of the Island. Secondly, there was the rapid development of a number of large inland settlements like Qormi, Zabbar, Zejtun and B'Kara coupled with the parallel 'extinction' process of the older medieval hamlets. In the third place, there was the very persistent reluctance of the civil population to occupy the coastal zones in the northern part of the island which were considered to be vulnerable to Turkish raids. As one would expect, these changes in the settlement pattern immediately generated a large building boom which gave the opportunity to a number of Maltese mastermasons to design several dwelling blocks and churches in the new developing villages. Here the activity of these buildings experts or 'periti', as they were commonly called, was largely uncontrolled by the Order's administration which allowed them to design any new building and supervise the works, so long as the new structures were not of a military nature. But in the case of the harbour cities the situation was rather different, because there was here the pressing need to relate carefully the civil buildings with the new network of fortifications which was devised and subse-

quently elaborated to defend the Grand Harbour (1). Apart from the fact that the Maltese periti were inexperienced in the refined techniques of fortification, the sophisticated and alien tastes of the Knights must have also been a source of embarrassment in view of their restricted knowledge. As a result, the Maltese periti allowed themselves to be pushed into a secondary position where they seem to have exercised an advisory rather than a decision-making role. Nevertheless contemporary documents show that they were respected by the Knights for their precise knowledge of local materials and methods and for their experience in handling the various human aspects of the local building industry (2). Because of this they were included within the framework of the Order's administration by being asked to sit on a special board known as the 'OFFICIUM COMMISSARIORUM DOMORUM' (3). This was the planning control body which shaped much of the urban growth which took place in Malta under the Order so that the advisory role of the periti at the various sessions of the board must have been an important one. Besides, the frequent meetings of the Commission in the 16th century gave the Maltese periti the opportunity to come into contact with the several foreign military architects and engineers like Laparelli, Genga, Ferramolino and others whom the Knights invited to Ma'ta to act as consultants in the design of their fortifications and public buildings. Thus, for the first time, the Maltese periti, hitherto enclosed in the ideological vacuum of Medieval Malta, found themselves interposed between the 'high' architectural concepts of the foreign engineers of the Order on one hand and the vernacular architecture of the Maltese Mediaeval builders on the other. It is to their credit that they contributed to both traditions, for by their expertise of local materials and building methods they made it possible for the masters to execute their grand paper designs for palaces and fortifications, while in return they channelled certain traits of the imported 'high' architecture into the vernacular tradition which started developing along new lines. In this way, the Maltese architect-engineers of the 16th century consciously or unconsciously managed to introduce new building ideas into Malta with the result that a new popular style emerged and the foundations for future

R[oyal] M[alta] L[ibrary], *Libr[ary]* 1017, "Volume contenente diverse Relazioni, Discorsi e sentimenti degli Ingegneri riguardo Le Fortificazioni di Malta e Gozo", and A[rchives of the] O[rder of] M[alta] 6554, "Pareri e Discorsi sopra Fortificazioni 1633-95".

2. *A.O.M.* 2137, p. 322.

3. Sammut, E., "L'Ufficio delle Case ed i Regolamenti per la Fabbrica della Valletta (1556-1629)", in *Atti del XV Congresso di Storia dell'Architettura* (Rome 1970), pp. 387-97, and Borg Cardona, S., "The Ufficio delle Case and the Housing Laws of the Earlier Grandmasters, 1531-1569", *Law Journal* Vol. II-III, n.1.

development were securely laid.

Apart from bringing the Maltese periti into close contact with the foreign masters who from time to time came over to Malta, the coming of the Knights also influenced the local profession in three other aspects. In the first place, the Knights introduced the idea that in Malta, where civil architecture was closely linked with the fortifications network and the water supply system (4), it was ideal to have profession people with a thorough know-how in both architectural design and civil engineering. Thus was born the concept of the Maltese architect-engineer. In the second place, the Knights instilled an element of organization which the building profession in Malta hitherto lacked — an organization which was subsequently elaborated to control all building in Malta. It will suffice here to state that the building department of the Knights was organised at three levels. The top level comprised two elected resident engineers known as PROBI HOMINES STRUCTURAE who received an annual salary of £25 and who were assisted by a varying number of foreign specialists in the fields of military engineering, design aesthetic, hydraulic engineering and town-planning (5). The second level comprised the CAPOMASTRO DELL'OPERE who was a Maltese 'perito' combining the talents of architect and engineer and who was assisted on a 'primus inter pares' basis by a panel of twelve 'periti' elected by the Grandmaster. Finally the third level comprised all those building contractors and masons who saw in the large building programme of the Knights a fairly secure source of paid employment. Lastly, the Knights of the 16th century influenced the local building profession by providing incentives for the Maltese periti to widen their knowledge on building method and design; among their incentives one can mention the system of patronage through which promising Maltese periti like Cassar and Gafà were sent abroad to receive formal academic training (6) and the liberal diffusion of continental literature on the art of building in the libraries of the Maltese social elite (7). Besides, there was the presence of a number of influential Knights who mixed freely with the Maltese architect-engineers with the subsequent healthy exchange of ideas regarding architectural taste.

The apex of professional activity during the Order's rule in Malta

4. Libr. 195, pp. 19-21.
5. Manuscript in Private Collection entitled 'Privilegi della Sacra Religione di San Giovanni Gerosolimitano' (Marchesato di Roccaforte 1718), p. 34.
6. One documented case of Magisterial Patronage concerning an architect called Onofrio Pellerano occurs in *A.O.M.* 1484 (no pagination). Notarial Archives Valletta, Notary Ignazio Debono, R 762/25, fol. 164 and other documents kept in the Notarial Archives, Valletta, referring to the contents of libraries of deceased persons.

was reached in the 18th century. During this period the 16th century concept of the professional practising both as an architect and an engineer acquired new strength as a result of a large building boom which spanned right through the principates of Vilhena and Pinto. More than anything else this boom provided the opportunity for the Maltese periti to transform the high baroque style imported from Paris and Rome by Mondion and Carapecchia (8) into a popular style which admirably served the propaganda purposes of the state as embodied in the person of the Grandmaster. For this was the age of absolutism — that exclusively baroque concept which called for a powerful dynamic building style based not on an enclosed network of bastions but on a new system of town planning with long avenues and spacious plazas of the Floriana type, grandiose churches and sumptuous palaces. Put together these new elements reflected a new life-style where class barriers were accentuated with the result that the relations between the aristocratic knights on one side and the Maltese middle class on the other became highly strained. But by transforming the aristocratic version of the Valletta and Mdina baroque style into a popular style eminently suited for the villages, the Maltese periti like Barbara, Zerafa and Bonnici helped the Maltese to assert themselves in face of this threat which partly explains why the authority of the Order finally began to decline until it was, along with the Versailles autocracy it had attempted to emulate, enveloped by the inescapable tidal wave of a Bourgeoisie Revolution.

The documents of the 18th century (9) show that during that period, the Maltese architect-engineers concerned themselves not only with private and public housing but on certain occasions they were also asked to design village churches and chapels, to sit on various ecclesiastical and municipal boards, to draw up plans and valuations for existing buildings and landed property, to supervise and extend the water-supply system and the existing road network and finally to draft plans and reports for Notarial contracts and submissions to Government boards. Besides there existed in the 18th century a few Maltese architect-

8. De Lucca, D., and Tonna, J., *Rimano Carapecchia* (Malta 1975) and De Lucca, D., "Architects working in Malta during the Grandmastership of Manoel De Vilhena", B.Arch. (Honours) dissertation (Malta 1975), typescript.
9. The most revealing sources in this respect are:
 - (a) Documents appertaining to Notaries Ignazio Debono (1722-33), Giovanni Bartolo (1721-53), Andrea Zerafa (1731-4) and Giuseppe Vella Gatt (1718-37);
 - (b) Documents appertaining to the Università of Notabile now kept in the Royal Malta Library, particularly RML Univ. 27 and 28;
 - (c) Documents contained in Vol. Suppliche (1714-41) kept in the Archives Section of the Valletta Archiepiscopal Curia.

engineers who were greatly respected either because they had received academic training overseas or because they had spent some time practising in Italy. Such was the case of Lorenzo Gafà who had studied architecture in Rome, Carlo Zimach who designed the Basilica of S. Anastazia ai Cerchi in Rome and Carlo de Dominicis — an architect of Maltese origin who designed the facades of four major Roman churches (10). Thus the 18th C saw the Maltese profession asserting itself overseas while still preserving its distinct local identity.

The establishment of English rule in Malta in the early 19th century proved in many ways to be beneficial in so far as the local profession was concerned. The old system of having a fixed number of 'periti' practising under the direction of a 'Capo Mastro' was continued but now a course for architect-engineers was set up at the Valletta Lyceum, the subjects taught being Land-Surveying, Valuations, Architecture and Mathematics (11). But it should be noted that this was a Land Surveying rather than an architectural course. It was only as late as 1905 that a formal Course of Architecture was incorporated in the curriculum of the University (12). Hitherto lectures in architecture and engineering had been incorporated in the Faculty of Literature and Science but in this year the former disciplines rose to the status of a faculty. In 1919 the Architect's Ordinance was promulgated by the Colonial government to regulate the exercise of the profession by establishing that, firstly, no person could practise as an architect and Civil Engineer, that is as a 'perit', without the direct authority of the Governor and, secondly, that the Governor could regulate the number of practising 'periti' according to the circumstances. Following the enactment of this Ordinance the Chamber of Architects and Civil Engineers was founded (13), which still serves as the only link between the profession and the Government.

In conclusion to this short historical review, one can say that as the role of the architect-engineer in Malta has not changed much in the last decades, the retention of the professional who combines the talents of architect and engineer is fully justified. But on the other hand one cannot help observing that the recent introduction of a new type of design aesthetic using new forms and materials calls for a certain amount of specialisation. Perhaps the ideal solution to these two con-

10. *A.O.M.* 1123, pp. 85-6.

11. Mifsud Bonnici, R., *Dizzjunarju Bijo-Biblijografiku Nazzjonali* (Malta, 1960), p. 422.

12. "Architecture in Malta", address delivered by Robert Galea on the occasion of the re-opening of the Royal University of Malta on the 1st October 1914. See also Statute of the University of Malta for 1915.

13. Degiorgio, R., article in *Sunday Times of Malta Supplement*, 10th August 1969. The chamber of Architects and Civil Engineers was founded in 1920.

flicting demands of everyday role and new aesthetic calls for a professional who has received the basic training of a Perit but who has been given the option at some time during or after his University Course to specialise either in the art of design or in the science of engineering. Such a solution would have the advantage of preserving the historical identity of the Maltese perit while at the same time improving his abilities in a particular branch of his practice — an improvement which would surely give a new and more refined look to the future building of Malta.

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