

THE CONTRIBUTION OF FRANCOIS DE MONDION IN THE ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF 18TH CENTURY MALTA

The name of François de Mondion is first mentioned in a letter sent by King Louis XIV of France to Grandmaster Fra Ramon Perellos dated 26th January 1715 (1). Mondion's qualifications and background are explained in further correspondence exchanged between the French Minister of War Monsieur Le Pelletier de Souzy and the Grandmaster. In this second letter (2) Mondion is introduced as a talented military engineer born in Paris who had studied his profession under the guidance of Sebastien Le Pestre de Vauban, Marshal of France (3).

It would seem that François de Mondion first came to Malta as a deputy engineer in the Tigne mission of 1715 which had as its official objective the updating of the defences of Malta following the threat of a Turkish invasion (4). As things turned out, Mondion managed in an admirably diplomatic fashion, to extricate himself from the Tigne mission and to obtain permanent residence in Malta as a 'Cavaliere di Grazia' in the French Langue of the Order (5). As 'Commissario dell'Opere della Sacra Religione', his great opportunity came in 1722 when an admirer of his, Fra Manoel de Vilhena, was elected to the Magistracy of the Order. In this respect the translated version of a letter (6) signed by the Order's ambassador in Paris, Bailly des Mesmes, is significant:

Having been informed of the goodness with which your Eminence has received Chevalier de Mondion on your election to the Magistracy, I feel that I must take this opportunity to recommend him to you and to ask you to show him all those marks of respect which I dare say he deserves for the pains and cares he takes for the well-being of the Religion. Facts have shown that he has attached himself to Your Order with all possible disinterest and has sacrificed twenty years of service in France with the approval of his superiors in order to give it entirely to your illustrious Order. He seems to have preferred the honour of being in Malta to all the glory and rewards which he had good reason to expect in view of his ability

1. National Library of Malta, [A]rchives of the [O]rder of [M]alta, 1301, f. 50.
2. A.O.M. 1301, f. 52.
3. M. de la Chenaie-Desbois, 'Dictionnaire De La Noblesse' Tome XII Paris 1778.
4. A.O.M. 1301, f. 54; A.O.M. 6552.
5. Libr. 386, f. 157.
6. A.O.M. 1219, f. 401.

and good services. The gratifications that he was about to receive from the Court have had for him no claim and have not induced him to remain in Paris — he has thought it appropriate to spend the rest of his days in the service of the renowned Order of your Eminence. For this reason alone he has left his family and has renounced the bright future which the post of engineer offers. I am convinced that your Eminence will be judicious enough to reward him with certain benefices which will sustain him, this on the understanding that he expects this much from your well-known generosity.

On his election to the Grandmastership on the 19th June 1722 (7), Vilhena seems to have abided by his ambassador's advice for between 1722 and 1725 Mondion had his hands full with the design and execution of at least seven major projects:

- (1) The completion of Grandmaster Perellos' programme of updating the harbour area fortifications (8) including the building of the so-called Calcara magazines in Floriana which were eventually built to Mondion's design using the type of elliptical arches which were to re-appear in his later designs for Fort Manoel (1725) and Vilhena Palace in Mdina (1726). Also the design of the Polverista Gate at Cottonera (1722) and the Couvre Porte and the Advanced Gate at Vittoriosa (1722-3).
 - (2) The preparation of site surveys, design drawings and detail sheets as well as the actual execution of a scheme for the building of a new fort on the Izolotto, this on the basis of an earlier report and plan drafted by Mondion in 1715 (9). Of particular interest in Mondion's preliminary and final plan for Fort Manoel is his concentration on the design of the outworks and the internal planimetry (10) based on the novel feature of having a raised parade ground.
 - (3) The preparation of design drawings for a new fortress on Gozo which was meant to occupy the site of the later Fort Chambray (1749). The drawings of this fort seem to have been completed by October 1722 for in a letter dated 16th October, 1722 (11) addressed to the Order's ambassador in Rome, Vilhena asked Spinola to forward Mondion's
7. A.O.M. 133 and 1219; correspondence.
 8. A.O.M. 1301, ff. 57-107.
 9. A.O.M. 1301, f. 181.
 10. N.T.P. Cooper, 'Malta — The Story of Manoel Island', Malta 1952.
 11. A.O.M. 1484, no pagination; A.O.M. 6557.

plans to a special commission set up by the Pope for approval of the necessary financial aid required for its realisation. It is relevant to point out that in this letter, Vilhena referred to his engineer Mondion as a person "who merits all esteem for his singular virtues and unparalleled experience in these matters".

- (4) The setting out and building of a new suburb situated between the Valletta and Floriana defences on the general guidelines laid out in the late 17th century by the engineer Maurizio Valperga (12). The gridiron street network of Floriana showed similarity to a planned extension of Bormola drawn up by Mondion in 1718. Included in the Floriana project was Mondion's design for Porte des Bombes following the completion of which Tigne commented that Mondion had within a short time "managed to convert the Floriana landfront into one of the most beautiful and respected in Europe" (13).
- (5) The restoration of the old town of Mdina which was partly destroyed by earthquake shock in 1693 (14). Mondion's activity at Mdina included the updating of the main landfront fortifications with the addition of outworks based on calculations used by Vauban; the replanning of the main entrance area of the town where the irregular medieval planimetry was replaced by a straight forward baroque formula; the design and execution of several buildings including the Main Gate (15), Greek Gate (16), the Magisterial Palace (17), the Municipal Palace (18), the small church of St. Rocco (19), several storage magazines and a number of smaller buildings including an armoury. There is also a strong possibility that Mondion was actively involved in the design and building of the Archbishop's Seminary (20).
- (6) The establishment of a workable network of coastal defences based on batteries, redoubts and entrenchments (21) which were meant to supplement the forts and towers of the 17th century. In 1723 Mondion

12. A.O.M. 6552, ff. 50-60v.

13. A.O.M. 1301, f. 153.

14. Mdina Cathedral Archives, Ms. 62, f. 63.

15. National Library of Malta, [Univ]ersità, Ms. 27 and 95.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Univ. 27 and 96; Mdina Cathedral Archives, Ms. 60, f. 23-4.

18. Univ. 27 and 96; Univ. 96, p. 521.

19. Mdina Cathedral Archives, Ms. 60, f. 19.

20. Mdina Cathedral Archives, Ms. 172, f. 123.

21. R. Vertot, "Histoire des Chevaliers Hospitaliers de St. Jean de Jerusalem", Paris 1726.

persuaded Grandmaster Vilhena to fortify the Great Fault so that work was started simultaneously at three points — Naxxar Gap, Falca Gap and Bingemma Gap (22), this in anticipation of 19th century British strategy.

- (7) The preparation of drawings and the overall supervision of various projects contained in the document entitled 'Cabreo della Fondazione Manoel' (1734) (23). These projects included the building of Leone Palace at Hamrun and its adjacent gardens and the erection of seven windmills in various localities.

In 1726, Mondion was assigned the task of carrying out two additional projects, namely, the building or modification of seven hospitals and charitable institutions in Malta and Gozo (24) and the rebuilding of several blocks in Valletta in the area of the site reserved for a new theatre. There is documentary evidence to show that in 1733, the year marking Mondion's premature death, Grandmaster Vilhena had asked his engineer to start work on a new Municipal Palace for Gozo which, together with his earlier hospital of San Giovanni Battista, formed the basis of a much needed building spree of private housing in the suburb of the Old Medieval Castello, of the South Italian hilltop type.

Two interesting references to François de Mondion occur in the inscription which marked the engineer's tombstone in the crypt of Fort Manoel Chapel (25) and in an entry dated 25th December 1733 in the Order's register of deceased Knights (26). The description of Mondion as 'Architectus Polemicus' and 'Praefectus Bellicarum Artium' in the above documents throw considerable light on the role of the engineer in Malta during the period 1715—1733 when he was responsible for the execution of the above-mentioned projects. One plausible explanation would be that Mondion, while being a properly trained engineer who had been apprenticed to the then late Marshal de Vauban (d. 1707), lacked any formal training as an architect in the Italian interpretation of the word. In the circumstances it would seem that due to his position as 'Commisario dell'Opere' during Grandmaster Vilhena's principate, Mondion was, like his old mentor Vauban, given a carte blanche to practise both military engineering and architecture. It would therefore seem plausible to assume that Mondion considered himself to be an architect by reason of his position rather than because he had received any formal training in the field. In this respect it

22. A.O.M. 1032, ff.18-27. Also various plans in the National Library of Malta.

23. National Library of Malta, "Cabreo della Fondazione Manoel" (1734).

24. A.O.M. 384, no pagination.

25. Libr. 390, no pagination; Libr. 386, f. 155-7.

26. Libr. 390, no pagination; A.O.M. 1948, f. 75.

would be relevant to point out that Mondion's buildings in Malta, particularly his approach to the more delicate problems of composition, did not go far beyond the expected output of a skilled 'Capomastro' with an impeccable knowledge of building construction, a thorough knowledge of the many illustrated textbooks on architecture available and, most important of all, with plenty of good common sense. What is important, however, is that Mondion, together with his staff which included the Italian designer Carapecchia, succeeded for the first time to introduce into Malta not only the then fashionable French flair for flawless stereotomy but also the main grammatical elements of the style of architecture known as the baroque. At Floriana, to mention one example, Mondion introduced the concept of the arcaded avenue designed to emphasise the importance of the people who were driven along it in gilded carriages and the menacing power of smartly uniformed troops marching along a straight line. At Fort Manoel, Mondion introduced another typical baroque feature — a raised parade ground rigidly contained within a formal arrangement of military barracks and dominating an extensive system of fortification works based on mathematically-designed outworks designed in the tradition of Vauban's classic Neuf-Brisach. At Mdina, finally, in what appears to be the salient point of his career, Mondion introduced the baroque principle of a monumental gateway providing access to a directional space flanked by a palace planned on the model of a typical Parisian hotel. There is also here an attempt at baroque cajolery evident in the way in which the designer used a monumental facade, a stage setting in fact, to conceal a relatively shallow building and a number of old private houses. These then were some of the principles of baroque design with which Mondion, brought up in the Paris of Louis XIV, was so well acquainted and which, with the tacit approval of the shrewd politician that was Vilhena, he managed in a short span of time to introduce into Malta. Therein lies the essence of his achievement, his major contribution to the architectural development of 18th century Malta. Doubtlessly, the pleasing personality with which the documents credit him (27), his personal talent and the important contacts which he had in France particularly among the engineers on the sensitive Belgian frontier, (his colleague Tigne was in charge of the important frontier fortress at Arras) contributed in no small way to the extent of this achievement.

Mondion's death occurred unexpectedly on Christmas Day, 25th December, 1733 when he was fifty years of age (28). According to his last wish and to the evidence of a tombstone bearing his coat of arms, he was buried within the crypt of the small chapel of St. Anthony of Padua situated within the walls

27. Libr. 386, f. 157.

28. A.O.M. 1948, f. 75.

of Fort Manoel. Perhaps the greatest tribute to his considerable work in Malta occurs in the introductory address to the beautifully illustrated document known as the "Cabreo della Fondazione Manoel" (29):

What remains in order to complete this great work is a description of all the funds acquired in order to inform future generations about the pains taken to ensure the good government of this most noble foundation. Most of the designs and notes have been executed to this effect under the diligent direction of the Knight de Mondion who, during his lifetime, has merited the esteem of Your Eminence. Following his immature demise, I have completed the work according to the command of Your Eminence. Happy are your subjects if, with their prayers, they can acquire for him everlasting life in heaven with innumerable and unending blessings which would compliment all those favours which Your Eminence has so rightly lavished on him during a comparatively short time.

29. Libr. 1375 — Fondazione Manoel.

Piwa fief'Psefa'e r' Goto
ju'ka'a ta'ijSw P'ntim*

nef 1726.

3a. FRANCOIS DE MONDION: Plan
of Gozo Hospital 1726.

3b. FRANCOIS DE MONDION: Sec-
tional drawing of the Kalkara Maga-
zines. Elliptical arches were also used
by Mondion at Fort Manoel and at
the Magisterial Palace, Mdina.