

# Carapecchia's intervention at the Inquisitor's Palace - 1733-34

Kenneth Gambin

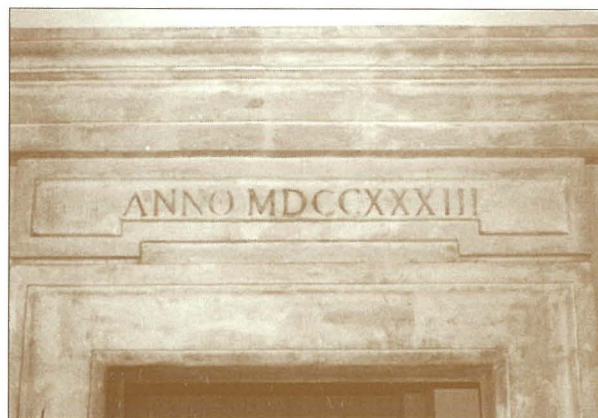
The Inquisitor's Palace, sited in the heart of the historical city of Vittoriosa, is one of the very few surviving palaces of its kind which in the early modern period could be found all over Europe and South America. Many simply succumbed to the ravages of time or else were victims of the reactionary power unleashed by the French Revolution. Fortunately, the Maltese Inquisitor's Palace, throughout its five centuries of history, always hosted high-ranking officials representing the main powers on the island, who ensured its survival. The Palace also managed to survive through the ordeal of the Second World War and the threat of modern development, and although much has been changed in its structure by its successive occupants, it is today an architectural gem, representative of the chequered history of the Maltese islands.

Yet, until now, our knowledge of the Palace and its history remained very incomplete, and all one can find is small pieces of information scattered here and there in various sources. The history of the Palace received a boost last year with the publication of three previously unknown plans of the building discovered in Rome.<sup>1</sup> Yet much still remains to be done in foreign as well as (as in this case) in local archives, in order to fully appreciate the history and vicissitudes of the Inquisitor's Palace, especially when placed in a wider Maltese and European context.

## *The background*

The *Palazzo del Sant'Officio* was not built purposely as a residence for the inquisitors of Malta. The Palace was built in the 1530s by the Order of St John as their civil courts and it served that purpose until 1571, when the Order transferred its headquarters to Valletta. It remained vacant for three years, until 1574, when it was given to Mgr Pietro Dusina, the first General Inquisitor and Apostolic Delegate of Malta, to be used as his residence. In the first decades of the Holy Office in Malta the Palace was considered unsuitable and inhospitable by the high ranking dignitaries who had to reside in it, and they tried to transform it into a more suitable place. Letters by local inquisitors to the Holy Congregation in Rome are, in fact, replete with references to the need for repairs and embellishments in various parts of the Palace. Major restructuring works were carried out by Inquisitor Fabio Chigi in the 1630s, Inquisitor Gerolamo Casanate in the 1660s, and Tommaso Ruffo in the 1690s. The next major development took place in the 1730s.

Inquisitor Giovanni Francesco Stoppani arrived in Malta in March 1731. Apparently he had been briefed by his predecessor, Fabrizio Serbelloni, about the works which were planned for the Inquisitor's Palace. Serbelloni, in fact, had already planned - and obtained permission from his superiors of the Holy Congregation in Rome - to carry out restructuring works at the Inquisitor's Palace: the replacement of the beamed ceilings of the three halls of the *Piano Nobile*.<sup>2</sup> The commencement of works, however, had to be postponed, since the wood which had been ordered directly from Venice for the beams (it was cheaper than if it had been ordered locally) had not yet arrived. Stoppani, on his part, did not simply wait. Barely a month after his arrival, he had reconfirmed the need for the structural repairs by commissioning two carpenters, Antonio Fiteni and Giuseppe Azzopardo, to give him a condition report of the state of conservation of the said ceilings. They asserted that the *travi non sono più in stato da poter soffrir il peso cha hanno anzi chiaramente si vede che minacciano rovina*. According to their estimate, the cost of their replacement would have amounted to 1,250 *scudi Maltesi*.<sup>3</sup>



*MCCCXXXIII: 1733 - the year in which the entire project was planned and executed was recorded on the lintel of the door facing the Bibliotheca*

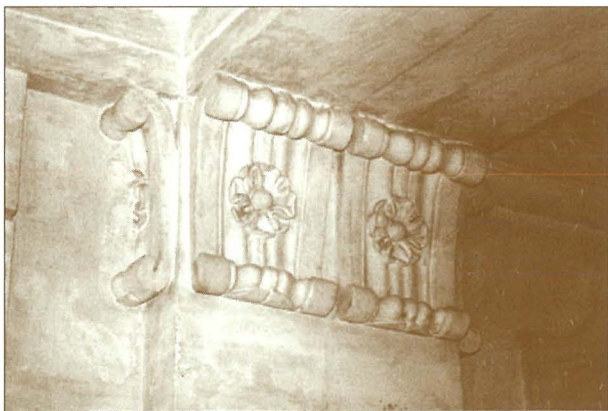
This report was sent to Rome for approval by the Holy Congregation,<sup>4</sup> which on its part instructed Stoppani to proceed *secondo il suo arbitrio e prudenza*.<sup>5</sup> Basing himself on this report, therefore, Stoppani's initial plans were to refurbish the halls of the *Piano Nobile*. The wood which had been ordered from Venice arrived in Malta only in 1733. Work on the ceilings commenced immediately. However, while the works were in progress, unexpected abundant rains caused one of the walls of the main hall to absorb much more water than usual. As a result it collapsed onto the main staircase.





The coat of arms of the Roman Inquisition designed by Carapeccchia for the ceiling of the main staircase. The 37 (?canne) of tela used for the coat of arms were sewn by Maestro Lorenzo Borg. It was fixed to the ceiling with 10 migliari di chiodetti, and pittore Gio. Antonio [ ] took care of the stucco and the painting (fols 368-72)

Even the prison cells were at risk of not being utilised. According to Stoppani, the principal cause of such a collapse was the soil which the Maltese used to build with instead of lime. The damage was so extensive that Stoppani had to seek temporary alternative accommodation for himself and his staff for up to six months in a nearby residence, for which he had to pay rent. This was an added burden for the Inquisition Tribunal, since, the financial situation of the Holy Office was far from being a happy one.<sup>6</sup>



A detail of Carapeccchia's architectural design

This dramatic situation needed some quick thinking and decision taking. Stoppani was quick to react. His first decision was to reconstruct the staircase as it was before, making use of the arch which used to support it. But

after having certified that this was in an imminent state of collapse, he thereupon immediately decided to embark on a more extensive and ambitious project for the Inquisitor's Palace as a whole. Instead of simply refurbishing the halls of the *Piano Nobile*, he resolved to reconstruct a new majestic entrance to the Palace together with the main staircase *con simetria e decoro corrispondente al corpo dell'edifizio*, ensuring that it became the centre-piece of the whole Palace, *ritoccando le adiacenti stanze ed officine che la cingono come nel centro del Palazzo*. Once he was at it, Stoppani also built the *Bibliotheca*, the secondary flight of stairs which leads to the second floor, reconstructed a section of the prison complex, enlarged the Family's quarters, gave a facelift to the garden (reference to *battumatori per il giardino*), constructed a passageway which links the Ruffo Apartments to the auditor's offices, and constructed a new drainage system for the Palace, whose foundations were accumulating unnecessary amounts of water to the detriment of the whole building. Possibly, he also reconstructed part, if not all, of the chapel, which is in the main hall of the *Piano Nobile*.



The remains of the colossal sculpture with three papal coat of arms and a replica of the original inscription put in place by Vincenzo Bonello in 1930 (see Carapeccchia's plan)

That this was a massive project is clear from the register which the meticulous *procuratore* of the Holy Office, B. Ciantar, used to list down to the slightest detail regarding all the different types of works which were being carried out, including the workers, their different tasks, their 'salary scale', the materials they used and for what, and all the various expenses.<sup>7</sup> The work went on uninterrupted for one whole year, from July 1733 to July 1734, involving in all 150 workers working 5 to 6 days a week, ranging from 17 *falegnami* (carpenters), 15 *battumatori* (earth-beaters), 2 *pittori* (painters), 5 *muratori* (stone masons), 7 *stuccatori* (plasterers), one *ferraro* (blacksmith), one *guardiano* (watchman), 4 *scultori* (sculptors), one *vitraro* (glazier), one *cugitore* (tailor), 88 *manoali/lavoratori/ragazzi* (labourers), and 6 *schiavi* (slaves), including 17 *Maestri* (skilled craftsmen). The original nucleus of workers was kept throughout, but constant recruitment and changes kept going on as the works progressed, also dictated by





Three views of the main staircase of the Inquisitor's Palace during restoration by Vincenzo Bonello in 1930

necessity, (eg. the *battumatori* were not needed from the start, but only after the new beamed roofs were put in place). By May 1734 the bulk of the project must have been over since there was a drastic decrease in the number of workers and in their load.

The large scale of the project could also be gathered from a quantitative analysis of the materials used: a total of 153 *salme* of *calce* (lime), and 6,223 *cariche* (?cart loads) of stones (excluding a considerable number of *balate, dadi, capitelli, mensole, chiavi, cantoni, and scaline* - the majority from a quarry in Santa Venera), and *turba* (earth material) and *arena* (sand) from St Julian's, and *terracotta* and *puzzolana* from Rabat. The proper understanding of the materials used, including a lot of details on Baroque interiors and artists' techniques - which still have to be studied fully - should be of great interest to present-day architects, conservators and restorers.

Fully aware of the bureaucracy of Rome, but also because the circumstances (as described above) so dictated (*non ammettea consiglio*), Stoppani took the initiative to authorise the new project himself without previously obtaining the go-ahead from Rome, as he was bound to do. Not having enough money to finance this project, he decided to make use of the accumulated funds of the local office of the *Reverenda Fabbrica di San Pietro* (which also operated from the Inquisitor's Palace) for the purpose. He informed the Holy Congregation of his financial 'policy' and of the whole project, including the plans and elevations for approval, only one week after the work was completed, taking the maximum advantage of the communication difficulties and of the particular circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Stoppani's tactic seems to have been intentional, since it appears that he did not even refer once to the works in progress at the Palace in

his numerous letters to the Holy Congregation while the works were still going on. Probably, what convinced Stoppani to keep a very low profile on this project was the sum total of the entire plan, which amounted to 5,243 *scudi*.<sup>9</sup>

Another underlying reason why Stoppani would have embarked on such an extensive project was that of status. In a society which put a lot of emphasis on façade effect, protocol and the order of precedence, the Palace was considered to be the outward sign of the splendour of a family or institution. It was used to impress and command deference, even if it masked onerous debts.<sup>10</sup> Conspicuous consumption was a value widely shared by eighteenth century European society as a form of communication: 'to be distinguished from others, whether equals (and therefore rivals), or inferiors'.<sup>11</sup> In other words, besides the real necessity to construct a new staircase, the project would also have been undertaken for what it symbolised, for its contribution to a particular image which the inquisitor wanted to project of himself and of the Inquisition in general.<sup>12</sup> As Inquisitor Giacomo Caracciolo instructed his successor Ranieri d'Elci in 1710, *conviene all'inquisitore di Malta il trattarsi splendidamente ... poiche in questa forma ... concilia gran rispetto*.<sup>13</sup> In Stoppani's case the immediate intended receivers of this kind of message would have been the Bishop of Malta and the Grand Master; more the latter than the former. The reigning Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena has in fact been described as 'a great prince determined to transform Malta into a typical Baroque State' through his intense building activity.<sup>14</sup> It was precisely during this period that the Grand Master was erecting the beautiful magisterial palace of Mdina (*Palazzo Vilhena*). Stoppani obviously did not want to be any less, and he probably grasped this opportunity to demonstrate his power.

It was precisely the staircase which acted as the definite architectural point of reference in which this social discourse took place.<sup>15</sup> It was in itself an important vehicle of diplomacy since one's social standing was acknowledged precisely by the point in the staircase in which the Inquisitor received his guests. The paying of calls in fact was so important that it required specific instruction books setting forth its principles and details. Even the inquisitors of Malta had their own manual which they used in such occasions.<sup>16</sup>

Actually it appears that Stoppani, as a man of his times, was very keen on his social standing, and he took full advantage of this particular situation to transform the Palace to satisfy his requirements and aspirations. During his tenure of office, in fact, he also protested with his superiors in Rome that certain Maltese jurats were using four horses to pull their carriage, while he had only two. Stoppani therefore was given permission to use up to six horses to pull his carriage since he held a much more important position.<sup>17</sup>

#### *The architect*

A key entry of this document is without any doubt that of 19 April 1734 concerning the mind behind such a project: the architect

*Per 24 Zecchini Magistrali dati al Molt' Illustrate Signore Fra Romano Carapecchi[a] come architetto per aver fatto il disegno della scala, ed assistito diverse volte nell'esequione del suo disegno: 102 scudi*<sup>18</sup>

Romano Carapecchia arrived at the court of the Order of St John in 1707 and he remained in Malta right up to his death in 1738. At the time of his arrival, the Baroque spirit was still lacking in Malta.<sup>19</sup> Throughout his 31 years of residence on the island, however, Carapecchia managed to 'draw early eighteenth century architecture in Malta within the mainstream of this great European cultural movement' through his 'constant search for new solutions', 'intensive creative drive' and 'superb technical skill', especially during the magistracy of Grand Master Vilhena.<sup>20</sup>

Many of the buildings which were being erected in Malta at this time have the imprint of Carapecchia on them. Some of them, such as the Manoel Theatre, the church of St Catherine of Italy in Valletta, and Palazzo Spinola in St Julian's, just to mention a few, are very well known. Others, however, are less known, while others still remain unknown. Fortunately, the existence of an album of architectural drawings authored by Carapecchia himself at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London has enabled Arch. Denis De Lucca to produce a very interesting book on this architect and thereby making known many of Carapecchia's masterpieces and his overall contribution to Malta's architectural history.

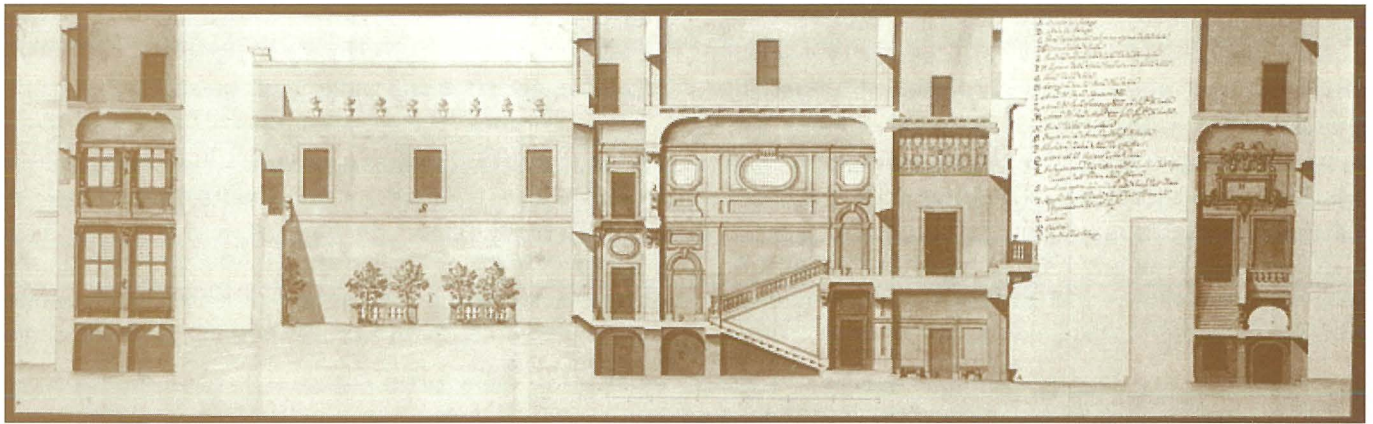
Carapecchia was a very busy professional in 1733. He had just been approached by the Bailiff Fra Gio. Battista Spinola to enlarge and enhance his palace in St Julian's bay.<sup>21</sup> Besides, Carapecchia was also engrossed in designing a new monastery for the Franciscan Minor Conventuals of Valletta, and a new parish church of St Publius in Floriana.<sup>22</sup> In addition, it is now clear that Carapecchia was also commissioned by Inquisitor Stoppani to design a new majestic entrance and main staircase for the Inquisitor's Palace after the accidents described above.

This staircase has been described as having 'an important niche in the history of Maltese staircases' since from it eventually evolved other important ones such as that of the Augustinian Priory at Rabat (1740), the Auberge de Castille (1741), and the National Museum of Fine Arts (1761).<sup>23</sup>

It is also apparent that Carapecchia did not just limit himself to design the project, but he also firmly engaged himself in its execution. It is not difficult to imagine him interacting with the *maestri* and workers mentioned above, providing several 'inventive ideas' to solve any technical problems which would have inevitably arisen during the actual building process, as he himself had advised architects to do in his *Compendio Architettonico* of the 1680s.<sup>24</sup> It is also not to be excluded that Carapecchia may have designed some alterations to the chapel of the Inquisitor's Palace (whose retaining wall had collapsed as described above), as well as some of the iron brackets and doors and apertures complementary to the project, as he did for St John's Conventual Church.<sup>25</sup> The construction of a new drainage system for the entire Palace could also possibly be a result of Carapecchia's expertise in the realm of water engineering.<sup>26</sup> In any case, considering the extent of the project and the multiple problems it faced and managed to solve at one go, it appears improbable that the contribution of Carapecchia was strictly limited to the design. A master mind would have been needed to envisage these multi-faceted problems and tackle them as one whole.

The design of the Inquisitor's Palace has indeed been published on page 93 of Arch. De Lucca's book (from page 14 of the Conway Album, London). However, it has been attributed to one of Carapecchia's works in Rome: the *Isola Tiberina* project, including the *Fatebenefratelli* Hospital.<sup>27</sup> The two designs on page 13 and 14 of the said album have in fact some similarities (notably the ceiling). However the second one certainly belongs to the 1733-34 plan of the Inquisitor's Palace. Apparently this was an earlier sketch of the project, since some minor details are different from the actual state of the building. The subsequent final design, the original watercolour of which has only lately been found in the





Carapecchia's plan for the main entrance of the Inquisitor's Palace. (From: J. Azzopardi & W. Zammit, 'Inquisitor's Palace in Vittoriosa: Discovery of three original plans in Rome' in *Treasures of Malta*, Easter 1999, pp.15-20).

Vatican archives,<sup>28</sup> matches perfectly with the present day building.

This actually gives rise to two possibilities: either that it is a mistaken attribution, or that Carapecchia recycled his plan of the *Fatebenefratelli* Hospital and adapted it to the Inquisitor's Palace. The second possibility, although not to be discarded, is perhaps unlikely, considering the great ease with which Carapecchia designed (*disegnava a meraviglia*), and the exactness with which it matches that of the Inquisitor's Palace.

From this plan one can also appreciate one of the main traits of Carapecchia as an architect: that of respecting older building fabrics when having to add new sections onto them.<sup>29</sup> He managed to create a magnificent entrance and main staircase to the Palace - complete with a colossal sculpture including three papal coat of arms, an inscription, and the impressive coat of arms of the Roman Inquisition on the ceiling - only with minor interventions on the rooms close to the area intended to be reconstructed. In order to interfere less with the adjoining rooms he lighted the staircase with 'carefully positioned high level windows' as he had done in the nunnery dedicated to St Catherine in Valletta.<sup>30</sup> The façade was also left intact as it had been designed by Francesco Sammut in 1660.

The finished project of the Inquisitor's Palace, the official seat of the Pope's representative in Malta, must have certainly added to the prestige enjoyed by Carapecchia. Actually this was not the first time that Carapecchia had worked closely with the Holy Office. In the 1720s he had been asked to produce a design to replace the existing façade of the church of St Lawrence in Vittoriosa, whose patron was the inquisitor himself (then Antonio Ruffo), who intended to boost his stature as papal legate by enhancing the prestige of 'his' church.<sup>31</sup> Carapecchia must also have collaborated closely with Inquisitor Ruffo when he drew the *Ristretto generale di tutte le Cisterne e Gebbie pubbliche e private...* in all the harbour area, including Vittoriosa and the Inquisitor's Palace in 1723.<sup>32</sup>

This was not the first time that the Holy Office made use of architects of the Order of St John for structural works in the Palace. The same had happened with Giovanni Barbara and Inquisitor Caracciolo in 1707.<sup>33</sup>

Carapecchia's plan of 1733 also allows us to make some wider observations on the Inquisitor's Palace and its history as a building. It is certain that the level above the *Piano Nobile* had been built before 1733 (though definitely not before 1696 since it is not included in the plan of that year). In 1733 the room above the Chancery was in fact used by the *Signor Segretario dell'Illustrissimo e Reverendissimo Mons. Inquisitore*.<sup>34</sup> It is still not known when the upper floor of the Palace was constructed, but it is possible that it was the work of Inquisitor Giacomo Caracciolo (1706-1710) and architect Giovanni Barbara in 1707.<sup>35</sup> The fact that no official records referring to this work have been found so far could arise from the fact that Caracciolo had paid for it from his own pocket and then simply put a plaque in the main staircase as a record of his munificence. However, this does not specify what the work consisted of, and the letter which had been sent to Rome describing the works undertaken<sup>36</sup> has not been traced as yet.

In any case, it is hoped that this discovery sheds more light and engenders more appreciation for the history of the Inquisitor's Palace and its wider significance as part of our European cultural heritage.

#### References

- <sup>1</sup> J. Azzopardi and W. Zammit, 'Inquisitor's Palace in Vittoriosa: Discovery of the three original plans in Rome' in *Treasures of Malta*, Easter 1999, pp. 15-20.
- <sup>2</sup> AIM, Corr.94, f.236v, Serbelloni to Cardinal Ottoboni, 1 October 1729.
- <sup>3</sup> AIM, Mem.5, ff.165-166v, 19 April; 18 June 1731.
- <sup>4</sup> AIM, Cor.94, f.266v, Stoppani to Holy Congregation, 16 July 1731.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Corr.25, f.26, Cardinal Ottoboni to Stoppani, 11 August 1731.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Corr.94, ff.286-287v, Stoppani to Holy Congregation, 16 February 1732.



- <sup>7</sup> AIM, Mem.5, ff.352-382v, *Libro delli pagamenti fatti dal procuratore del Sant Officio alli lavoratori cha hanno lavorato nel Palazzo Apostolico del Sant Officio di Malta per il risarcimento dei soffitti fatti nuovi nella Cancellaria, Sala dei Staffieri, ed Anticamera, nuova loggia, nuova fabrica, ed altro bisognevole dal dì 24 Luglio 1733, sin' oggi dì 16 Luglio 1734.*
- <sup>8</sup> AIM, Corr.95, ff.25v-26v, Stoppani to Holy Congregation, 24 July 1734.
- <sup>9</sup> However, in his letter to Rome Stoppani affirmed that the total cost had amounted only to 1903.34 *scudi*. Was this a result of the difference in the rate of exchange between *scudi Romani* and *scudi Maltesi*?
- <sup>10</sup> R. Cleary, *The Palace Royale and urban design in the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge, 1999), p.12.
- <sup>11</sup> P. Burke, *The historical anthropology of early modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987), pp.132-6.
- <sup>12</sup> P. Burke, 'Res et verba. Conspicuous consumption in the early modern world' in J. Brewer and R. Porter (eds), *Consumption and the world of goods* (London-New York, 1994), p.149.
- <sup>13</sup> AIM, *Memorie*, Vol.1 (Caracciolo), f.18v.
- <sup>14</sup> D. De Lucca, *Carapечchia. Master of baroque architecture in early eighteenth century Malta* (Malta, 1999), p.182.
- <sup>15</sup> P. Waddy, *Seventeenth century Roman palaces. Use and the art of the plan* (New York, 1990), pp.3-8.
- <sup>16</sup> NLM, Lib. Vol.23, f.4, *Trattamenti dell'Inquisitore nel ricevere e rendere le visite.*
- <sup>17</sup> A. Bonnici, *Storja ta' l-Inkizizzjoni ta' Malta*, III (Malta, 1994), p.85.
- <sup>18</sup> AIM, Mem.5, f.370v.
- <sup>19</sup> De Lucca, p.9.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.viii.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.188.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.195.
- <sup>23</sup> L. Mahoney, 'Secular architecture', in *Birgu. A Maltese maritime city*, Vol.II (Malta, 1993), p.446.
- <sup>24</sup> De Lucca, p.47.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.212.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p.263.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.90-6.
- <sup>28</sup> Azzopardi and Zammit, 19.
- <sup>29</sup> De Lucca, p.211.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.133.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.167.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.263-80.
- <sup>33</sup> AIM, Corr. 94, f.134v, Caracciolo to Holy Congregation, 19 October 1707.
- <sup>34</sup> AIM, Mem.5, f.165.
- <sup>35</sup> AIM, Corr.94, ff.134-135, Caracciolo to Holy Congregation, 19 October 1707.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, Corr.19, f.80, Cardinal Marescotti to Gio. Battista Napulone, 22 November 1710.

Dedicated to Vincenzo Bonello, who in 1939 'literally resurrected Carapечchia from total oblivion' (De Lucca, p.vii), and who during the 1920s and 1930s resurrected the Inquisitor's Palace from 'the abundant traces of the awkward and mischievous meddling of man' (MAR, 1925-26, p.xi).