INTERPRETING THE LANDSCAPE OF THE MALTESE ISLANDS

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The Maltese islands, located at the heart of the Mediterranean basin, have throughout their history been ruled by various foreign powers. This paper analyzes the morphology of the local physical environment as a discontinuous historical process, based on the assimilation of urban typologies from both European and Arab contexts. The Maltese landscape is unique in its superimposition of the mutually distinct Islamic and European Baroque urban traditions. The historical transformations of the built environment are interpreted as a product of the intricate and complex dynamics of secular and religious powers. This case study concludes with a conceptual methodological paradigm for interpreting traditional landscapes within the Mediterranean.

Malitah [Malta] . . . rich in everything that is good and in the blessing of God . . . well peopled, possessing towns and villages, trees and fruits, ... Malta abounds in pasture, flocks, fruit, and above all honey.[1]

A TWELFTH-CENTURY DESCRIPTION OF MALTA BY THE MUSLIM GEOGRAPHER, IDRISI.

Melita [Malta] . . . merely a rock barely covered with more than three or four feet of earth, which was strong and very unfit to grow corn. . . . The inhabitants are poor and miserable, owing to the bareness of the soil and the frequent descents of corsairs. . . . There are troglodytes in Malta: they dig caves, and these are their houses.[2]

AN EARLY SIXTEENTH-CENTURY DESCRIPTION OF MALTA BY THE FRENCH CHRONICLER, J. QUINTIN D'AUTUN.

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These two diametrically opposed interpretations of the Maltese landscape in medieval times reflect the contrasting per-

ceptions of visiting Arab and European chroniclers. Both assessments were made relative to the diverse cultural backgrounds of the two men. To Idrisi, Malta appeared to be a potentially fertile land in comparison to the arid land of the Arab regions; whereas to Quintin d'Autun, the islands appeared barren and desolate in contrast to the rich agricultural lands and natural environment in continental Europe.

The Maltese islands, strategically located at the crossroads of the Mediterranean Sea, have throughout their history acted as a cultural bridge between Christian West Europe and the Muslim regions of North Africa and the Middle East (FIG. 1). The islands have been inhabited since prehistoric times, as witnessed by the various Megalithic temple sites dispersed throughout the landscape. Since antiquity, Malta has been host to a wide range of foreign cultures that have included Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs (870—1090), Siculo-Normans (1090—1194), Swabians (1194—1266), Anjevins (1266—1283), Aragonese (1283—1530), Knights of St. John (1530—1798), French (1798—1801), and British (1801—1964).[3] This diverse, multicultural background has determined the distinctive ethnicity, language, religion and social customs of Maltese society through an uneven process of selective assimilation and reinterpretation.

The successive overlaying of cultural elements appropriated from the various foreign rulers is a recurring theme in many aspects of Maltese life. The Maltese language has a predominantly Semitic linguistic structure, derived from the Phoenicians, overlaid with a Romance vocabulary. The amalgamation of two seemingly incongruent linguistic cultures, one borrowed from the Arab Middle East and the other from Southern Europe, is synthesized into a distinct, local language. The same phenomenon applies to settlement patterns. The Maltese landscape is highly discontinuous in its physical structure, reflecting the diverse settlement patterns and urban forms that were introduced over various centuries by Arab and later European cultures.

THE LEGACY OF ARAB SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

The urban morphology of many Maltese towns and villages, although outdating the period of Arab rule, closely resembles that of Middle Eastern settlements. The prevalence of tightly clustered courtyard houses within a highly irregular network of narrow, serpentine streets and dead-end alleys suggests a strong Arab influence.[4] Even the Maltese words used for describing the various physical components of the traditional dwelling unit and village are almost identical to equivalent Arabic terms. Examples include words such as *dar* (house), *setah*

FIGURE 1. *Partial view of a late-eighteenth-century map of the Mediterranean, from the De Fez atlas showing the location of the Maltese islands. (Source: National Library of Malta.)*

(terrace), *bir* (well), *bitha* (courtyard), *suq* (marketplace), and *sqaq* (alley). Even the names of various villages and rural places are Arabic in origin, such as places beginning with the words *ghajn* (water spring), *wied* (ravine), and *zejt* (oil). In the absence of written documentation dating from the Arabic occupation of Malta, the etymology of words related to architectural forms and places provides a valuable source for reconstructing the islands' physical landscape.

The Arabs conquered Malta from Sicily in 870, and they ruled until 1090, when the islands were ceded to the Siculo-Normans. The Arabs introduced to Malta various irrigation techniques to improve the quality of arable farming land. Presumably, the Arabs also introduced the *noria* (Maltese *sinja*), an animal-

driven mechanism used to lift water for irrigation. Although the land was not very fertile because of a lack of water, most of the inhabitants were involved in some form of subsistence agriculture (FIG. 2). Thus, local human settlements in early medieval times were mainly in the form of dispersed small landholdings and farm-type hamlets. This would explain the star-shaped radial development of the later villages, as village dwellers chose to construct their houses in close proximity to their tract of agricultural land.

The Arabs also introduced Western Europe to a variety of new crops. From meager agricultural products such as barley, grain and clover used as animal fodder, a more sophisticated agricultural system developed based on the cultivation of citrus fruits and cotton. The latter product, in particular, became the main economic staple of the island, and was exported in great quantities to nearby countries in the Mediterranean. However, as the production of cotton was very labor intensive and required larger landholdings, there must have been a shift in settlement patterns on the island that favored the formation of larger villages. A number of small hamlets, particularly those dispersed in the outlying coastal regions, were depopulated and eventually became extinct, as larger inland villages flourished and grew in population. This development can also be explained by the need for greater security, as smaller coastal settlements were more exposed to the frequent raids of corsairs seeking to enslave villagers. However, the British historical geographer Brian Blouet, in his research on agricultural and settlement patterns in Malta, makes a convincing argument that one should not overemphasize the preoccupation with defense and its effect on the general landscape.[5] He is of the opinion that it was more the case that the changes in modes of agricultural production dictated the shift in settlement patterns.

Besides local traditional villages organized on an organic model, there were a number of fortified citadels on the islands that served as defensive outposts for the inhabitants. There were two main citadels, one on Malta and the other on the smaller island of Gozo (FIG. 3). The larger citadel on Malta was known as Mdina. Strategically located on the highest terrain of the island, it was ideally suited for defense (FIG. 4). It was from within the enclave of Mdina that the *hakem* ruled over Malta. Outside the fortified citadel was Rabat, a sprawling residential settlement with an intricate web of narrow streets and cul-de-sacs. The relationship of Mdina to Rabat is typical of a number of similar situations in Middle Eastern cities.[6]

Malta's Mdina was derivative of the Arabic *madina*. The term, as used by Muslim geographers, described not just a city but
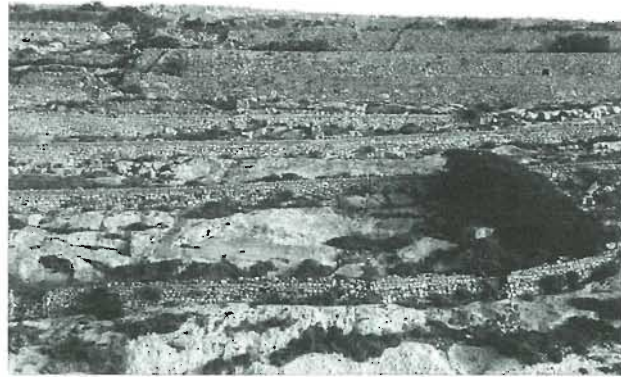

FIGURE 2. (TOP) *Terraced fields in Xlendi, Gozo.*
FIGURE 3. (BOTTOM) *A view of the Cittadella, a defensive citadel on Gozo.*

any place with political (and usually religious) jurisdictional supremacy. The *madina* was basically where justice was administered and where the government had its administrative base.[7] As security was a major concern, the *madina* was usually strategically located and defended by elaborate fortification walls. Mdina served as the main political center in Malta until the Knights of the Order of St. John founded the new city of Valletta in 1566. After that time it was abandoned to the disempowered and disgruntled local nobility.

Arab influence lasted longer than official Arab rule of the islands. But by the time of the Sicilian Vespers at the beginning of the thirteenth century, Malta under the rule of the Siculo-Normans was drawn more into the orbit of Western Europe. Still, it would be incorrect to assume that medieval Maltese society was homogeneous. A population census of 1241 recorded a total of 1,119 families residing in Malta, of which 836 were Muslim, 250 were Christian, and 33 were Jewish.[8] It was only by the late fifteenth century, during Aragonese rule, that Maltese society became almost exclusively Christian. This followed the expulsion of the Jews in 1492 and the forced conversion of the remaining Muslim families.
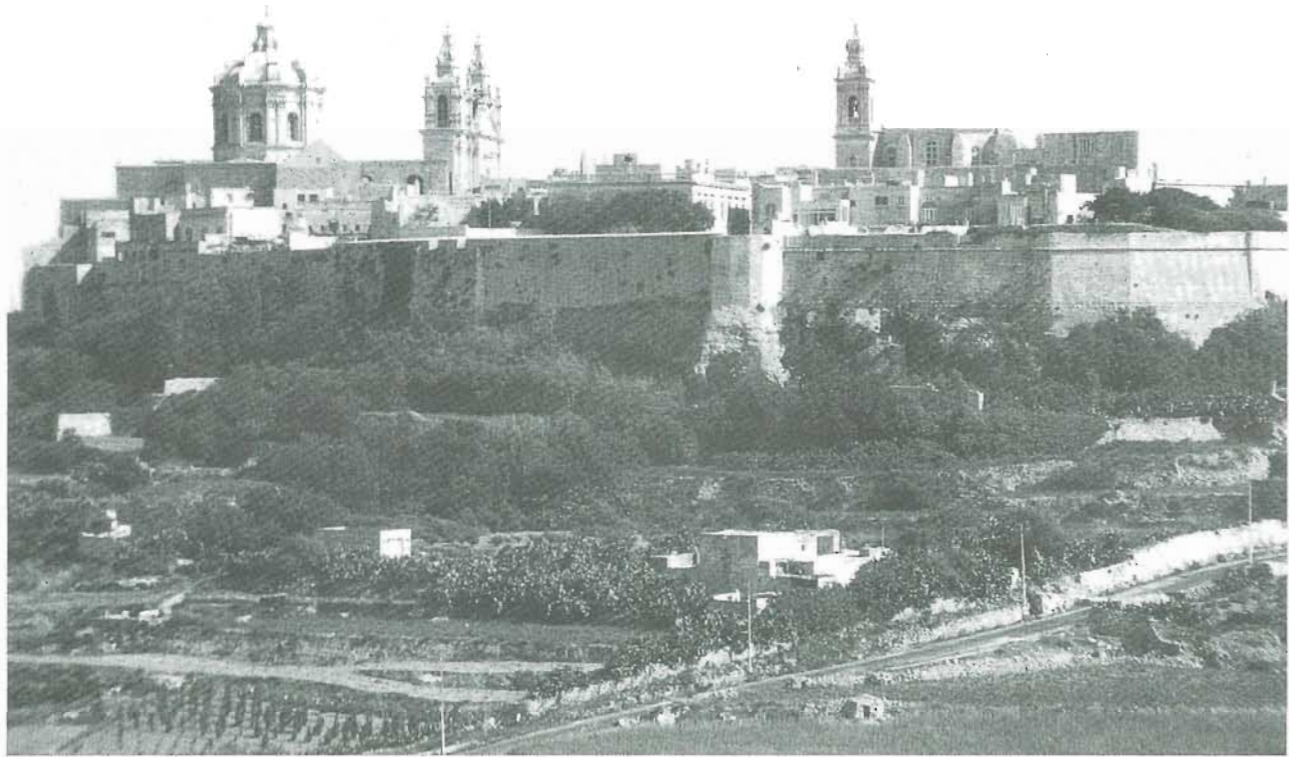
FIGURE 4. *Skyline view of Mdina. (Source: Martin Scerri.)*

THE EUROPEAN URBAN TRADITION IN MALTA

After their expulsion from Rhodes by the Ottoman Turks in 1530, the Knights of the Order of St. John set up base in Malta.[9] At this point Malta became the southernmost outpost of the Christian West European powers, intent on preventing the westward expansion of the Muslim Ottoman Turks (FIG. 5). The islands became a Christian bulwark within the Spanish-controlled axis of the Southern Italian peninsula and Sicily, which served as the dividing line between the Christian and Muslim regions of the Mediterranean.[10] Malta's role as a strategic military outpost had a major impact on the built environment of the island.

The crucial victories attained by West European forces over the Turks at the Great Siege of Malta in 1565 and the battle of Lepanto six years later seriously checked the expansionist aspirations of the Ottoman Empire (FIG. 6). However, the Knights recognized the vulnerability of the islands to future attacks and set out to build extensive fortifications and a new capital city. The only existing urban enclaves, Mdina and the Borgo around Fort St. Angelo, were too small and too spatially restricted to serve the military and religious needs of the Order adequately (FIG. 7). In 1566 the Order of St. John set out to built their own capital city, which they named Valletta after its founder, the French Grand Master Jean de La Vallette.[11] Valletta was to be unlike any previous urban settlement in Malta. It was planned according to a strict gridiron pattern and located on a strategic land peninsula, whose perimeter was to be fortified by massive bastions that would appear to rise straight from the sea.

The Italian military engineer Francesco Laparelli was commissioned with the task of planning the city. In effect, Laparelli's plan for Valletta was a completely foreign model, imported to the islands to serve the military needs of the Order (FIGS. 8,9). It had nothing in common with the organic layout of the local traditional settlements. Valletta, to borrow a term from Spiro Kostof, was a city conceived in the form of an ideal diagram.[12] Laparelli was undoubtedly influenced by the various European Renaissance treatises on ideal cities, particularly those of Cattaneo and Scamozzi.[13] Still, the new city had to accommodate the specific requirements of the Order.

The Order of St. John consisted of seven different *langues,* or languages, representing Knights from various West European countries or provinces. Members of each *langue* would take up residence in an *auberge.* Thus, for example, a Knight from Aragon would belong to the *langue* of Aragon and would live in the Auberge d'Aragon. Laparelli's plan for the city had to provide for the construction of the various *auberges,* the magisterial palace for the Grand Master, the Order's conventual cathedral, and the Order's hospital. There were also a number of churches, private palaces, and ancillary buildings such as the Order's bakery and gunpowder magazine. The location of the different urban components within the city was based on the relative status of a particular *langue* and on various military and functional considerations.[14]

Although this preconceived city plan was based on an external model, the Order still had to come to terms with local conditions. During its stay in Rhodes, the Order had delineated an urban area known as the *collachio* which was separate from the residential area of the city.[15] The *collachio* in Rhodes accommodated the various buildings of the Order within one autonomous spatial enclave. This physical separation from the Rhodian population was deemed desirable to preserve the life-style of the members of the Order, who at that time still lived strictly according to vows of celibacy and obedience. Although the Knights' original intention was to maintain the *collachio* in Malta, for practical reasons and for reasons of limited space it was decided to do away with it in Valletta, and the Knight's usual model of urban segregation was abandoned in favor of a looser demarcation of primary areas within the city.

Physical regularity and rational order characterized the urban morphology of the new city of the Order. To implement the

city plan, the Order issued a set of building regulations intended to produce a unified urban design. For one, there was to be no reselling of sites without the permission of a special building commission, the *Officio della Casa*, set up by the Order.[16] This measure was taken to prevent land speculation. Building work had to start within six months, and the house had to be occupied within a year. Also, the building commissioners established the amount of money to be spent on any structure. This ensured that building would be of a high standard and that there were certain streets where sites could only be acquired if the buyer was prepared to erect a *palazzo*. Building sites were to be allocated "according to the resources and social position of those who will build."[17] This ensured that social stratification was reflected in the urban space of the city. The rational grid was not motivated by any initiative towards a more egalitarian urban society.

Other regulations were more in the form of physical urban-design controls. No front gardens or external staircases were allowed in order to preserve the building line of the street. Corner buildings had to be embellished with proper ornamentation, determined by the commissioners. Also the ornamentation of main doorways was to be supervised by a master mason appointed by the *Officio della Casa*. Emphasis was placed on maintaining high aesthetic standards and a contextually harmonious streetscape. These strict building regulations were not that dissimilar to urban-design codes that had appeared or were to appear in other places in Europe such as medieval Siena and the Baroque cities of St. Petersburg and Paris.[18] But such highly centralized control of design and construction had never before existed in Malta.

Although many illustrious Italian military engineers participated in the design and fortification of Valletta, Maltese architects and master masons were not excluded from the process of making this urban vision a reality.[19] In fact, the Order's local architect, Gerolamo Cassar, was sent to Italy to familiarize himself with late Renaissance and Mannerist architectural works.[20] Upon his return, he was responsible for designing the main buildings of the Order in Valletta. Although the Knights consistently sought to introduce progressive European architectural and city-planning concepts, they were not adverse to allowing skilled local stone masons some artistic license.

TRANSFORMATIONS OF SPACE AND POWER

The rule of the Order of St. John led to a complete realignment of the settlement patterns in the Maltese islands. Once the Order started to exploit the strategic harbors around
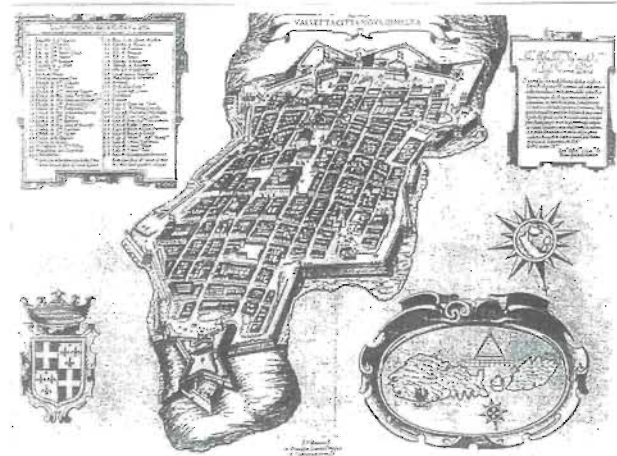

FIGURE 8. (TOP) *The new city of Valletta, from an engraving in Giacomo Bosio,* Istoria della Sacra Religione di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano, *Rome, 1594.*
FIGURE 9. (BOTTOM) *Engraving by Francesco Collignon, Rome, showing the fortifications of Malta around the new city of Valletta, to be built on the central land peninsula. The Three Cities are on the left side, enclosed by the encircling Cottonera lines.*

Valletta, it became inevitable that the main centers of administration and commercial activities would lie in this region (FIG. 10). The Order was by far the major employer on the island, as a substantial number of the local population worked for it in activities such as shipbuilding, construction and maintenance of fortifications, and retailing. The Order was mainly financed by revenue derived from the various European estates of its noble members and from monetary gifts by various Christian European sovereign states.[21] A financial crisis ensued whenever this foreign income was not so forthcoming, such as when the French estates of the Order were confiscated in the aftermath of the French revolution.[22]

During the rule of the Order Malta experienced rapid economic growth, and there occurred a shift to a more diversified

economy from complete dependence on agriculture. This led to a greater urbanization around the harbor areas of Valletta and the Three Cities. Villages experienced considerable population losses, and the old capital, Mdina, languished in a dilapidated state until its urban renewal in the early eighteenth century. Suffice it to say that when the Order came to Malta in 1530, hardly one in ten of the inhabitants could be classified as town dwellers. By the time the Order was expelled by the French in 1798, half the Maltese population lived in the harbor conurbation of Valletta and the Three Cities.[33]

The Maltese landscape evolved over centuries according to a discontinuous historical process based on the assimilation of foreign urban morphologies from the Middle East and Western Europe. It is imperative to discern that the derivation of the Maltese landscape has been based on an evolution reflecting changing socio-political conditions within the islands. One would be mistaken to analyze the local landscape as having been shaped by a homogeneous and monocultural historical process. Such a process never existed. A good illustration is the physical form of the old city of Mdina.

FIGURE 10. (LEFT) *Aerial view of Valletta and its harbors. (Source: MJ Publications.)*
FIGURE 11. (ABOVE) *A medieval street in Mdina dating to the Arab and Siculo-Norman period.*

As described earlier, the genesis of Mdina goes back to the Arab period, and its pattern of narrow streets and alleys was similar to that of Middle Eastern settlements (FIG. 11). During the rule of the Order of St. John, as Valletta flourished, Mdina was rendered politically obsolete, and eventually it became physically dilapidated. The earthquake of 1693 aggravated this urban decay. However, in the early eighteenth century, the Order wanted to restore the old citadel as a showpiece. At this time the earlier urban morphology was altered by the creation of a processional way from the triumphal gate of the city to a grand square, which was carved out in front of a monumental Baroque cathedral, built after the earthquake. Thus, today the physical form of the citadel is disparate; the older part is organic, while the remaining half has been altered by various urban interventions that have included the creation of a regular urban space and the construction of a number of imposing Baroque buildings (FIG. 12).
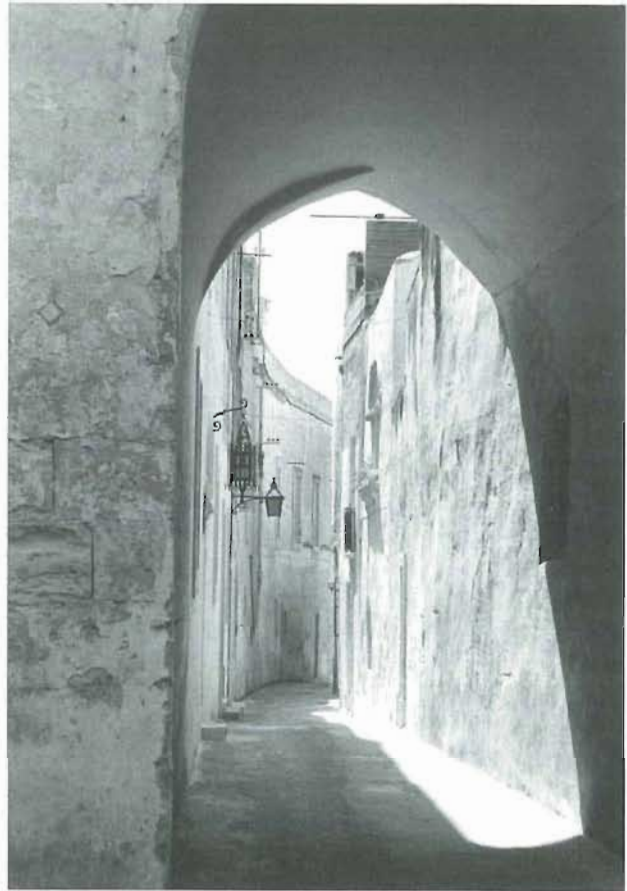
In other words, Mdina's physical form has been shaped by both Arab and European Baroque urban traditions, with Baroque forms being partially superimposed on the preexisting Arab medieval fabric. Such an analysis depends on being able to recognize the culturally diverse urban typologies that have shaped the Maltese landscape over time.

For a more thorough understanding of the Maltese landscape, one has to go beyond the limitations of urban morphology. Aspects such as the social stratification of Maltese society and the role played by the various religious authorities have had an appreciable impact on its formation. A good example is the very intricate and complex issue of local religious powers. During the rule of the Order of St. John (1530—1798) the three main religious authorities were the Grand Master, the Bishop of Malta, and the Inquisitor. The Grand Master, as the head of the Order, was the undisputed sovereign ruler of the

FIGURE 12. *Early-eighteenth-century Baroque entrance to Magisterial Palace. Mdina.*

Maltese islands. The Bishop of Malta was in charge of the diocesan church and controlled the various village parishes dispersed over the island. He owed his candidacy for the bishopric to the Grand Master, but his nomination to the King of Sicily. The Inquisitor was the apostolic delegate of the Vatican and was appointed by the Pope. Although all three gave their unconditional allegiance to the Catholic Church in Rome, there was considerable political intrigue, as each attempted to undermine the other's authority. At times their thinly disguised animosity erupted into bitter, open conflict.[24]

One might question how all of this is relevant to the physical landscape. Yet each of these three religious powers exerted influence through the appropriation of urban space. The Grand Master's palace was the seat of governmental power, and it was located at the center of Valletta, conceived as the city of the Order. The residence of the Bishop of Malta was in the old citadel, Mdina. As head of the diocesan church, he wielded considerable influence over, and received grass-roots support from, clergy dispersed through the various villages.

In times of dissent against taxation measures enacted by the Order, the Maltese Bishop usually became a rallying figure for the disgruntled locals.[25] Finally, the Inquisitor had his palace in the old Borgo. The Inquisitor, as the papal envoy, had special powers to arrest people on the mere suspicion of heresy, and could take individual knights into custody just to spite the Grand Master. All the three factions had staked out their own distinct spatial enclaves from which they operated.

Any attempt to trespass on the jurisdiction of the other was not taken lightly. Since the role and limitations of each religious authority were not clearly defined and there was considerable overlap, there were frequent occasions when conflicts arose. The disputes usually concerned the use of prerogatives, tax exemptions, privileges, and precedents in processions and ceremonies.[26] However, there were also cases when conflict arose due to one party challenging the spatial territory of another. One good example took place during the reign of Grand Master La Cassière (1572—1581).[27] Bishop Tommaso Caligares, moved by a sudden affection for the neighborhood of the Grand Master, started to built an episcopal palace in Valletta. The Council of the Order strongly opposed this, interpreting it as an intrusion in the jurisdiction of the Order within its own city. An injunction suspending construction works was issued, and the matter was only resolved after the intervention of the Papacy. Although the Vatican ruled that the construction of the episcopal palace should be allowed to continue, various concessions had to be made by the Maltese Bishop, including the elimination of planned dungeons.

THE DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE OF TRADITIONAL SETTLEMENTS

So far we have been concerned with a general overview of the various typologies of the Maltese urban landscape and the dynamics of urbanization. But the argument of culturally derived transformations can be extended more specifically to the local domestic environment of the various Maltese towns and villages (FIG. 13). The reign of the Order of St. John was characterized by the evolution of a highly sophisticated public realm that encompassed a number of elaborate public spectacles, rituals and ceremonies. During the celebration of the various feasts, Baroque perceptions of the street as a public theater inverted the older Islamic concept of the streetscape as an impermeable boundary between the public realm and the private interiors of dwelling units. Whereas the Arab-derived courtyard dwelling was highly introverted and gave its back to the public urban space, the opposite was the case with the village house in the Baroque period, whose facade became a backdrop for the street and the square.

The higher the social class of the owner of a Baroque house, the more visually elaborate and ornamented its facade became. Social status and prestige were reflected through the physical image projected within the public domain. And this principle was not limited to the aesthetic treatment of the facade; it also applied to the arrangement of internal domestic spaces. The main formal sitting room, usually containing opulent furniture and crystal chandeliers, was located at the front of the house. Whenever there was a village feast, and particularly during religious processions, the windows and doors of this room would be opened, revealing the full splendor of the interior to other members of the community. In this way, a private internal room had the potential to be utilized as an extension of the public street domain. Domestic space could be externalized as a rhetorical means of projecting an impression of well-being to the community.

Local studies dealing with cultural anthropology, material culture, and folklore customs provide us with invaluable information regarding various aspects of village life in Malta.[28] The celebration of religious festivities entailing the decoration of church facades and streets, the production of statuary, and the appearance of decorative festoons, temporary structures, and fireworks are all part of the rich Baroque culture which still survives to the present (FIG. 14).

In Malta local vernacular expression was assimilated within a more academic monumental tradition. The local architectural historian Jo Tonna, in an essay that explores the interpenetration and cross-fertilization of so-called "high and folk traditions," reconciles the two in the following terms:

> One could examine how elite groups display their values and achievements to the common people and lead the latter to emulate them, how craftsmen simultaneously work in both high and low traditions and mediate between the two, and how organizational measures initiated by the elite deflect folk traditions to new ends or in new directions.[29]

The Knights had sought to project Valletta as the monumental capital of the sovereign and military Order and to impress upon the other European states the Order's growing status and prestige within the Mediterranean region (FIG. 15). Even on a local level, various villages and towns attempted to emulate Valletta's Baroque monuments. Thus, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries many of the village parish churches were completely rebuilt on a much grander scale. And neighboring villages even competed with each other in seeking to build the most imposing and elaborate Baroque church. One can today still identify a village from its skyline, with the distinctive dome of its parish church at its center, towering over surrounding cubic masses of dwelling units.

The Order could draw upon various European sovereigns to supply it with the services of some of the most distinguished foreign military engineers, architects and artists. In fact, the Order, throughout its rule in Malta, always maintained a

FIGURE 13. (LEFT) *Early-twentieth-century view of a typical Maltese village square in Luqa. (Source: Antiquities Archives.)*
FIGURE 14. (BELOW) *A processional triumphal arch erected for a village feast. Rabat.*

resident military engineer, who was usually of French or Italian nationality.[30] Still, the contribution of a number of highly skilled Maltese master masons and stone carvers was invaluable in the transformation of Valletta as a resplendent Baroque capital. There was a symbiotic relationship between the academically trained military engineers of the Order and the skilled Maltese master masons, who were well versed in local tradition. Although the foreign military engineers were active in the building of Valletta, it was mainly the Maltese master masons who disseminated the Baroque tradition in the local villages. It is within the dispersed traditional settlements that one can best experience the blending of the academic Baroque with the deeply rooted vernacular tradition.

A METHODOLOGY FOR ANALYZING THE MALTESE LANDSCAPE

A critical issue in the formulation of an analytical model for interpreting the Maltese landscape is the recognition of the discontinuous historical process by which it evolved over time. In Malta linear historical narratives are not sensitive to the superimposition of distinct urban patterns derived from European and Arab traditions. They usually result in simplistic observations that the two traditions are incompatible and mutually exclusive. Rather, by pursuing an interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond the traditional confines of chronological urban history, one is able to make better connections between landscape, form and culture. A sensitive analytical urban paradigm has to take into account the underlying urban patterns and the various cultural superimpositions in a collage-like manner.

Even within such a small island state as Malta, one can decipher a diverse range of urban typologies. These include Mdina, an organic citadel overlaid with some monumental urban interventions in the tradition of the "Grand Manner," and Valletta, a strict grid city constructed according to a preconceived and ideal geometric diagram that was representative of the absolutist ideology of the Order of St. John. Rural villages provide a third typology, that of organic settlements which grew out of a number of dispersed agricultural communities. The skylines of the Maltese villages with their cubic masses of dwelling units are dominated by the overpowering silhouettes of domed Baroque parish churches. The vernacular skyline can thus be interpreted as a historical text, providing a physical representation of the hegemony of the Catholic Church over the various rural communities, in the same manner that the Mosque, with its distinctive dome and minaret, is representative of the Islamic city.[31]

FIGURE 15. *Baroque Palace in Valletta.*

The formation of the Maltese landscape can be seen as having been derived from larger underlying regional patterns. One cannot afford to overlook externalities such as the geopolitical history of the Mediterranean basin, with its shifts in political and economic power, the relevance of maritime cities in relation to sea trade routes, and the impact on the urban environment by the various European colonizing powers. Cities and countries are very rarely "closed" systems, and it is imperative to consider regional processes of diffusion via geographical, political and cultural patterns.[32] A historical interpretation of the landscape has to go beyond a parochial approach, and has to be seen within the framework of a broader regional context.

This brief outline of the Maltese landscape was based on an interdisciplinary approach that recognizes the validity of a historical and multicultural evolutionary process. As an island state at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, ruled for centuries by diverse foreign powers, Malta is characterized by a layering of human settlement patterns. The Maltese landscape is, in essence, a symbiotic and cultural microcosm within the Mediterranean that bridges the traditional geopolitical divide between Christian West European and Muslim Middle Eastern powers.

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