

## Architettura e trasformazioni urbane di Mdina durante il regno del Gran Maestro Anton Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736)

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*Le origini della città fortificata di Mdina risalgono al periodo romano, anche se i suoi attuali confini furono definiti durante l'occupazione araba di Malta (870-1090 c.). In epoca medievale, durante il dominio aragonese (1283-1530), Mdina o la Città Notabile come era allora conosciuta, fiorì e prosperò come il principale insediamento urbano dell'isola. Tuttavia, con l'arrivo sull'isola dell'Ordine di San Giovanni, nel corso del XVI e XVII secolo Mdina declinò e perse la sua preminenza politica ed economica a vantaggio della nuova "Città dell'Ordine", Valletta. Questo contributo esamina l'impatto del terremoto del 1693 sulla città e l'impegno profuso dalla Chiesa locale nell'opera di ricostruzione nel tentativo di consolidarne il prestigio di antica sede episcopale. La ricostruzione della vecchia cattedrale medievale e la nuova edificazione del palazzo vescovile, e più tardi del seminario, fu parte integrante di una impresa architettonica che il Capitolo della cattedrale condusse con l'obiettivo di rafforzare la sua presenza all'interno della città. Tuttavia nel 1722, con l'elezione del Gran Maestro portoghese Anton Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736), l'Ordine di San Giovanni dimostrò per la prima volta un reale interesse a intervenire entro la città murata. Vilhena avviò un vasto programma di rinnovamento urbano, riconfigurando tutta la zona di ingresso di Mdina, con la costruzione in stile barocco dell'imponente Palazzo Magistrale e Corte Capitanale e della Banca Giuratale. Per Vilhena il rinnovamento urbano di Mdina aveva l'obiettivo politico di trasformarne l'identità da sede del Vescovo e dell'Università a "Città dell'Ordine" in miniatura.*



# Architecture and urban transformations of Mdina during the reign of Grand Master Anton Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736)

Conrad Thake

On 20<sup>th</sup> September 1722, a few months after his election, Grand Master Anton Manoel de Vilhena made his formal entry into Mdina as was the custom whenever a new grand master assumed office (fig. 1)<sup>1</sup>. On the occasion of the *possesso*, the main streets of Mdina were adorned with damask and a temporary triumphal arch was erected on the site adjoining the Banca Giuratale building a few metres away from the Cathedral<sup>2</sup>. Preparations for the event were underway well before the appointed day. The Mdina *Università* had commissioned to Pietro Paolo Troisi (1687-1742) to design and supervise the construction of the temporary triumphal arch (fig. 2)<sup>3</sup>. Troisi's structure was some fifty *palmi* in height and consisted of a grand triumphal archway in the middle which was flanked by a smaller rectangular doorway on each side<sup>4</sup>. The arch was widely acclaimed for its rich colours and paintings which depicted

1. National Library Malta (NLM), Archives of the Order (AOM), ms. 27, *Università*, reg., 1722-1723, ff. 40v-41r.

2. THAKE 1996c, pp. 63-76.

3. Pietro Paolo Troisi was a prolific designer of stage-sets. Educated at the *Accademia di San Luca*, Rome he was a sculptor, engraver and designer of coinage and silverware. His father Carlo Troisi had been the Order's Master of the Mint for over thirty years. In 1730 in a *supplica* addressed to the Grand Master, Pietro Paolo requested that he succeed his father as *M.ro della Zecca*. His request was acceded to and he designed some of the finest coinage minted during the rule of the Order. AOM, ms. 1187, ff. 120-120v. BRIFFA 2009.

4. NLM, AOM, ms. 27, *Relazione del Suntuoso Possesso preso sotto li 20 Settembre 1722...*, ff. 20-21; Vilhena's triumphal arch was remodelled from a similar arch which was used during the *possesso* of Grand Master Zondadari, two years earlier.



Figure 1. Laurent Cars, *Grand Master Anton Manoel de Vilhena*, engraving (from Abbé René-Aubert de Vertot, Conte Antonio Cavagana Sangiuliani di Gualdana, *Histoire des Chevaliers Hospitaliers de S. Jean de Jerusalem: appelez depuis les Chevaliers de Rhodes et aujourd'hui les Chevaliers de Malthe*, volume IV, 1726, Rollin, Quillau and De Saint, Paris - C. Thake collection).

allegorical scenes relating to the Order. Allegorical figures representing Faith and Fortitude depicted a triumphant Order amidst war trophies and other military paraphernalia, in the act of vanquishing its enemies. The arch was decorated with branches of laurel leaves, emblems and insignia of the Manoel family and inscriptions inscribed in gold characters praising the newly elected grand master. A bust of Vilhena and his family coat-of-arms were prominently displayed over the central arched opening, while the imperial eagle insignia of the Kingdom of Sicily crowned the upper tier of the structure. The latter being a symbolic gesture that the Order possessed the island in fiefdom from the Spanish crown as had been established in the sixteenth-century charter with Charles V<sup>5</sup>. However, Vilhena's ambitions for the walled city of Mdina went far beyond purely ephemeral imagery. Unlike his predecessors who were disinterested in the city's plight, Vilhena was determined to intervene directly in restoring Mdina to

The procurator of the Benedictine monastery was paid the sum of 42 *scudi* for returning Zondadari's arch. NLM, AOM, ms. 1397.

5. *Ibidem*.



Figure 2. Pietro Paolo Troisi, design of a triumphal arch erected for Grand Master Vilhena's *possesso* of Mdina, 20 September 1722. Pen, ink and wash drawing, 45 x 32 cm. Mdina, Archives of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Malta.

its former glory. The Grand Master was politically motivated to assert the Order of St John's absolutist power throughout the territory of the Maltese islands.

This paper will focus on the physical interventions and major urban morphological changes of Mdina from a socio-political perspective. Whereas past academic research on Mdina has tended to interpret these transformations as a natural outcome of Malta's historical narrative, I will argue that the architecture and urban renewal of Mdina during the magistracy of Grand Master Vilhena was motivated primarily by an acute political and rhetorical agenda that was intended to counteract and diminish the prevailing influence of the Diocesan church within the walled city<sup>6</sup>.

### *Mdina in the early eighteenth century*

Mdina, the ancient capital of Malta, is an exquisite, immaculately preserved citadel perched on a strategic outcrop in the north-west territory of the island (fig. 3)<sup>7</sup>. The *Città Notabile* is a microcosm of the history of Maltese architecture, urbanism and landscape. It retains physical vestiges of each of the cultures that occupied the Maltese islands – the Romans, Arabs, Aragonese and the knights of the Order of St John. However, when the Order first settled in Malta in 1530 their first base was not Mdina but Birgu given its strategic location within the Grand Harbour and later, in the aftermath of the Great Siege of 1565, they embarked upon the construction of a new city that would be called Valletta<sup>8</sup>. With the definitive move of the knights to Valletta in 1571, Mdina had lost the socio-economic and political preeminence that it previously enjoyed. By the time that Vilhena acceded to power in 1722, the Order of St John was undergoing a serious identity crisis. The military and religious Order had ceased to be a major political force. The chivalric Order was intrinsically a medieval institution dating from the time of the religious crusades. Although the knights had constantly maintained their militia and fleet, they could no longer compete with the powerful European nation-states that had emerged during the late-seventeenth and eighteenth century. With the decline of the Ottoman naval forces the Mediterranean Sea was no longer the principal battleground for on-going power struggles. By the early-eighteenth century, Papal Rome and Spain were spent political powers, whereas England, France and Hapsburg Austria were on the rise and vied against each other to wield more political and economic influence<sup>9</sup>.

6. For a comprehensive history of Mdina refer to DE LUCCA 1995; BUHAGIAR, FIORINI 1996.

7. SAMMUT 1960; BUHAGIAR, FIORINI 1996; THAKE 1996b.

8. THAKE 1994, pp. 37-47.

9. KOENIGSBERGER 1987.



Figure 3. An aerial view of the walled town of Mdina ([www.Malta.com](http://www.Malta.com)).



Figure 4. Enrico Regnaud (attributed), *Grand Master Anton Manuel de Vilhena with pages*, oil on canvas, 226 x 157 cm. Attard, Heritage Malta, San Anton Palace (Courtesy: Heritage Malta, Carlos Bongailas; photo credit: Joe P. Borg).

The grand master is depicted wearing the simple black habit with the eight-pointed cross of the Order of St. John. Vilhena is pointing to a plan of Mдина which is held by one of the page boys accompanying the grand master.

Throughout its rule of Malta, the Order of St John was beset with problems relating to procuring adequate finances to support itself and to implement its various projects. By the early eighteenth century, the diminished preoccupation with the military defence of the island had an unintended positive effect, since now substantial financial resources could be diverted towards civilian projects. This new-found affluence was also reflected in the greater importance that was placed on public ceremonies and displays, at times contrasting sharply with the austerity and asceticism that characterised the Order's earlier years in Malta. More emphasis was placed on projecting an exuberant image that was intended to impress upon the local population the absolute power and sovereignty of the Order. It was within this atmosphere of rhetorical imagery that Grand Master Vilhena embarked upon the renewal of Mдина (fig. 4).

Mdina was still widely perceived by the local population as primarily being the seat of the Maltese bishopric and the place where the local *Università* issued its decrees. The local diocesan church headed by the Bishop was instrumental in ensuring that Mdina survived and was still relevant during the early days of the Order. In the aftermath of the 1693 earthquake, the Cathedral Chapter had overseen the reconstruction of the old dilapidated medieval cathedral and its replacement with a larger one built in the contemporary Baroque architectural style, as designed and supervised by the Maltese architect Lorenzo Gafà (1639-1703) (figs. 5-7). The bishop resided in a palace adjoining the Cathedral. Subsequently in 1734, the church would further consolidate its physical presence within the centre of Mdina with the construction of the Seminary building intended for the education of novices. Besides the Diocesan church as represented in the Cathedral Chapter, the Carmelites had a church and priory that occupied an entire block as did the Benedictine nuns whose nunnery was established in the late-fifteenth century. Prior to Vilhena no Grand Master of the Order had physically intervened within the walled city to assert its influence (figs. 8-9).

Grand Master Vilhena's vision was to physically and symbolically re-appropriate Mdina as a representation of the Order. The urban regeneration that would follow was intended by Vilhena to consolidate the Order's sovereignty throughout the island (fig. 10). Mdina would be transformed into another "City of the Order" as was Valletta. Vilhena's overall strategy for revitalising the walled city was to first overhaul and re-build the city's land-front fortifications. Vilhena then gave the orders to the French military engineer François de Mondion to demolish the entire medieval-era entrance and then proceeded to erect a new monumental entrance gate, a grand palace for himself and a law courts building. In the implementation of these projects, Vilhena needed to procure some form of financing which ideally would be a regular source of income.

On 3 November 1722, Grand Master Vilhena issued a decree whereby he ordered the *Università* of Valletta and the Three Cities to contribute on a weekly basis the sum of 350 *scudi*<sup>10</sup>. This regular contribution was in addition to the sum of 4,000 *scudi* that the various *Università* had already donated. These funds would serve for the restoration of Mdina's dilapidated fortifications, for the deepening of its ditch, and the construction of covered passageways. Four months later, Vilhena issued another decree which ordered the *Università* to double their regular weekly contribution to 700 *scudi*<sup>11</sup>. The Grand Master claimed that his additional revenue was necessary for the completion of works on the fortifications.

10. NLM, AOM, ms. 27, *Università*, reg. 1722-1723, ff. 40v-41r; ms. 267, f. 161v.

11. NLM, AOM, ms. 267, f. 193r.



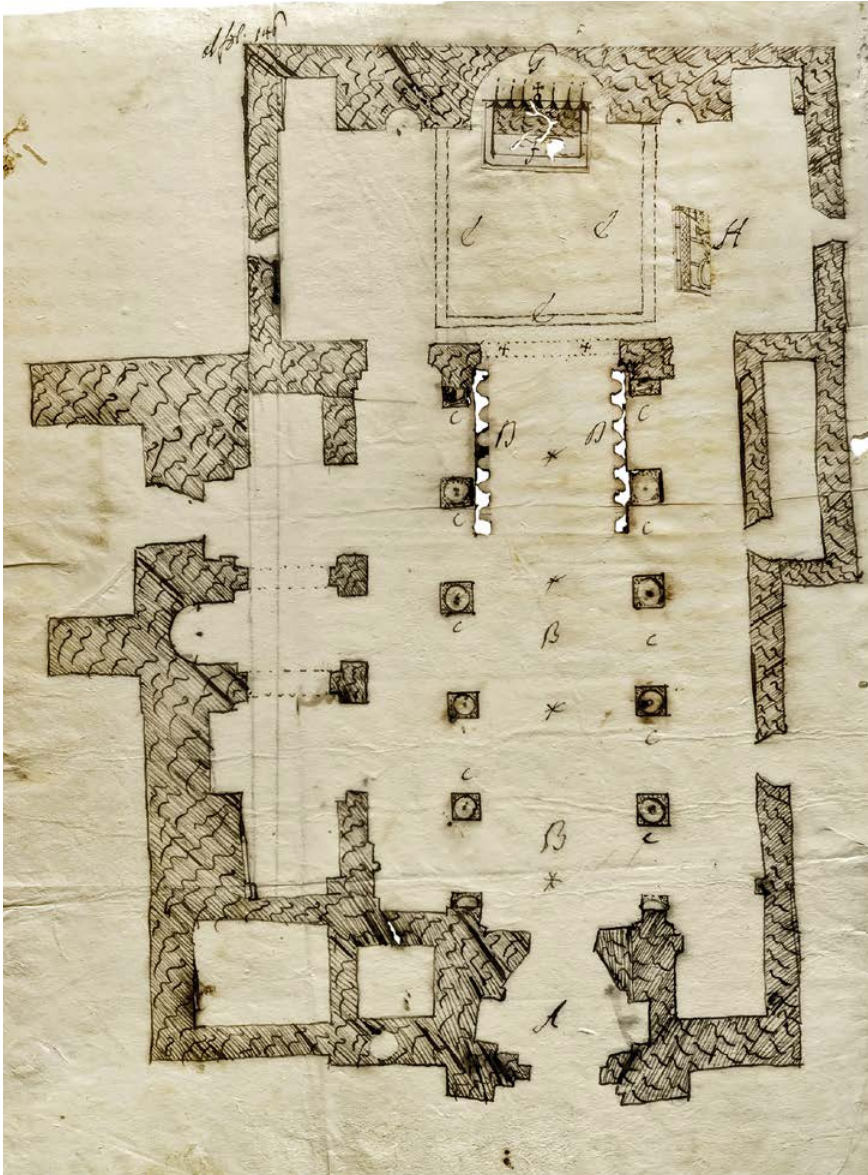


Figure 5. Anonymous, manuscript plan of the old medieval cathedral of Mdina. Mdina, Archives of the Mdina Cathedral.

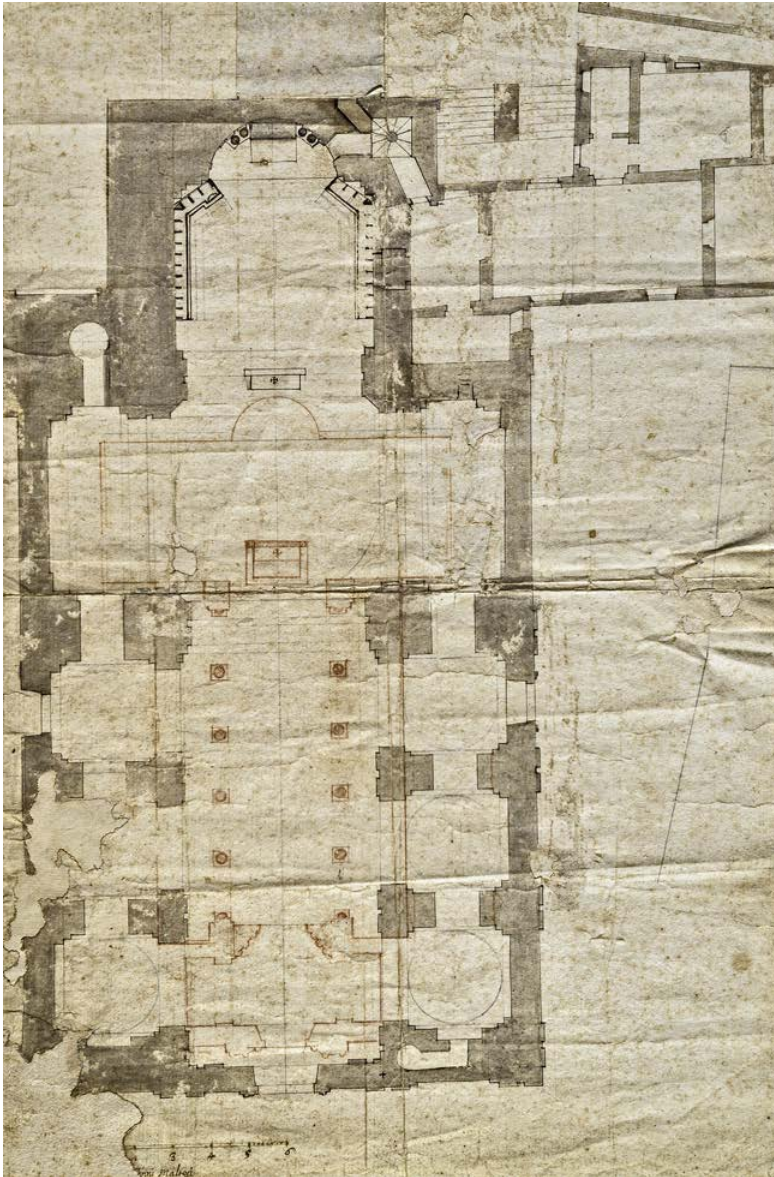


Figure 6. Anonymous, manuscript plan showing Lorenzo Gafà's plan of the new Mdina Cathedral superimposed on the outline plan of the medieval cathedral. Mdina, Archives of the Mdina Cathedral.



Figure 7. Mдина Cathedral (photo by C. Thake).  
On the next page, figure 8. Aerial view of Mдина Cathedral and environs (photo, Department of Information - DOI, Malta).





Figure 9. Skyline of Mdina (photo by C. Thake).

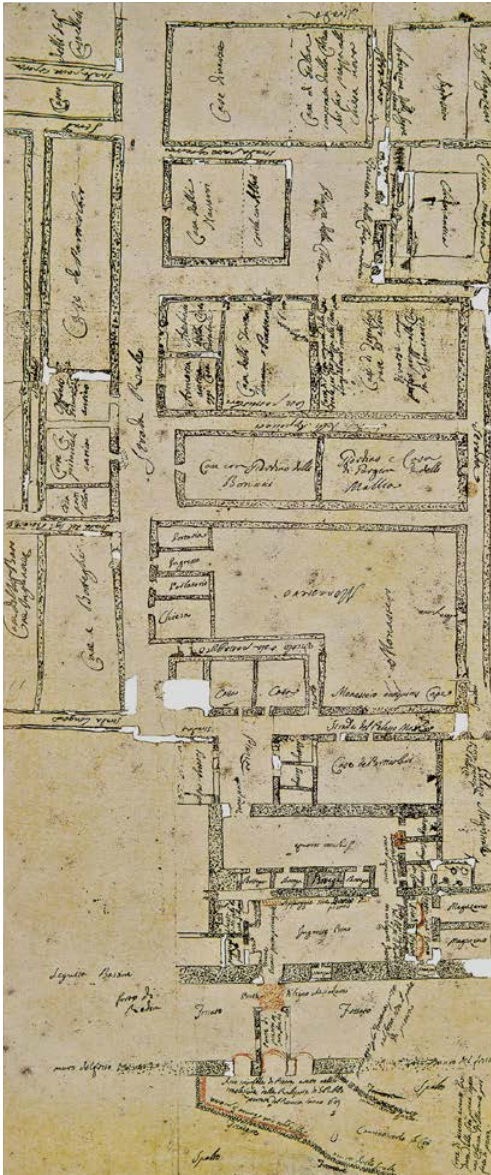


Figure 10. Anonymous, manuscript plan of Mdina's main entrance and environs prior to Grand Master Vilhena's urban interventions. Mdina, Archives of the Cathedral Museum.

### *The realisation of a modern fortified citadel*

The projection of a sophisticated image of a modern fortified citadel was considered even more relevant than the actual military effectiveness of the fortifications. The Grand Master appointed the French resident military engineer François de Mondion to undertake several works on the ditch and land-front fortifications<sup>12</sup>. A detailed eighteenth century plan of Mdina, entitled *Plan et Profils de la Citta Vielle située au milieu de l'isle*, outlines the various urban interventions that would be undertaken during Vilhena's reign (figs. 11-12)<sup>13</sup>. In his scheme Mondion outlined the new network of fortifications and the layout for the complete restructuring of the entrance approach to the citadel.

Works started in earnest in July 1722, two months before Vilhena's formal entry into Mdina. By September, a workforce of some 170 *men* were actively engaged in the excavation of the ditch and in reconstructing the main curtain wall in which to incorporate the new gateway. The documents of the local *Università* record the weekly payments that were issued to all the workmen. They contain useful information regarding the diverse composition of the work-force. For example, during the first week of October 1722 the sum of 232 *scudi* was paid as the total sum of weekly salaries for 198 workmen<sup>14</sup>. The workforce was composed of the following trades: 33 *muratori* (stone masons), 12 *mastezzieri* (rubble fillers), 9 *lavoratori* (workers), 3 *peritori* (work surveyors), 12 *della mensa* (cookhouse workers), 7 *picconieri* (pick-axe workers), 3 *sbocicatori* (excavators), 6 *uomini* (labourers), 94 *figlioli* (young men), 11 *guardiani* (guards), 3 *dell'acqua* (water suppliers), 5 *della forza* (strong men)<sup>15</sup>. The work-force was subdivided into small groups which were under the responsibility of an experienced master mason or *capo maestro*. The latter reported directly to the military engineer François de Mondion and to his assistant Francesco Zerafa in his capacity as the Order's *Capomaestro dell'Opere e Fortificazioni*<sup>16</sup>.

In 1724, Mondion gave orders for the demolition of the old medieval entrance approach to the citadel. The old bridge supported by the underlying stone arches for two-thirds of its length and

12. For the architectural career of François de Mondion refer to De Lucca 1981; DE LUCCA 2003.

13. This plan of Mdina indicating the various buildings and streets was probably prepared under Mondion's direct supervision. The map is in the drawings collection of the Archives of the Cathedral Museum (ACM), Mdina.

14. NLM, AOM, ms. 95, *Università*, ff. 138r-144r.

15. *Ibidem*.

16. In 1714, Francesco Zerafa (?-1758) succeeded Giovanni Barbara (1642-1728) as *Capo Maestro delle Pubbliche Opere*. In October 1722, he was appointed *donat* of the Order. Zerafa had a distinguished career during the first half of the eighteenth century. He served the Cottoner Foundation, the French langue and several distinguished knights. He supervised the construction of various *casette* in the new suburb of Floriana and assisted in works on St Catherine's monastery in Valletta. His *magnum opus* is the Castellania, building in Merchants' Street, Valletta which was built between 1757 and 1760, during the reign of Grand Master Pinto.

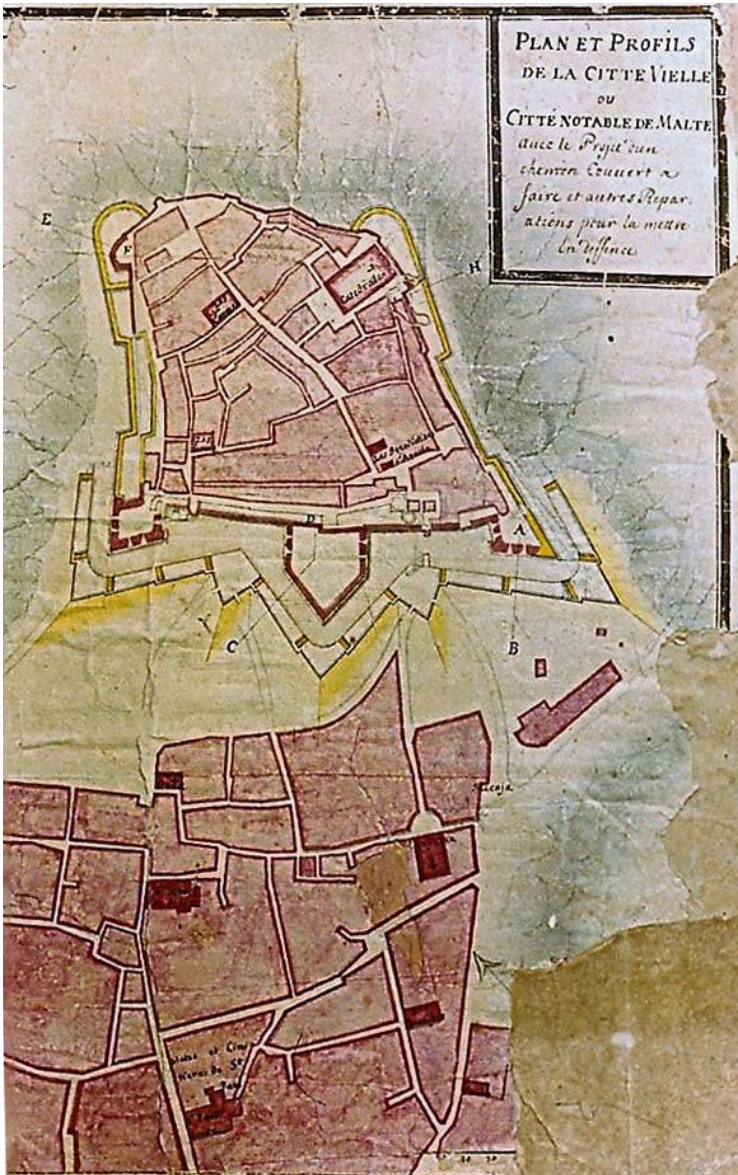


Figure 11. François de Mondion (attributed), manuscript plan entitled *Plan et Profils de la Cittié Vielle ou Cittié Notable de Malte*, c. 1725. Archives of the Cathedral Museum, Mdina.



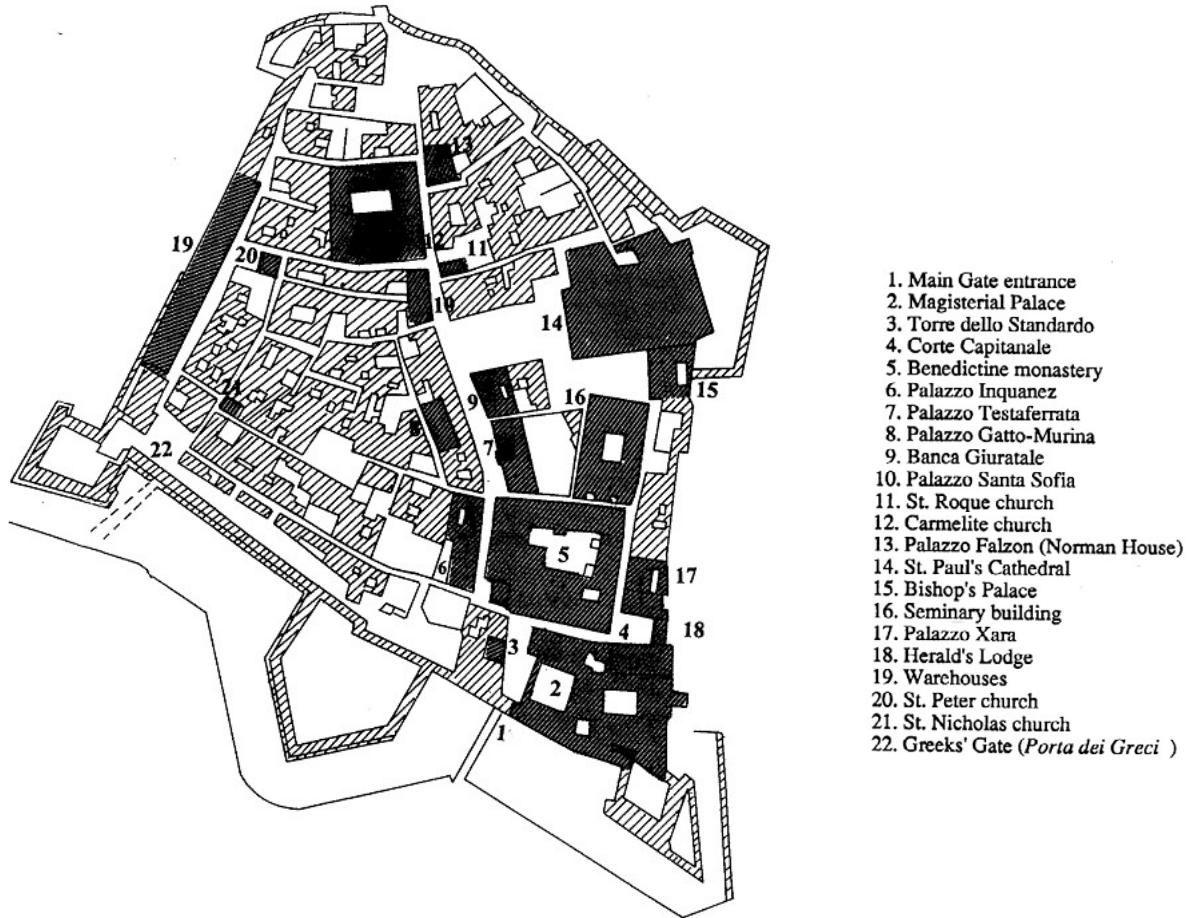


Figure 12. Plan of Mдина indicating the main buildings (plan drawn by C. Thake).

a wooden drawbridge for the remainder was dismantled. It was replaced by a wider bridge made entirely of stone. The old medieval gateway within the fortification wall was sealed and Mondion built a more monumental and ornate Baroque gateway a few metres away from the former entrance.

### *A new entrance approach for Mdina*

The creation of a monumental entrance to Mdina was the main concept underlying Mondion's urban renewal plan. The narrow winding streets and irregularly-shaped open spaces of medieval Mdina were not compatible with Vilhena's vision of a grand processional route. Only by demolishing the old medieval-period entrance could a monumental spatial experience be achieved. This *tabula rasa* approach implied the destruction of the former layout of the double market squares with their arrangement of staggered triple entrances. The old Grand Master's palace, the small chapel of Santa Maria della Porta, De Paule's double arched loggia and the spine of the various shopping stalls were all razed to the ground. This was necessary to create the required space for a larger and more monumental Magisterial Palace.

The palace that served as the seat of the Grand Master within the citadel was the primary focus of the new layout. It was built on a typical Parisian *hôtel* plan. Vilhena's palace with its arcaded *cour d'honneur* was planned at right angles to the open space in front of the main gateway. Even though the site of the Magisterial Palace had an irregular configuration, Mondion managed to impose a sense of order and regularity in the forecourt and façade, both being aligned parallel to the main public space in front of the main gate<sup>17</sup>. In March 1725, the square medieval watch-tower was demolished and the *Torre dello Standardo* was reconstructed on the same site but to a larger scale (fig. 13)<sup>18</sup>. Works on the Main Gate to the city and the Greeks' Gate or *Porta dei Greci* were completed only two months earlier<sup>19</sup>. Both gates were designed by François de Mondion who had served his apprenticeship in the school of the renowned French military engineer Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban (1633-1707)<sup>20</sup>.

17. The plan of the Hôtel de Beauvais, 1652-1655, had a regular symmetrical layout although the configuration of the site was highly irregular. Plans of the ground and first floors of Antoine Le Pautre's Parisian palace were reproduced in the Grand Marot. The first edition of the Grand Marot forms part of the extensive library of the Order. It was published in 1727, at the same time that Mondion was preparing his designs for the Magisterial Palace. Refer to MAROT 1727.

18. NLM, AOM, ms. 96, *Università*, f. 169r.

19. *Ivi*, ff. 195r, 220r. The estimate of payments due to stone sculptor Gerolamo Fabri and his sons for the ornamental work on the two gates were signed by Mondion on 26 May 1725. Another estimate of marble works carried out was prepared a few months later, in favour of the *marmista* Giò Maria Gilberto.

20. BLOMFIELD 1938.



Figure 13. Mdina, Torre dello Standardo, 1726 (photo by C. Thake).

Mondion was well versed in the design of military gateways and besides the Mdina gate he was also responsible for the design of other gateways located within the Birgu land-front, Fort Manoel and the Cottonera Lines.

Mondion's proposal for the main entrance called for the construction of an imposing gateway that was to be strategically situated within the curtain wall of the southern land-front (fig. 14). The central arched portal was symmetrically flanked by pairs of giant order banded pilasters that projected from the wall plane. A Doric entablature with decorated metopes and triglyphs separated the lower part of the gate from the overlying superstructure. The upper tier was a relatively plain addition with two pairs of individual short pilasters providing the only relief from an otherwise bland wall surface. A pair of sinuous volutes that converge to the centre piece crown the composition.

There are several historical precedents of monumental gateways and triumphal arches being used as urban landmarks within the city. François de Mondion would undoubtedly have been heavily influenced by some of the contemporary French examples such as François Blondel's Porte Saint-Denis (1672), Claude Perrault's gateway at the Place du Trône on the road connecting Vincennes to Paris (1670), and Simon Vollant's La Porte de Paris, leading to the Cittadelle at Lille (1682-1695)<sup>21</sup>. The common characteristic of these French gateways was that they all commemorated the military triumphs of King Louis XIV. The monumental gateway to the city as a symbol of military conquest was utilised by Grand Master Vilhena for the new gateway to Mdina. But within the context of Mdina, the insertion of a grand monumental gateway is first and foremost a political gesture as the Order of St John was in this instance not celebrating any great victory over the Ottoman Turks. The only vanquished subjects in this case appear to be the Mdina residents who must have felt more subjugated to the authority of the Order. The familiar sight of the undistinguished old medieval entrance as a simple opening in the fortification wall had been replaced by an imposing gateway overladen with rhetorical symbols of the Order (fig. 15).

The new main gate was adorned with several explicit references to Grand Master Vilhena. The Vilhena coat of arms depicting in one quarter a winged hand grasping a sword and diagonally to it a lion, was carved in limestone and placed over the arched entrance. A marble plaque placed over the coat of arms contained the following inscription in Latin which proclaimed Grand Master Vilhena's achievement that «out of love and for safeguarding the people, he restored and enlarged the city of Notabile from the former state of dilapidation»<sup>22</sup>.

21. BLONDEL 1752-1756.

22. The contract for the supply of stone for the main gateway was formalised on 14 May 1724. The document stipulated a number of conditions regarding the dimensions of the cut stone, the type of globigerina limestone and the cost of every cartload of stone transported to the building site. Refer to NLM, AOM, ms. 27, *Università*, reg. 1723-1724, ff. 94v-95v.



Figure 14. Mdina's main gateway. François de Mondion, 1726 (photo by C. Thake).



Figure 15. Mdina, Magisterial Palace. François de Mondion, 1726-1728 (photo by C. Thake).

«Vetustissimae Hujus Urbis, Quam Patres Dixere Notabilem Insulae Metropoleos  
 Quae Divi Pauli Provido Naufragio Fidem Edocta Primum Praesulem Divum Publium Patritium Habuit  
 D. Ant. Manoel De Vilhena, M.M., Egregius et Piissimus Princeps  
 In Honorem Apostoli Ejusq' Discipuli, Amorem, et Tutelam Populi, Munimenta Pene Collapsa Restauravit,  
 Et Auxit, Anno Sal. MDCCXXIV, Principatus Sui III».

The imposing gateway to Mdina served as a rhetorical monument to impress upon the public consciousness the power and influence of the Grand Master. The previous representation of the *Città Notabile* as the autonomous enclave of the local nobility and the diocesan church was now obsolete. Any visitor to Mdina could not but associate the reconstructed walled city with the Order.

### *Vilhena's Magisterial Palace and the Corte Capitanale*

By August 1725, the main gateway was complete and works had begun on the construction of the Magisterial Palace and the Corte Capitanale (Law Courts building) which were physically integrated into one building complex but with independent facades (fig. 16). On a symbolic level, it was of paramount importance that the Magisterial Palace be immediately visible to any visitor entering Mdina. It was desirable that the design of the Grand Master's palace reflect the architectural style of contemporary palaces on the European continent. From an iconographical point of view the Order of St John was keen on projecting itself as a progressive institution in keeping with the times.

Mondion adopted the layout of the Parisian hôtel plan with an open forecourt enclosed by the main palace façade and symmetrical arcaded wings on two floors (fig. 17). An ornate portal or porte cochère connected St Publius Square in front of the main gate to the forecourt of the palace. In line with the external gateway was the monumental entrance portal of the palace, whereupon one immediately encountered a straight flight of stairs leading into the palace interior (fig. 18). The influence of Parisian palaces such as the Hôtel de Beauvais and that of Vrillière is clearly evident in the spatial typology and form adopted for the Magisterial Palace in Mdina (figs. 19-20). Throughout the sequence of spaces, physical representations of Vilhena were displayed in strategic locations; Vilhena's coat of arms carved in stone on the exterior gateway, an oval bronze relief of the Grand Master over the main entrance portal and a bust of Vilhena that was placed at the landing of the staircase (fig. 21). The intention was to draw the visitor into an orderly sequence of subtly orchestrated spaces and in the process to constantly remind one of the Order's presence.

The main buildings of the Order that were constructed in Mdina during Grand Master Vilhena's reign were the Magisterial Palace, the Corte Capitanale and the Banca Giuratale. François de Mondion



Figure 16. Mdina, Corte Capitanale.  
François de Mondion, 1726-1728  
(photo by C. Thake).





Figure 17. Mdina, forecourt of Magisterial Palace (photo credit: Daniel Cilia).

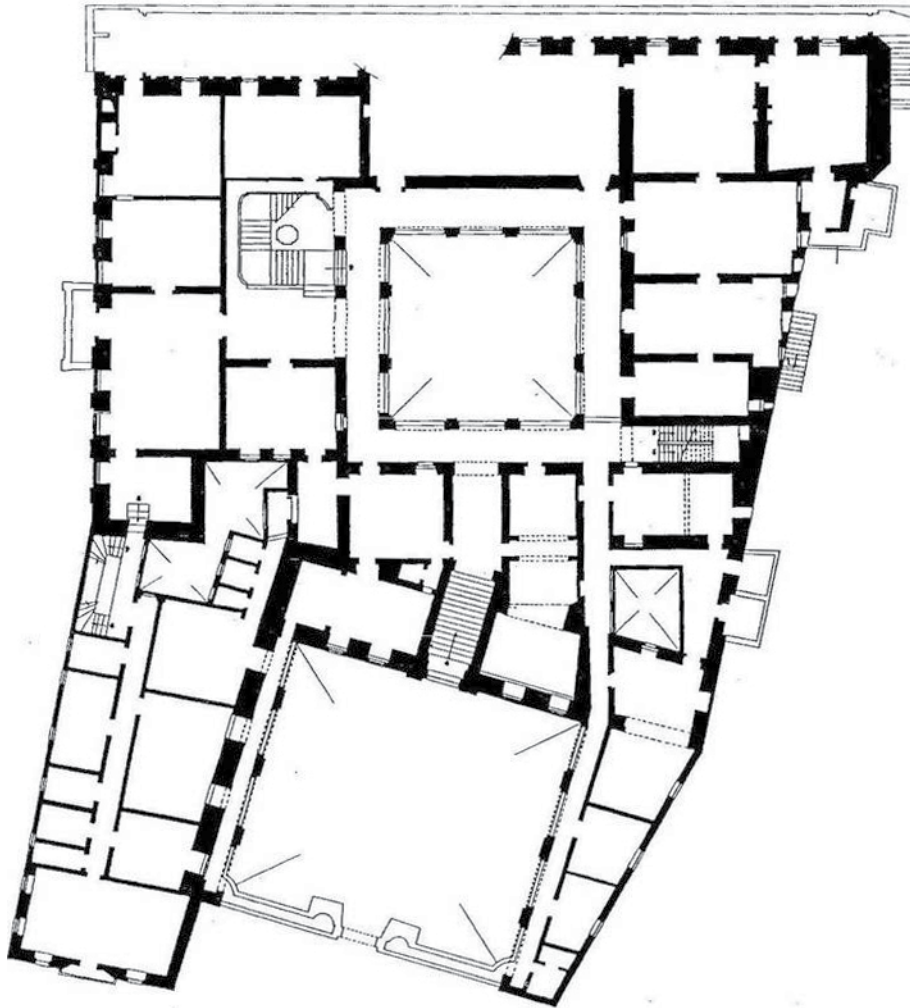


Figure 18. Mdina, plan of Magisterial palace and Corte Capitanale (plan drawn by C. Thake).

*Plan du premier Etage de l'hôtel de Beauvais*

*Liv. III. N. 1. Plan. 1.*

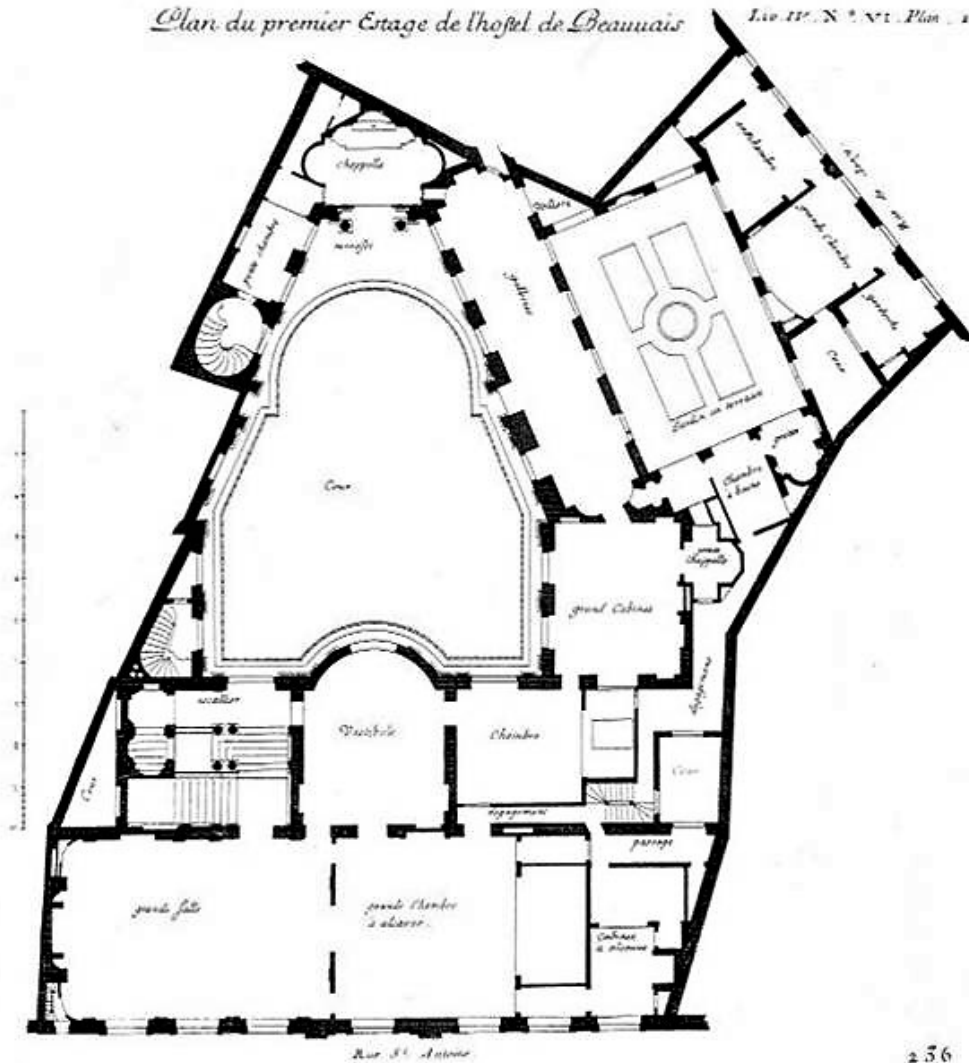


Figure 19. Ground floor plan of the Hôtel de Beauvais, Paris, engraving (from J. Marot, F. Blondel, *L'Architecture française*, Jombert, Paris 1752, vol. II, p. 236).

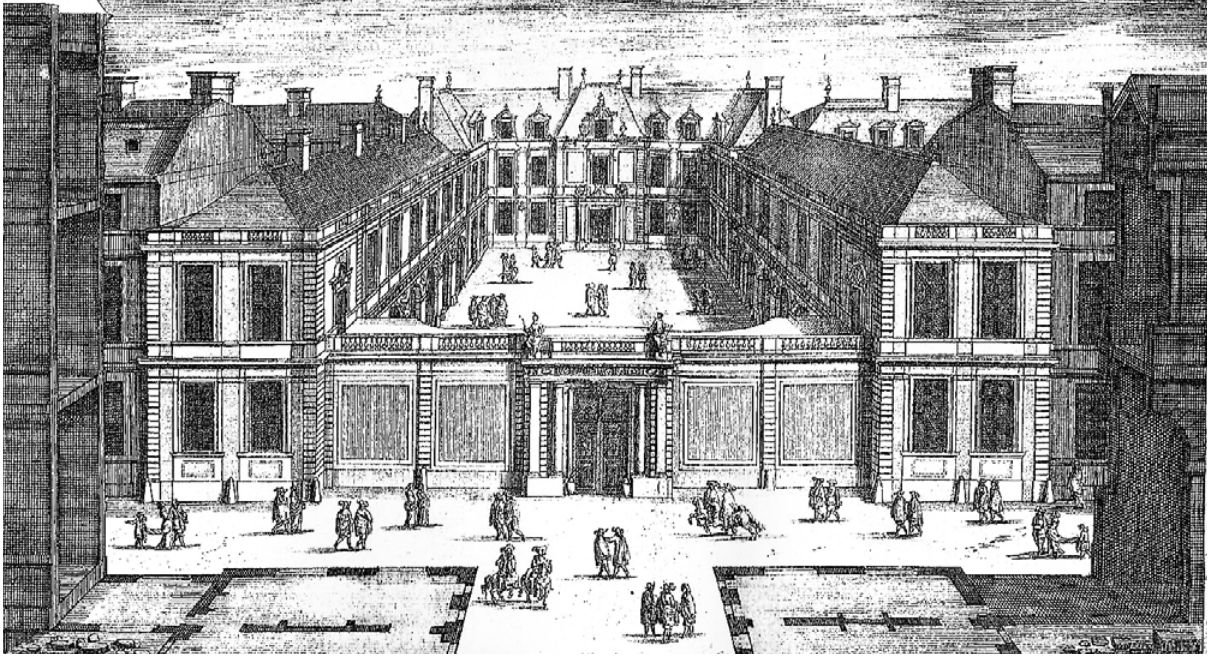


Figure 20. *Veue de l'hostel de la Vrilliere du Dessein de Francois Mansart, engraving (Le Petit Marot, Paris 1660).*

On the next page, figure 21. Bronze low-relief sculpture of Grand Master Vilhena set in oval stone-frame flanked by ornate sculptures of allegorical female figures (photo by C. Thake).



designed and supervised the construction of all three buildings in the relatively short period between 1726-1728. Mondion's designs all bear the distinctive stylistic stamp of the French architectural academy<sup>23</sup>. The refined ornate details in the door and window surrounds, and the profusion of elaborate stone carvings depicting war triumphs and other military paraphernalia impart a sophisticated imagery. Lorenzo Gafà's façades for the Cathedral and the Bishop's palace would have appeared to be rather outdated and provincial in contrast to Mondion's designs. It is difficult to determine whether Mondion consciously adopted the academic French Baroque style so as to distinguish the Order's secular buildings from the ecclesiastical buildings of the local church. One can argue that Mondion as a military engineer was trained in the French academic tradition and hence, it was only natural that his buildings would reflect this background. An alternative view point could be that Grand Master Vilhena encouraged the adoption of the French Baroque style in his architectural projects. By promoting such a distinct mode of representation, the new architectural imagery would symbolically be associated with Vilhena.

By 1728 with the completion of works on the Magisterial Palace, the new entrance area had taken its final form. A regular rectangular open space referred to as St Publius Square was bounded on its sides by the Torre dello Standardo, the Magisterial Palace and the high walls of the Benedictine monastery. The new Banca Giuratale or the Casa della Città, serving as the new quarters of the Università, was also completed. The Banca Giuratale had been built on the block along the Strada Reale (today, Villegaignon Street), corner with St Paul's Square in front of the Cathedral. The Order previously had a small Archives building and an Armoury located on this site. These two adjoining buildings had been demolished to make way for the construction of the Banca Giuratale.

Within just six years from the election of Grand Master Vilhena, integral parts of the urban fabric of Mdina had been completely transformed. The major areas affected by Mondion's urban interventions were the main entrance area, the Greeks' Gate area and the main Strada Reale which physically bisected the citadel into two roughly equal parts<sup>24</sup>. The ecclesiastical enclave of the Diocesan church centred around the Cathedral and the Bishop's palace was still physically intact and would be further consolidated with the construction of the new Seminary building. Mdina was no longer perceived exclusively as the Episcopal See, for the Order of St John had through Vilhena's urban project also strongly staked its territorial claim to the former medieval capital.

23. HAUTECOEUR 1943-1948; BLUNT 1957.

24. DE LUCCA 1979; DE LUCCA 1995.

### *The problem of populating Mdina*

In spite of Grand Master Vilhena's intensive urban renewal of Mdina few locals were interested in taking up residence within the walled city. The population of Mdina when Vilhena was elected Grand Master was only 295 persons in contrast to the 1,906 individuals who resided in the suburban residential town of Rabat<sup>25</sup>. Mdina and Rabat were considered to be far away and too isolated from Valletta and the Three Cities, where most of the population resided. In 1725 in a report submitted by several physicians to the Mdina *Università*, it was claimed that the stagnant waters and infected air around Mdina and Rabat, was the main cause for the high incidence of ill-health amongst the local residents<sup>26</sup>. A few years later the members of the *Università* complained to the Grand Master that although the city had been restored it was still sparsely populated<sup>27</sup>. They appealed to him to implement the necessary measures to encourage more people to take up residence in Mdina. In particular, the *Università* stressed the importance of hearing legal cases within the jurisdiction of Mdina, Rabat and the surrounding towns in the new *Corte Capitanale*.

Grand Master Vilhena immediately took heed of the appeal made by the *Università*. On 25 January 1727, he issued a *Chirografo Magistrale* which was intended to address Mdina's acute population problem<sup>28</sup>. Vilhena promulgated ten regulations with the aim of providing incentives for more locals to take up residence in Mdina. The decrees were the following:

1. All those taking up residence within the *Città Notabile* were to be exempt from undertaking military duty although they would still be obliged to enrol within the regular city regiment, in accordance with their rank and status.
2. Only people residing within the *Città Notabile* were eligible for holding any official post in the local administration and government of the city.
3. The fiscal advocate would not be empowered to intervene in legal cases involving the inhabitants of the *Città Notabile*, when these cases were of a private nature and did not involve treason, murder, theft, usury and homicides.

25. FIORINI 1983.

26. «Per quelle esser affatto depravata l'aria di quei luoghi per cagione di dette acque stagnanti et internate [...] onde da noi si stima ache la infermiza, che hanno corso da pochi anni a questa parte in detta Città Notabile, e Rabbato ha proceduto dall'aria infetta», NLM, ms. 187, *Università*, f. 102r.

27. «Che detta Città già si è ridotta in stato di potersi dire disabitata, e dopo che dalla munificenza di V.A.S. è stata restaurata, e messa in stato di difesa pesa molto à esso Magistrato suplicante et ad altri abitanti delle medesima Città vederla così priva di Gente, che l'abitano», *Ivi*, ff. 114-115.

28. NLM, AOM, ms. 27, *Università*, reg. 1726-1727, ff. 58r-60v.

4. Legal cases concerning debts renounced by the ordinary tribunals and concerning inhabitants of Notabile, Rabat, Dingli, Attard, Zebbug, Siggiewi and Mosta, were to be tried within the courts of the city magistrates in Mdina. This also applied to persons who might possess the privileges to have redress to other tribunals as was the case with widows, orphans and members of the *Università*.

5. The city magistrates are empowered to force people who own buildings within the city to occupy them within a reasonable time limit. If these houses remain unoccupied, the same authorities could establish an appropriate rental value and lease them out to any persons who desired to take up residence within Mdina.

6. The magistrates are empowered to force landlords to rebuild any dilapidated buildings within the city. To avoid any unjustified excuses the *Università* of Valletta has the facility to lend money for landlords with financial problems. The sum borrowed was to be repaid within ten years, with one tenth of the total sum being repaid annually. In the event of the landlord declining to accept this offer, the magistrates would reserve the right to sell the property at a public auction.

7. All inhabitants residing within the *Città Notabile* were to be excused from paying any debts for a period of five years, commencing from the date of residence within the city.

8. All inhabitants of the city, were to be allowed to practise any type of hunting activity during any season and at any place on the island, after the due license was granted by the *Capitano della Verga*. This privilege was valid except for those protected localities and during the closed hunting season.

9. All merchants selling goods within Mdina could do so freely without any restrictions.

10. The city magistrates were to select a specific day every month, whereby vendors could sell their goods at the convenience of the local residents, and as was the usual practice every year on the first day of May.

Vilhena's incentives scheme was wide-ranging in scope. The *Chirografo* provided various incentives for special interest groups such as debtors, vendors and those with a passion for hunting, to take up permanent residence in Mdina. The Grand Master was also keen to re-establish Mdina as the principal seat of jurisdiction for that region. Other measures were intended to ensure that there would be no vacant or dilapidated properties within the city. During the same year that the *Chirografo Magistrale* was issued, Vilhena gave orders for the reconstruction of the main road between Mdina and Valletta. The road improvement project was completed in July 1728<sup>29</sup>. It was intended to improve links between the two cities. At the same time a series of warehouses were also built close to the Greeks' Gate entrance. The magazines designed by Mondion were constructed along Magazine Street, abutting onto the bastions within the citadel (fig. 22)<sup>30</sup>.

29. A series of payments were made to various workmen between March and July 1728, for road improvement works between Valletta and Mdina. The total expenditure was approximately 2,500 scudi. NLM, AOM, ms. 96, *Università, Spesa per l'accommodamento della strada dalla Notabile sino l'arco di Wied in cita*, ff. 1r-3r.

30. In November 1727, timber doors and window frames were installed in the twelve magazine stores that had been



Grand Master Vilhena probably envisaged Mdina as a central inland depot for all the agricultural produce of the fertile north-western part of the island. The produce would then be transported by horse-driven wagons to the densely populated urban areas around the Grand Harbour. The major landowners including the church, the Order and the *Università* of Mdina, had all been promoting the concept of rehabilitating barren areas for crop cultivation<sup>31</sup>. These institutions leased out semi-arable land to local farmers to increase local food produce. However, the arduous challenge of cultivating tracts of arid, rocky terrain could not have enticed many locals.

Vilhena's strategy of re-populating Mdina achieved only limited success. By 1728, Mdina's population increased to 423 residents, a mere increase of 128 residents from the 1722 figure<sup>32</sup>. Throughout the eighteenth century, the population remained constant at around 420 residents although by the time that the Order left the island in 1798 the population had declined to 369. However, the population of the suburb town of Rabat grew steadily, reaching a figure of 3,500 by the end of the eighteenth century<sup>33</sup>. Various religious orders including the Augustinians, Dominicans and Franciscans had established their convents and churches in Rabat to be in closer contact with the local residents. Unlike Mdina, Rabat was not physically constrained by fortifications and land for building expansion was more readily available. Still, most of the Order's administrative institutions and economic activities were based within Valletta and the Three Cities. The densely populated and congested urban areas within these cities gave rise to serious public health problems which were highlighted during occasional outbreaks of plagues and epidemics.

During the period that Vilhena embarked upon the urban renewal of Mdina, work also commenced on the planning of Floriana as the residential suburb town to Valletta. The creation of the new town of Floriana, although alleviating the over-crowding problem in Valletta, was not beneficial to the re-population of Mdina. It was far easier to attract residents to Floriana than to Mdina, as the inland citadel was not as accessible to the Grand Harbour area. Even after Vilhena's intensive urban renewal project, Mdina could never quite challenge the political and economic pre-eminence of Valletta. After Vilhena's interventions, the former medieval citadel acquired a dual role as the seat of the local diocesan church and as a rhetorical urban stage-set for the Order of St John<sup>34</sup>.

constructed in Magazine street. «Legname presa per servitio delle nuova fortification e porte di dodeci Magazzeni colli loro fenestroni», in NLM, AOM, ms. 96, *Università*, ff. 454r-456r.

31. BLOUET 1964a.

32. FIORINI 1983.

33. *Ibidem*; AZZOPARDI 1990.

34. THAKE 1996b.

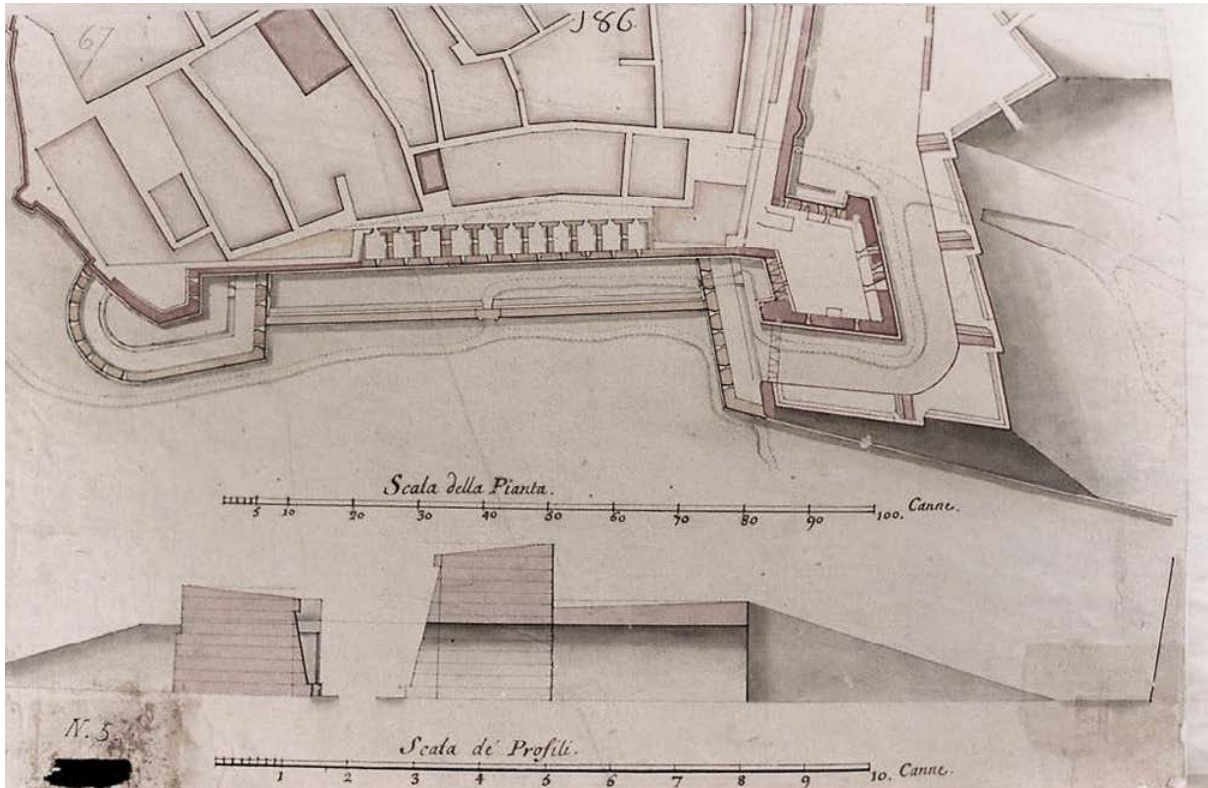


Figure 22. François de Mondion (attributed), Manuscript plan delineating in yellow body colour a series of vaulted stores and magazines proposed to be built abutting the fortifications. The construction of the magazines was completed in 1727. Valletta, Drawings collection of the National Library of Malta.

### *Mdina - Baroque scenography and public theatre*

Public spectacles and rituals assumed a heightened significance during the eighteenth century. These celebrations were not only limited to the formal ceremonies of the Order or the religious festivities organised by the local churches but they also included other activities that were addressed to the public. Towards the end of Vilhena's reign the Manoel theatre was built in Valletta. The inscription overlying the main entrance to the theatre, «ad honestam populi oblectationem» (for the honest recreation of the people), bears testimony to Vilhena's intention to provide a suitable place of entertainment where the knights could host their theatrical productions, pageants and operas<sup>35</sup>.

Architectural scenography became an effective means of projecting imagery that was inspired by either political rhetoric or religious fervour. One can argue that Vilhena's interest in regenerating Mdina was motivated more by the desire to create an opulent stage-set for the Order of St John than by a genuine belief that the walled city could thrive economically<sup>36</sup>. As an astute ruler, Vilhena had envisaged that the urban renewal project for Mdina would serve as the ideal pretext to further disseminate and consolidate the Order's absolutist power on the island. Vilhena's vision for Mdina went even beyond the purely ephemeral imagery – the new main entrance approach and the urban enclave around the main gateway and Magisterial Palace, formed part of a permanent urban theatre. The Grand Master had altered the entrance area to the walled citadel as a physical and symbolic representation of the Order. This intervention is historically analagous to the seventeenth-century *Quattro Canti* or Piazza Vigliena embedded within the historic urban fabric of Palermo. The *Teatro del Sole* was an urban monument that commemorated the Spanish Viceroy's rule over the city<sup>37</sup>. The ephemeral scenographic imagery was transformed into a permanent urban stage-set.

The intensive urban renewal of Mdina came to a sudden end with the death of Vilhena in 1736. The Seminary building was the last major project to be commenced towards the end of his magistracy and it was completed in 1742. Vilhena's successors did not implement any other major projects within the citadel. Even during the lengthy reign of Grand Master Pinto (1741-1773), not a single major building be it secular or religious was constructed in Mdina. Pinto was more concerned with the Baroque embellishment of Valletta where he rebuilt on a monumental scale the *Auberge de Castille et Leon*, the

35. Construction works on the Manoel theatre started in 1731, after the Order acquired two houses in Old Theatre street in Valletta from the Priory of Navarre. The oval shaped auditorium as designed by Romano Carapecchia had three floors of boxes with open galleries flanking the five boxes at the top. The theatre was inaugurated on 19 January 1732.

36. TONNA 1970; THAKE 1996b.

37. DI FEDE, SCADUTO 2011.

Castellania palace building and an impressive array of nineteen warehouses along the Grand Harbour waterfront known as the Pinto Stores<sup>38</sup>. His only interventions in Mdina were limited to the construction of a new bastion behind the Cathedral and the reconstruction of the subterranean passage underlying the Bishop's palace, both projects being completed by 1748. Otherwise, the physical evolution of the citadel came to a standstill although one may argue that Vilhena had not only initiated Mdina's renewal but had overseen its completion.

Throughout the remainder of the Order's rule in Malta, Mdina became increasingly isolated from the administrative and political institutions of the Order which were based in Valletta. By the time that Napoleon Bonaparte expelled the knights from Malta in 1798, the island's population was around one hundred thousand inhabitants. Mdina's resident population did not exceed four hundred, which figure was negligible on a national scale. The walled citadel never recovered its medieval preeminence. It was destined to remain politically and economically irrelevant. Mdina's new *raison d'être* was that of an opulent Baroque stage-set that served as a testimony of the Order's "Grand Manner" in projecting its political influence and sovereignty.

38. HUGHES 1956; TESTA 1989; THAKE 1996a.

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