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The Architectural Setting of the Grand Masters of Malta, 1530-1798

Expelled by the Ottomans from their Mediterranean redoubt of Rhodes in 1522, the Knights of St John of Jerusalem found a new home on Malta eight years later, courtesy of the Emperor Charles V. They first occupied the narrow Birgu peninsula, but after repulsing a second Turkish bombardment in 1565, the Order relocated to the more easily defensible Sciberras promontory, where Valletta was built.

The new city took its name from Jean de Valette, the order's Grand Master who had marshalled the island's defences in 1565. As David Boswell suggested in this paper, following the defeat of the Turks, the Italian architect Francesco Laparelli was commissioned to construct a bastion-town that would withstand future sieges. It was initially intended that the Grand Master's Palace would form part of these fortifications. But impatient with the slow progress of construction, Valette's successor Pietro del Monte orchestrated the purchase of his nephew Eustachio's recently completed mansion. Although Del Monte died in 1572, the year that Gerolamo Cassar began converting the building into a princely residence, the house was to serve as the Grand Master's Palace until Napoleon evicted the order in 1798.

Although enlarged by the absorption of the neighbouring Auberge d'Italie, the palace never quite shed its modest, piecemeal origins. A shallow, rectangular block built around two courtyards, Cassar's building was rugged and unpretentious: Patrick Brydone, visiting in the eighteenth century, thought it a 'very noble though a plain structure'. Demonstrations of magnificence were reserved for the interior, chiefly the Supreme Council Chamber, where Grand Master Cassière (1572-1582) ordered a fresco cycle from the Italian Matteo d'Aleccio depicting the victory of 1565. Subsequent Grand Masters followed his example: Grand Master Wignacourt (1601-1622) commissioned a set of murals illustrating the Order's earlier history for the other public rooms, while Grand Master Carafa (1680-1690) added murals of his own achievements to the internal decorations.

The splendour of magisterial entertainments belied the haphazard architectural development. Since the sovereign of the Order was also *de facto* ruler of the island, the Grand Masters sought to emulate the practices of other European princes. In 1614, a guest of Grand Master Wignacourt described how he was received in an audience chamber hung with royal portraits before being taken in procession through an enfilade to witness a display of Arab horses. This was followed by a dinner, at which some sixty knights waited on the Grand Master.

Grand Master Pinto (1741-1773) added two baroque gateways, a pair of balconies and an elaborate mechanical clock. As Boswell explained, this coincided with a move towards a more absolutist style of government. Under Pinto, marks of sovereignty gradually appeared: the Grand Master's coronet was replaced by a closed crown and the Supreme Council Chamber was redesignated a throne room. Work towards the further aggrandisement of the palace was still underway when Napoleon invaded in 1798 and finally ended these ambitions.

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