

by a reproduction. The two side altars, dedicated to St. Angelo and to St. Barbara, respectively, are cut in the rocks in the shape called *arcosolium* like those of the Roman catacombs.

A direct hit during the war destroyed the vestry of the chapel and its frontage which were then rebuilt. Until some time ago, the Chapter of St. Lawrence Collegiate held religious celebrations in honour of the Nativity of Our Lady on 8 September.

Church of St. Anne

On the upper part of the Fort there is the elegant Church of St Anne, built by the occupying Castellan around 1430 for his exclusive use. It consists of a nave having all the arches resting on a singular central pillar made of Egyptian granite. This is purported to be a relic of the ancient temple of Juno.

Upon the arrival of the Order at Birgu in 1530, Grand Master L'Isle Adam caused the Order's repository of sacred relics, the *tolo*, to be preserved in this church, along with other treasures. He extended the church by adding an aisle where he and the succeeding five Grand Masters were buried. Their remains were eventually re-interred in the Conventual Church of St John, Valletta, as stated in the inscription in the chapel.



The Magisterial Palace

The imposing building on the top of the Castle's keep was these palace of the *Castellan*. Its origin goes back to the Norman period, as evidenced by its beautiful staircase and double arched windows. The presence of the coat of arms of Grand Master L'Isle Adam proves that the main part of the building was reconstructed by him when he chose it as the Magisterial Palace. The entrance hall served as Council Chamber while the main hall was used for the less frequent General Chapters. L'Isle Adam added the front garden and also erected the summer alcove called *nymphaeum*.

The British Naval authorities made further alterations to the building which became the residence of H.M.S. St Angelo's Commanding Officer. However, the general structure and appearance of the palace has been preserved. It is now occupied by a high dignitary of the Order of St John in his capacity as Knight Resident.

Great Siege cemetery

At the foot of the lofty Ferramolino Cavalier there is a sarcophagus on a raised platform. This marks the site of the cemetery where the Knights who lost their lives during the Great Siege of 1565 were buried. These were removed to Valletta in 1591 where a cemetery was built for them adjacent to St John's Church. However the cemetery at Fort St Angelo remained in use and the victims of the plague of 1676 were buried there. Close to the steps that lead to the Ferramolino Cavalier there are the granaries of the Fort for the storage of grain during emergencies.

Saluting Battery

Because of the imposing height of the Ferramolino Cavalier, it served as a watch tower and was equipped, as was the case in medieval castles, with a Sentry Bell. It was rung to give alarm, to announce good tidings or salute passing galleons. It had no religious connection although the bell is now peeled for the feast of St Lawrence and that of Our Lady of Victory. The bastion was used as a saluting battery by the British Admiralty.



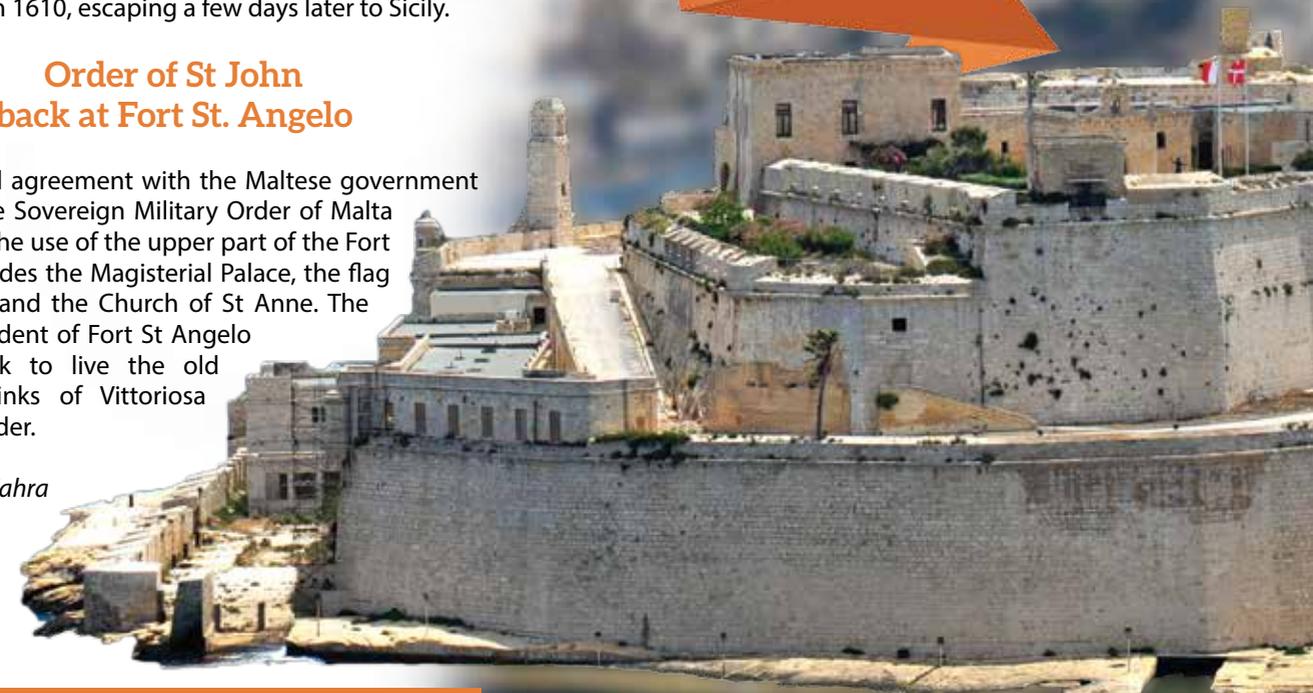
The Dungeons

The Captain's House stood in the vicinity of the Ferramolino Cavalier and underneath there were the slave prisons. In 1531 when Grand Master L'Isle Adam was away at Mdina with his retinue, the slaves mutinied and were at the point of seizing the Castle. However they were subdued and the ringleaders were executed. The prisons were later converted into gunpowder magazine. An underground dungeon called the *guva* or *oubliette* is situated opposite the Chapel of the Nativity. Scratched on the walls of this grim prison are various armorial shields and inscriptions in Latin and other European languages. This was the prison for high-ranking offenders. It is understood that it was here that the painter Caravaggio was detained after his skirmish at Valletta in 1610, escaping a few days later to Sicily.

Order of St John back at Fort St. Angelo

By a special agreement with the Maltese government in 1999, the Sovereign Military Order of Malta was given the use of the upper part of the Fort which includes the Magisterial Palace, the flag post ramp and the Church of St Anne. The Knight Resident of Fort St Angelo brings back to live the old historical links of Vittoriosa with the Order.

Lorenzo A. Zahra



Vittoriosa

THE CASTLE OF ST. ANGELO

SENTINEL OF THE GRAND HARBOUR

Design & Printing Veritas Press, Malta



VITTORIOSA HISTORICAL
& CULTURAL SOCIETY
www.vittoriosahistorica.org



MALTA ARTS COUNCIL
www.maltaculture.com

Origin of the Castle

For more than 3,000 years, the tip of the Vittoriosa promontory, dominated by Fort St. Angelo, has played the role of sentinel to the Grand Harbour.

The origin of Fort St. Angelo goes back to the ancient times when the Phoenicians established their colony in our harbours, about 1,500 B.C. Written records indicate that on this site stood a temple of Astarte, subsequently rededicated by the Romans to Juno.

Castrum Maris

The earliest fortifications on this tongue of land are attributed to the Arabs who occupied Malta in 870 A.D. The Arabs were conquered by Count Roger de Hauteville of Normandy in 1091 who established a garrison for the protection of the harbour. During the Angevin domination between 1266-1284, the fortress started to be called *Castrum Maris* (Castle by the sea), and the nearby harbour town *Castrum Civitatis Melitae* (Castle-town of Malta). The governor of the Castle was *Castellan* who exercised separate authority over the town and the harbour, independently and occasionally in opposition to the Island's administration based in the capital city, Mdina.

When the Order of St. John set foot in Malta in 1530 and settled at Birgu, Grand Master L'Isle Adam took possession of the Castle which by then started to be called Fort St. Angelo. He occupied the palace of the former *Castellan* which was adapted to suit the Order's needs. The Order's fleet was berthed along Birgu Wharf and the Birgu Arsenal and the creek overlooking Birgu was called *Porto delle Galere* (Galley Creek).

In 1537 the bastions of the Fort were extended and various defence works were added. The ditch that separated the castle from Birgu was dug up to create a moat. In 1542 on the advice of military engineer Antonio Ferramolino, the main cavalier forming an immense platform dominating the Fort and the harbour and facing Birgu was raised. It was called Ferramolino



Tower. This was strengthened by the construction of a massive pointed bastion also facing Birgu, called after the Grand Master, D'Homedes Bastion. A defence boom was brought from Venice in 1546 to close off the mouth the Galley Creek to prevent direct attacks from the sea.

The Great Siege

After the sighting of the Turkish Armada in 1565, the Fort made ready for the coming onslaught. Historians agree that the Fort rendered substantial defence when the position of Birgu became almost untenable. At one bleak point during the siege, the Order's Council proposed the evacuation of Birgu to the castle, but Grand Master De La Vallette refused even the suggestion of the abandonment of Birgu.

The Great Siege left the Fort severely damaged and necessary repairs and restorations to the battered fortifications were taken in hand following contributions from Pope Pius V in 1566.

Grunenbergh Bastion

Grand Master Caraffa (1680-1690), desiring to push forward works commenced by his predecessors, undertook a major overhaul of the Castle. He built three batteries commanding the entrance to Grand Harbour. The lowest of these is situated at sea level, with the other two rising in steps above it. A renowned military engineer Grunenbergh was shortly commissioned to strengthen the Castle further. He caused a long line of walls to envelope the entire circuit bordering the inner side of the Castle facing the Galley Creek up to the Castle's Main Gate. The new walls were built of first class white Malta stone known as *zongor* (lower coralline limestone). Grunenbergh actually paid for part of the construction cost himself.

To commemorate these improvements which transformed the Castle into a massive fighting complex and gave it the structure that survived till this day, Grunenbergh placed his escutcheons on the Main Gate of the Castle and a marble tablet was installed with an inscription in Latin. The lower bastion facing Valletta is still called Grunenbergh Bastion.

The Fort has only one entrance which is reached over a bridge from Vittoriosa Wharf. The shore from the moat to the ramp leading to the Castle's Main Gate was adapted to enable galleys to come alongside and discharge their cargo direct into the nearby stores.

The British period

Until 1801 when the British Forces arrived in Malta, a detachment of Maltese light infantry was stationed in the Castle. The Fort formally passed to the British military colonial authorities in 1819. In 1907 the Castle became the headquarters of the Royal Navy for use as a shore establishment. Its name was changed, inappropriately and heedless of the Fort's noble history, to H.M.S. Egmont. Five

years later, this was corrected and the Fort became known as H.M.S. Fort St Angelo. Before 1907 the British Navy made use of an old 19th century timber galleon that was anchored at Vittoriosa called H.M.S. Hibernia. When this galleon was later dismantled, part of its hull consisting of a figurehead representing the Lord of Hibernia (Ireland) playing the lute, was placed inside the Main Gate of the Fort. It was taken to the British Naval Academy at Portsmouth when the Naval base was closed in 1979, but was subsequently donated to the National Maritime Museum at Vittoriosa where it is now displayed.

The same bastions of Fort St Angelo withstood heavy bombardments during the war when the Fort was equipped with various anti-aircraft guns. It was at the mercy of innumerable air strikes but survived, though not unscathed.

Rock-cut chapel in the Castle

The principal chapel of the Castle dedicated to the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin is hewn in rocks and is as old as its sister chapel at Rabat known as St Paul's Grotto. Although a marble tablet in the chapel records that it was erected in 1090, it was traditionally held that the chapel existed since the foundation of Christianity in Malta and was dedicated to the Mother of God. During medieval times it served the inhabitants of Birgu but in 1409 became an independent entity to cater for the spiritual needs of the Fort's garrison. In later years it again became under the suzerainty of the Vittoriosa parish.

Little of the original chapel survives. The old altarpiece was removed to St Lawrence church where it was destroyed in a 1941 air-raid. It was subsequently replaced

