

Post of Allemagne

The long bastion running along Vittoriosa's eastern side up to the Sacra Infermeria was defended by German Knights and was called the Post of Allemagne. It offers a magnificent view of Kalkara Creek and the Grand Harbour entrance. An exit to the sea at the foot of the Post of Allemagne gives access to the Infirmary Sally Port. It was through this passageway that help was sent to the besieged at Fort St Elmo during the Great Siege, and it was also from here that the troops making up the Piccolo Soccorso reinforcement entered the embattled Birgu.

Post of Angleterre

The furthestmost part of Vittoriosa all the way to Fort St Angelo was the Post of Angleterre, even if the contingent of English Knights was small during the Great Siege. Within the bastions there were the underground Slave Dungeons. Their vicinity to Vittoriosa Wharf indicated that the prisoners were engaged as rowers in the Orders' galleys. That part of the Post of Angleterre which contained the dungeons was demolished and is now occupied by modern apartments.

The Main Gate

The defence scheme around Vittoriosa's Main Gate, known as Porta Maggiore, is unique and has medieval origins. In order to make it difficult for the attacking forces to penetrate into the city and thereby celebrate their conquest by an ignominious entrance into the city, the Main Gate is shielded by two anterior bastions or counterguards with two other gates therein, the Cover Gate, or Couvre Porte, in the Post of France, and the Advanced Gate, in the Post of Aragon. The three gates were separated by ditches each having a drawbridge.

The three gates are executed in baroque architecture with some intricate sculptural design and they bear the date of the last restoration works by the Order carried out by Grand Master De Vilhena in 1722 to the design of military engineer Charles De Mondion.

This date is in fact inscribed on the Advanced Gate. Distinct over the gates are the defaced escutcheons which were removed by the French Revolutionary Army in 1799. The Main Gate still bears the quotation from Psalm 139: *Obumbrasti Super Caput Meum in Die Belli* (Thou hast overshadowed my head during the days of war). This was installed after the Great Siege of 1565 victory.

At the Main Gate Approach there are old storehouses used during the Great Siege and these were linked to the Post of Aragon. Some of these were removed during the British period and replaced by Admiralty Gate.

A modern access into Vittoriosa was opened during the post-war reconstruction with the erection of a bridge across the Vittoriosa ditch right into Main Gate Street.

Following the 1722 renovation intervention by Mondion, the Vittoriosa fortifications were never given any maintenance until the major restoration project initiated in 2008 partly financed with EU funding.

Vittoriosa Square

Main Gate Street is the main thoroughfare of the city leading to the square. The street layout of the city is an excellent example of a medieval city intended for defence purposes in case of an enemy intrusion: the narrow, contorted streets twist as though they are blind alleys or as if blocked but then turn abruptly into another streets, each turning being within bowshot of the next. All the streets lead to the square.

The square was called the Piazza d'Armi as it was the meeting place of the Order's garrisons, the place where troops could be allocated in the various defence posts. High above the square rose the Clock Tower which served as vedette and sentry during the Great Siege. It was destroyed by a direct hit during World War II.

Outer Vittoriosa defences

As the threat of another Ottoman assault on Malta persisted, the Order decided to strengthen the landside defences of Vittoriosa and the outlying city of Cospicua. So in 1638 the engineer Fra Firenzuola was engaged and he constructed the lines still called after his name. Some years later, Grand Master Cottoner embarked on a more ambitious project, encircling the Three Cities of Vittoriosa, Cospicua and Senglea with a massive line of fortifications running for some 5 kilometers, thus completely sealing off the Order's Fleet base at the Vittoriosa Marina against an enemy invasion.

In 1730 Grand Master De Vilhena went a step ahead and erected Fort San Salvatore at the northern perimeter of the Cottonera Lines, exactly on the site where the Turks had planted their guns pointing to Birgu during the Great Siege.

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Vittoriosa

THE BASTIONS THAT WITHSTOOD A SIEGE





Birgu fortifications

The old city of Birgu merited to be renamed Vittoriosa after the Great Siege victory as this was achieved within bastions. The Order of St John and Malta gained wide reputation throughout Europe after the decisive defeat of the Ottoman invaders. The fortifications of the city, gallantly defended during the siege by Knights from various European nationalities and by the Maltese garrison, went down into history as unconquerable.

The Vittoriosa fortifications are a typical example of 16th century military defence system with various architectural features designed by renowned engineers. These include high level batteries connected with curtains, parapets, hidden ramps on terraces with low flights of steps to allow the guns and ammunition trolleys to be wheeled smoothly to the gun posts and embrasures.



Early defence lines

During the Middle Ages Birgu had crude defences consisting of a line of walls interspersed with towers. With the arrival of the Order in 1530 these defences were inadequate to protect the Order and its community which had settled in Birgu. Grand Master L'Isle Adam immediately embarked on improvements to the Birgu defences. The wall facing St. Margaret Hill was rebuilt and extended to both sides of the Birgu peninsula. A year later Grand Master D'Homedes, on the advice of Engineer Carmolino, deepened the ditch of the city to further cut it off from the mainland. He also constructed walls facing Kalkara creek thereby practically encircling the city with bastions.

Two high Cavaliers

A defence commission consisting of the German, Fra George Von Bombast, the French, Fra Louis De Lastic and the Italian, Leone Strozzi recommended the further strengthening of the landside defences and recommended the construction of two massive bastions projecting into the ditch, namely the Post of Provence and the Post of Auvergne. The work was entrusted to the Spanish engineer Pedro Pardo, who was specifically despatched to Malta by the Viceroy of Sicily De Vega. The two posts are joined together by means of a curtain, called the French Curtain. The two posts were crowned with two compact towering forts called cavaliers, St James' Cavalier and St John's Cavalier, respectively. It can thus be seen that the land side of Vittoriosa was the responsibility of the Knights from the three French Langues.



The Post of Castille

The innermost part of Vittoriosa flanking the creek and facing Kalkara was defended by the Spanish Knights from the Langue of Castille. This area is dominated by the formidable Post of Castille. This fortress bore one of the fiercest attacks during the Great Siege of 1565 and was the site of heroic deeds. At one point the Ottomans managed to open a gap in one of the outposts of the fortress called St Laurence Demi-Bastion. Were it not for the prompt counter-attack and bravery of the defenders, the enemy would have scrambled into the city. This place is commonly called *il-prexxa*, a derivation of the word *la breccia*, the breach. Grand Master De La Vallette himself took charge of the Post when the fighting was at its heaviest. He was wounded and had to be taken into a nearby house for refuge until he was taken to the Sacra Infermeria.

The Post of Castille, built in 1553, is an ingenious defence stronghold. The fort itself which is joined to the walls that surround the city is shielded by an outlying hornwork which is separated from the fort by a ditch. The hornwork had caponiers across the top to serve as traverses to protect the defenders from flying shrapnel. Inside the fort there are large stores for ammunition and a tunnel leading to the ditch. This tunnel served as shelter for

the people of Vittoriosa during air-raids in World War II. The defence complex at the Post of Castille presents four layers of batteries, with the lofty St James Cavalier rising on the top. One of these batteries was manned by Italian Knights and is called the Post of Genoa.

The Post of Castille still preserves to this day its original 16th century structure. It was the only defence bulwark of Vittoriosa on the landside during the Great Siege as the more sophisticated outer fortifications towards Cottonera were erected a century later.

The Armoury

Close to the Post of Castille and hidden behind St James' Cavalier there is the huge rectangular palace of the Old Armoury. Besides being the principal repository of arms and gunpowder during the Great Siege, it was turned into a temporary hospital. After the transfer of the Order's headquarters to Valletta, the building served for a time as a monastery. During the British period it was again used as a military hospital and eventually as a Army Quarters, in fact for a time it was called *il-Kwartier*. During the 20th century it served as a Government school.

