

The Restoration of Mdina

The changing role of Mdina under the Knights

Since the arrival of the Knights in 1530 Mdina had started losing its population. Most of its noble families left to live in Sicily. The lower classes preferred to live in its suburb Rabat. By the late 1600s the population of Mdina consisted of around 300 people mostly from the noble and professional classes

The earthquake of 1693 and its consequences on Mdina

Malta felt the outer ripples of the 1693 earthquake which caused such extensive damage in Sicily. Hundreds of people were killed in Syracuse and Catania. On 11th August the tremors were felt in all parts of Malta and Gozo. Panic and fear swept throughout the islands. Many people stayed outside their homes, and passed the night in the open: the people of Valletta stayed in *'nel piano della Floriana'* while the people of Senglea took refuge on the galleys and other ships. Others put up tents outside the walls. No deaths were caused by the actual earthquake but some people died later because of injuries incurred by falling masonry. On the other hand, a considerable number of Maltese who were in Sicily lost their life because of the earthquake. In the following months the Order set up a Commission of architects to report on the damages.

At Mdina, a large section of the town was severely shaken. The old medieval Cathedral suffered considerable damage but it was not totally destroyed. The decision to replace it had already been taken in 1682. The earthquake simply hastened its demolition. The new Cathedral was designed by the Maltese architect **Lorenzo Gafà** on a richly decorated baroque style. It took only five years to build: from 1697-1702. Gafà was also responsible for the Gozo Cathedral (1711) and for some other fine churches in the villages.

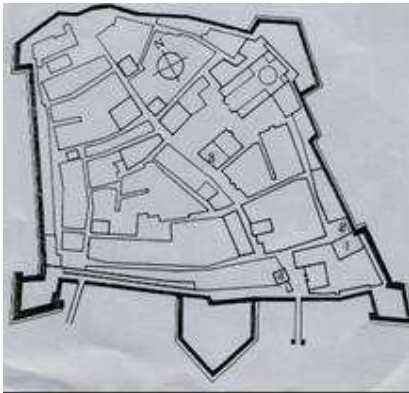
Restoration works undertaken by Grand Master Vilhena

Thirty years after the earthquake **Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena** (1722-36) decided to undertake a comprehensive restoration of Mdina to clear the remaining damaged buildings and to give some life to the old city since it had been losing its population who preferred to go and live in the villages.

Between 1723 and 1728 the fortifications were remodeled and repaired, some alterations were made to the street plan of the town and new public buildings were built on French baroque style. Nearly all these buildings were designed by the Parisian architect **Francois de Mondion** who introduced the French baroque building style to Malta. The old medieval

square in front of the old Cathedral was enlarged to make more space for the new Cathedral, the Bishop's Palace and the **Banca Giuratale** (or **Municipal Palace**). In 1727 Grandmaster Manoel Vilhena issued a decree for the repopulation of Mdina. An intense building activity followed that transformed Mdina from a neglected old town into a magnificent French-baroque style citadel. Building continued well into the 1730s. The last buildings to be completed were the storage magazines close to **Greeks Gate** (1739).

Unfortunately, all these projects failed to lure people to go to live in Mdina. Population figures for Mdina for the 18th and 19th century remained low. One thing was certain, the Mdina project served as a propaganda scheme of the power and magnificence of the Order's Government and the benevolence of the Grandmaster.



Plan of Mdina in 1720s



GM Manoel Vilhena



Mondion's new Mdina Main Gate

Source: *Mdina and the Earthquake of 1693*, ed. Canon John Azzopardi, Malta 1993.