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[p.20] A Note on Stefano and Sebastiano Ittar

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The National Library of Valletta, the BIBLIOTHECA, is not only the last important building erected by the Knights of St. John in Malta, but it is also one of the most imposing in the City, particularly as its splendid architectural features are so admirably set off by its position and surroundings.

There has always been something intriguing about the unusual name of the Architect, Stefano Ittar, as well as in the fact that, in spite of his obvious merits, few people in Malta seemed to know very much about him. Before being engaged by the Council of the Order of St. John, Ittar had been working in Catania and the buildings he had erected in that City during twenty years of intense activity were of sufficient importance for his name to be included now in all the major histories of Sicilian Architecture.

Stefano was born in about 1730¹ and was a descendant of the noble house of Guidone de Hittar, Conti del Balneo di Toscana. According to a recent writer² he was born in Poland, where his father had gone owing to financial difficulties following a quarrel with the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Shortly afterwards the family moved to Rome where, in due course, Stefano studied architecture and became a protégé of Cardinal Alessandro Albani, the celebrated Vatican Librarian and Patron of artists.³ He was certainly attracted and, to some extent, influenced by the style of Francesco Borromini and his later followers, which is revealed in most of his earlier Sicilian works. He also travelled in Spain before settling down in Catania in 1765.

During that period Catania was passing through one of its greatest architectural phases; most of the ravages of the earthquake of 1693 had been made good and, since the appointment as city architect of Giovanni Battista Vaccarini (1702-1768), a man who dedicated his whole life to the reconstruction and embellishment of the City, work had been proceeding apace, especially in the area around the great Duomo of St. Agatha. Shortly after his arrival, Ittar met Don Ignazio Paternò, Principe di Biscari (1719-1786), who was then building his fantastic Palazzo overlooking the harbour and filling it with antiques and works of art of every kind.

Don Ignazio, with whom Ittar was to spend most of the next few years, was an authentic Renaissance Prince living in Sicily when the type had long departed from the rest of Italy. He was fabulously wealthy, powerful, cultured, [p.21] endowed with numerous titles of nobility and, above all, noble in character and demeanour. Most of the foreign travellers of the period, including Jean Houel, Patrick Brydone and Goethe, bear witness to this. When Brydone visited him in 1770, although suitably impressed by house and museum, he remarked that "*the polite and amiable behaviour of the owner gives more pleasure than all his curiosities.*"⁴

¹ The *Status Animarum* of the Parish of St. Dominic, Valletta, for the year 1787, gives his age as 57.

² Olivier Michel, Rome, 1981. Information supplied by Mr. Michael Ellul, B.E. & A., F.R.Hist.S.

³ Anthony Blunt: "*Sicilian Baroque*"; London, 1968; p. 27.

⁴ Patrick Brydone: "*A tour through Sicily and Malta, etc.*"; London, 1776, p. 143.

The Prince persuaded the architect to remain in Catania. Stefano not only did so but married Rosaria, daughter of Francesco Battaglia (1702-1788), the architect in charge of the building. In due course, while his father-in-law loaded him with work Rosaria dutifully presented him with half a dozen healthy sons: Sebastiano, Errigo, Salvatore, Giuseppe, Benedetto and Franco, and three daughters: Agata, Francesca and Concetta.⁵ When Ittar joined the team of builders, Palazzo Biscari was already far advanced and it is unlikely that he had any hand in the design of the frothy decorations of the water-front facade. On the contrary, he may have influenced the calmer atmosphere prevailing in the inner courtyards, while he certainly worked on the upper floors of the building.

Stefano joined his father-in-law in many other works, notably the enormous Benedictine Monastery, which had originally been planned as a city within a city and is still the second largest of its kind in Europe. Like so many others, the original building had been destroyed in the earthquake of 1693 and a new project had been elaborated; but even this had been altered and enlarged by successive architects who worked on it from time to time. Ittar's major contribution to this huge enterprise, and probably his own most successful work, was the dome over the monastery church of San Niccolò l'Arena, which he designed and built between 1768 and 1783, while still in the regular employment of the monks.⁶ With its tall, circular drum, wide-ribbed dome and elegant lantern which seems to float on air, it is one of the most graceful features of the Catania skyline. Ittar also designed the layout of the semi-circular piazza opposite the Church, as well as the facade of some of the houses on its fringe; but the Church itself was never completed and the facade remains unfinished to this day.

Another work in collaboration between Ittar and Battaglia was the beautiful Porta Ferdinanda, now Porta Garibaldi. It is a lively creation in alternate layers of black lava and white granite, decorated with trumpeting angels, heraldic trophies and surmounted by a large clock. With its curved wings it looks more like the setting for a fountain than a city gate. Most probably, they also designed the layout of the adjacent Piazza Palestro, one of the few [p.22] surviving green areas of Catania.

Eventually, in about 1767, Stefano was able to break out on his own and, during the ensuing years, he completed a number of buildings which were, without doubt, a nostalgic throwback to his Roman days. The first was the Church of San Martino ai Bianchi, just round the corner from Piazza San Filippo (now P. Mazzini), for which he had designed an elegant colonnade. San Martino was the first of the curvilinear facades designed by Ittar, all within a hundred metres or so of the Duomo and which, after Vaccarini's Badia di Sant'Agata, were most influential in steering the architecture of Catania towards the Roman High Baroque. The following year he produced what must be his masterpiece, the facade of the Collegiata, a fine church originally planned by Antonio Amato (c. 1700-1750), to which Ittar gave all he could remember of Borromini but with characteristic Sicilian overtones. The sinuous facade, divided into three vertical bays by pairs of columns, surmounted by a deep, arched alcove with a smaller niche on either side containing statues, and topped by a richly decorated, central belfry, also crowned with statuary, produces a striking effect of chiaroscuro worthy of the best of its contemporaries.

At the back of the Duomo he designed the Church of San Placido, a vertical composition on two storeys sharply divided by a heavy cornice and surmounted by another central belfry crowned with statues. It has a longitudinal plan, with five side altars placed in recesses in the walls so as not to disturb the long perspective to the deep alcove of the presbitery. The undulant facade, with the wings set at an angle, is built entirely of the creamy

⁵ *Archivum S.M. Portus Salutis*, Valletta; *Status Animarum*, Vol. 35, fol. 55v.

⁶ Gaetano Gangi: "*Il Barocco nella Sicilia Orientale*," Roma, 1964, p. 38.

pietra di Siracusa, akin to the Maltese limestone, which has now acquired the mellow, golden patina we know so well.

After the death of Vaccarini, Ittar was engaged by the Authorities to produce an up-to-date planimetry of the City, which he later engraved and had printed. It is a remarkable piece of work showing the City as reconstructed after the great earthquake, with its long, straight roads cutting across the Via Etnea at right angles. The main crossing, known as the Quattro Canti di Città, for which Ittar designed the corners of Via Etnea and Via di San Giuliano, is one of Vaccarini's major achievements.

By that time Stefano Ittar was well established as one of Catania's leading architects and he was working on the severely classical facade of the Collegio Cutelli when, as a result of the decision taken by the Chapter General of the Order of St. John, held in Malta in 1776, he was introduced to a completely different way of life in a new country. In the course of that meeting, the "*Venerandi Sedici*" had considered two petitions drawing their attention to the precarious state of the books in the library collections, which were riddled with bookworm and were falling to pieces through damp and general [p.23] neglect.⁷ After protracted discussions, lasting several years, the Council decided that only drastic action could remedy the situation and it was resolved to construct a new building to which the books and other collections would eventually be transferred.⁸

The architect chosen for the job was Stefano Ittar, whose employment with the Benedictines of Catania had just come to an end; in fact, his last salary had been paid to him in respect of the period ended in April, 1783.⁹ He seems to have arrived in Malta shortly afterwards and to have submitted his plans without delay because, on the 16th April, 1785, the following entry was made in the records of the Veneranda Camera del Tesoro: "*Avendo noi chiamato in Convento l'Architetto D. Stefano Ittar per fabricare la nuova Bibliotheca abbiamo convenuto col medesimo di dargli l'assegnamento annuale di Scudi 1500 che deve principiare a decorrere dalli 2 Ottobre 1784, con pagargli inoltre lo affitto di casa.*"¹⁰ It was a very handsome arrangement for those days, particularly as Ittar had been called in over the head of the Capo Mastro delle Opere, Antonio Cachia, which must have caused considerable resentment. The Architect duly took up residence, with Rosaria and the children, in a large house "nella Strada Principale" of the Parish of St. Dominic, Valletta.¹¹

It is hardly surprising that, even after having worked with an architect like Francesco Battaglia and after having produced several fine Borrominian buildings of his own, Ittar should now have revealed himself as an out-and-out Classicist. His Bibliotheca is a model of decorum and composure and he closely follows the rules not only in the proportion and balance of his main elevation, but also down to the smallest detail of columns, arches, windows and pediments. The grandeur of the facade is equalled by that of the monumental staircase, carefully and elegantly planned, with a short flight from the circular entrance branching in two at the first landing. From there another short flight leads to the left and a long leisurely flight ascends to the right, well lit by large windows all the way up and with frequent pauses for breath. In the interior decoration of the staircase, with its festoons, rams' heads and Roman medallions, Stefano may have been assisted by his eldest son Sebastiano, then just over twenty years old and soon to reveal himself an excellent draughtsman. The Grand Staircase ends on a double landing which leads into the main Library Hall, measuring

⁷ Archives of the Order of Malta; Vol. 312, fol. 375: "*Memoria sopra la publica Bibliotheca di questa Sacra Religione Gerosolimitana*"; 26 November, 1776.

⁸ Antonio Annetto Caruana: "*The Royal Public Library of Malta*"; Malta, 1898.

⁹ Salvatore Boscarino: "*Studi e rilievi di architettura siciliana*"; Messina, 1961, p. 98.

¹⁰ A.O.M.; *Deliberazioni della Veneranda Camera del Tesoro A*; fol. 315.

¹¹ *Archivum S.M.P.S.*, loc. cit.

about 5600 square feet and immensely high. It is brightly illuminated from both sides, but mainly from the North, where there are five large windows surmounted by as many oval openings. This orientation [p.24] helps to keep out the damp Scirocco wind which harms the books, but it is extremely uncomfortable for students who use the place in winter. The proportions of the facade are so exact as to be misleading with regard to size: for instance, one can only obtain a precise idea of the height of the balcony by standing on it and trying to look out. One can only do so by looking through the balusters.

The Bibliotheca was completed in 1796, six years after Ittar's death and, in this connection, a rather interesting story was published recently. It is related that Ittar committed suicide because, during construction, the flat arches over the ground floor of the Bibliotheca started to give way and had to be supported by the insertion of additional arches between the columns of the facade, which spoiled the tone and rhythm of the original project. The work was then finished by the Capo Mastro Cachia.¹² On closer examination, the whole story appears extremely unlikely; in particular, there is no evidence at all of a possible suicide. On the contrary, the appropriate entry in the *Liber Mortuorum* of the Parish of Sancta Maria Portus Salutis, dated the 18th January, 1790, declares that Stefano Ittar, husband of Rosaria, died "*in comunione Sanctae Matris Ecclesiae*" and "*Sanctis munitus Sacramentis*."¹³ He was buried in the Church of Sancta Maria de Jesu where, on the same day, a High Mass for the repose of his soul was celebrated by the Franciscan Friar, Padre Carlo da Villanova.¹⁴ At that time, when Church and Inquisition were all-powerful in such matters, all this would have been impossible had he taken his own life.

A close look at the facade of the Bibliotheca shows that a couple of the "*piattabande*," the enormous monolithic lintels which rest directly on the half columns, are indeed cracked; but the damage extends down through the supporting arches which, obviously, must have been there when it happened. It may also be seen that the arches between the columns and the great vault over Treasury Street, including the cassettoni and the triangular pendentives at the junctions, are designed and constructed as a whole with no visible additions. Once no source of the story is given it is difficult to explain the damage, unless it can be attributed to settling of the mortar filling. There is no doubt that, after Ittar's death, the Bibliotheca was completed by Cachia in his official capacity. As will be seen, the Capo Mastro had had another clash with Ittar a couple of years previously, which makes the story all the more suspect. Finally, it should be borne in mind that Ittar had already designed and built [p.25] an almost identical facade, with "*pattabande*" resting on coupled columns and with arches in between, for the Collegio Cutelli in Catania.

As usually happens with foreign artists visiting Malta, Stefano Ittar received several outside commissions. In 1786 the Noble Gio Francesco Bonnici, Baron of Qlejgħa and one of the great builders of that patrician family, engaged him to build a summer house overlooking the Argotti Gardens, in Floriana.¹⁵ The result was the charming Villino Agata, now unfortunately built-in and invisible from the street. It might almost be called a Bibliotheca in miniature, adapted for use as a private residence. There is the same division of the facade into five vertical bays, separated by pilasters and with recessed panels for the windows, which are topped by the same triangular pediments in the "*piano nobile*." On the groundfloor, instead of the arches of the larger building, we find a series of doors with some rather curious, square

¹² Vincenzo Bonello: "*Posizione storica, dell'architettura inattese dal '500 al '700*"; in Atti del XV Congresso di Storia dell'Architettura; Roma, 1970, p. 456.

¹³ *Archivum S.M.P.S., Liber Defunctorum*, Vol. VII, fol. 37r.

¹⁴ Provincial Archives O.F.M., Malta, *Libro Messe*, 1790: "*A dì 18 Gennaro Lunedì. Una messa Cantata per il fu Stefano Itta (sic). + P. Carlo da Villanova Celeb. e Cant. per il detto.*"

¹⁵ Verbal communication from Marquis Alfio Testaferrata Bonnici.

fan-lights. The “temple” motif in the central feature is surmounted by an elaborate coat-of-arms, complete with supporters, and a baronial crown which add further dignity to this graceful building.¹⁶

The following year, the Assembly of the Venerable Langue of Provence, wishing to increase its revenues, decided to build a row of houses in the back garden of its National Auberge. Plans were called for and two sets were duly submitted: one by the Capo Mastro, Antonio Cachia and the other by the Treasury Architect, Stefano Ittar. Once again, fortune smiled on the latter or, as the Commissioners more elegantly put it: “*le sentiment de suivre le plan de l’Architecte a été approuvé par voix*”.¹⁷ Cachia was paid 60 Scudi for his plans and Ittar got the job. Work was started immediately; but the Langue soon ran into financial difficulties. After several instalments of 2000 Scudi each had been paid on account, the Commissioners were informed that there was no hope of any more money coming from France. It was therefore decided to borrow a further sum of 2000 Scudi at three percent interest, until such time as the Common Treasury could be approached for more.¹⁸ In the meantime, mercifully, Stefano Ittar was dead.

The houses which Stefano built in the back garden of the Auberge are now numbered 163 to 168 Strait Street, and neither he nor the Venerable Langue seem to have gone to much trouble over their embellishment. What we see is a satisfactory, workmanlike structure, repetitive to the point of boredom but obviously quite suitable for its purpose, which was to provide an urban residential unit as quickly and as inexpensively as possible. One is immediately struck by the tight rows of windows on the first and second floors, with [p.26] hardly any space in between; but it should be remembered that, at the time, Strada Stretta had not yet been widened, and it was necessary to obtain as much light as possible. Very little attempt has been made at decoration, apart from some rather feebly designed scrolls over the first floor windows and the continuous “key” motif along the string-course. There is a flash of the old brilliance in the carved pediments of the second floor; and the monotony is relieved, but only just, by three staggered, wooden balconies, though even these lack the usual carved stone brackets.

Stefano was survived by his six sons, at least two of whom, Enrico and Sebastiano, also achieved some prominence as architects. They both left Malta immediately after their father’s death, the former going to Poland, where he worked for the Radziwills and the Zamoyskis, eventually changing his style from the neo-classic to the Gothic Revival.¹⁹ Sebastiano went to Rome where, in 1799, he met Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, who had just been appointed British Ambassador to the Sublime Porte. At that time Greece was a Turkish Province and, although Lord Elgin’s official residence would be at Pera, he had in mind a project to take detailed drawings of the Athenian Temples “*for the enlightenment of the British Public*.”²⁰ Having failed to engage the services of any of the leading artists, he recruited a number of younger men nearer to the scene of action, including Sebastiano. At first the future seemed bright; but Elgin was no Principe di Biscari and Ittar had to accept fifty guineas a year and departed for Athens, where he lived on that pittance all through 1801 and 1802. His numerous, careful drawings of the temples, including the celebrated friezes of the Parthenon by Phydias, which Elgin later carried off, are now with the Elgin Collection in the British Museum.

¹⁶ Some of the older generation may remember this building in use as the “Silver Eagle” music hall.

¹⁷ A.O.M., *Deliberations de la Venerable Langue de Provence*; Vol. 2089, fol. 203.

¹⁸ A.O.M., Vol. 2089, fol. 235-238.

¹⁹ Michel, *op. cit.*

²⁰ “*Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl Elgin*”; in *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. VII, p. 130-31.

In 1804 he returned to Catania where he settled for good and, for the next few years, he was busy making and selling engravings from his drawings of the antiquities of the Near East and also of Sicily, some of which were later published in bookform.²¹ In 1810 he was called to Acireale by the Barone Nicolosi di Villagrande, for whom he designed the elegant Villino Nicolosi, in the style of an antique Roman country-house, standing on an eminence with terraced gardens, nymphaei and blind arcades frescoed with mythological subjects. The garden paths and the tops of the outside walls are lined with Grecian urns and “antique” busts in Caltagirone ceramics.²²

Across the road from the Villino is the Church of “*La Madonna dell’Indirizzo*,” which was originally built in 1708. In 1812 Sebastiano gave it a [p.27] new facade, a plain surface with a steep, raking cornice and a circular recess in the cornice, containing a bust of the Madonna and Child. In front, he added a semicircular pronaos with six, slender columns supporting a shallow, saucerdome of red brick, the whole reminiscent in a way of the work of Giorgio Pullicino, whom he may have known.

During 1829, he prepared the designs for the Naval Hospital, which the British Admiralty had decided to build in the grounds of the Villa Bichi, overlooking Grand Harbour.²³ The foundation stone was laid on the 23rd March, 1830 and the work was carried out under the supervision of the Admiralty architect Salvatore Scerri.²⁴ It was completed a couple of years later and an engraving by Luigi Brocktorff, showing what it looked like in 1840, was published in the Malta Penny Magazine for that year.²⁵

In the meantime, Sebastiano’s drawings of the Acropolis and of the numerous classic monuments in Athens and other Greek cities were being published not only by the Artist himself but also by Elgin in London; so that now Ittar found himself very much in demand as a lecturer on the subject. In April, 1830, he travelled to Paris, stopping on the way in Naples where he was received by King Ferdinand II.²⁶ In Paris, he spoke to the Society of Fine Arts about his drawings of the Greek monuments, the talk being later published in Palermo.²⁷ On his return to Catania he was appointed “Architetto del Comune” and, on 20th June 1836, he was elected an Honorary Corresponding Member of the Institute of British Artists.²⁸ He died on the 20th October, 1847, having obtained far greater recognition than his father for a much lower performance.

A biography published anonymously in Palermo, in 1880, has this to say of him: “*Sebastiano Ittar di animo grande, d’integerrimi costumi, ornamento della patria, sostegno dell’arte architettónica, passava al numero dei più, lasciando opere pregevolissime, povertà e onorata memoria.*”²⁹ And we may as well leave it at that.

²¹ E.g.: “*Raccolta degli antichi edifici di Catania, rilevati e disegnati da Sebastiano Ittar*,” Catania, 1816; “*Viaggio Pittorico all’Etna*,” Catania, n.d.; and others.

²² Vincenzo Raciti Romeo: “*Acireale e dintorni*”; Acireale, 1927, p. 159.

²³ Anon.: “*Cenni biografici sulla vita e le opere degli architetti Stefano e Sebastiano Ittar*”; Palermo, 1880, p. 12.

²⁴ J.F. Darmanin: “*The British Naval Hospitals in Malta, with particular reference to Bighi, etc.*”; in *Archivum Melitense*, Vol. X, 4, p. 172.

²⁵ *The Malta Penny Magazine*, 24th October, 1840; p. 234.

²⁶ Anon., *op. cit.*, p. 10.

²⁷ “Sui disegni dei monumenti dell’Acropoli, di Atene, presentati alla Scuola Libera delle Belle Arti di Parigi, dal Sig. Sebastiano Ittar, Architetto di Catania. Relazione letta nella tornata del 10 agosto, 1831.” Palermo, 1835.

²⁸ The letter dated 21st June, 1836, sent to Ittar by Mr. Thomas J. Donaldson, Secretary of the Institute, is published in “*Cenni Biografici*,” p. 7.

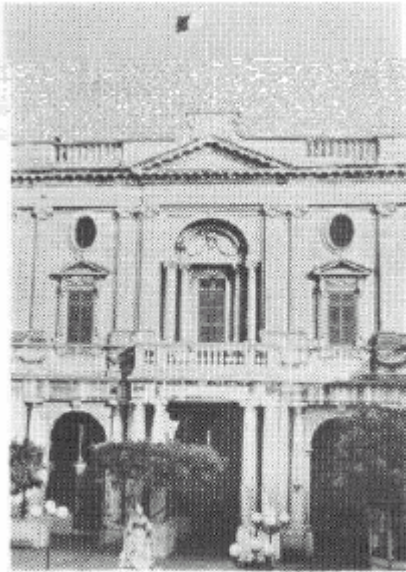
²⁹ Anon., *op. cit.*, p. 12.

[Plate 2]

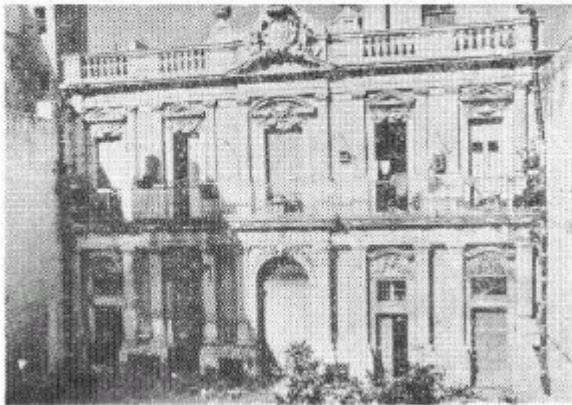


2. Stefano Ittar: Collegio Cutelli, Catania.

[Plate 3a and b]



3a. Stefano Ittar: The Bibliotheca, Valletta.



3b. Stefano Ittar: Villa Agata, Floriana.