

# ARCHITECTURAL SCENOGRAPHY IN 18TH-CENTURY MDINA

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Architectural scenography assumed a greater significance in the ceremonial rituals of the ruling Order of St John and the local Church during the 18th century. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the grand public spectacles that were held in Mdina, especially during the reign of Grand Master Anton Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736). The elements of scenography included temporary triumphal arches, festoons, damasks, street decorations, movable altars of repose and religious statuary.

This paper will focus on architectural scenography in 18th-century Mdina with specific reference to the designs of ceremonial triumphal arches and the movable 'Altar of Repose' by Pietro Paolo Troisi (1686-1750?).<sup>1</sup> The second part of the paper will be concerned with the scenographic element in the architectural and urban interventions of Grand Master Vilhena in Mdina.

## Ceremonial Triumphal Arches

It was customary for every newly elected Grand Master of the Order to take formal possession of the old capital, Mdina. The *possesto* took the form of an elaborate ceremonial procession whereby the governor and the jurats of the Mdina *Università* symbolically presented the Grand Master with the keys to the city. This ceremonial ritual was re-enacted ever since the solemn entry of Grand Master L'Isle Adam in Mdina on 13 November 1530, which event was immortalized in a painting by Antoine Favray.<sup>2</sup> With every subsequent election of a Grand Master, the formal entry into Mdina entailed more elaborate ceremonial rituals and ornate scenography.

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1 For a comprehensive account of Pietro Paolo Troisi's versatile artistic career refer to Giovanni Bonello, "Pietro Paolo Troisi: The quest for a gifted sculptor" MCM *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 29 August and 5 September 1993.

2 MCM ACM, Misc. 36 (1530) ff. 605-9, 774-6, 781-4, cited in S. Fiorini, "Mdina till the late Middle Ages", in *Mdina: The old city of Malta, a supplement of Heritage*, (1991), p. 18; Favray's painting of L'Isle Adam's entry into Mdina is to be found in the Grand Master's Palace, Valletta.

Preparations for the *posse* were usually undertaken immediately after the announcement of the date of the formal entry and attained a climax in the last few days before the event. One of the architectural highlights of the processional route was the construction of an imposing temporary triumphal arch which was set up near the corner of the present-day *Banca Giuratale*. During the 18th century, the square in front of the Mdina Cathedral occupied less than half the area of the present day square. The house of the Navarri family and its back garden separated the Strada Reale (Villegaignon Street) from the small square in front of the Cathedral.<sup>3</sup> The temporary wooden triumphal arch was erected as a gateway to the narrow street between the Navarri house and the *Banca Giuratale* which lead to the open space in front of the Cathedral.<sup>4</sup> It served as the last significant physical landmark along the processional route undertaken by the Grand Master prior to his entry into the Mdina Cathedral.

The use of triumphal arches was not only limited to the formal entries of the Grand Master in Mdina but was also evident in the formal inauguration ceremonies of the Bishop of Malta and the Grand Master in Birgu. Although the custom of erecting ceremonial triumphal arches is frequently cited in archival documents, only a few designs of these triumphal arches have survived.<sup>5</sup> The only two designs that are known to exist are those for the triumphal arches that were used in the formal entries into Mdina by Grand Master Marc'Antonio Zondadari (1720-1722) and by Grand Master Anton Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736). Both designs are preserved in the drawings collection that form part of

3 Refer to the late 17th-century manuscript plan of Mdina, MCM ACM, Misc. MS. 60, ff. vi-vii, reproduced and transcribed in *Mdina and the Earthquake of 1693*, ed. Can John Azzopardi pp. 84-8.

4 The square in front of the Mdina Cathedral assumed its present on day form after the house of the Navarri family was demolished in 1798.

5 On the occasion of Grand Master Perellos' formal entry into Mdina on 29 July 1697, a grand triumphal arch with three portals was erected to a design by the architect Giuseppe Azzopardo. (NLM AOM, MS. 264, ff. 140<sup>v</sup>-3<sup>v</sup>).

"il disegno fatto da Giuseppe Azzopardo Architetto nella piazza di detta città, con tre porte quella di mezzo magnifica..." (NLM, MS. 23 Università, entry for 21.vi.1697, f. 40). Giuseppe Azzopardo was the architect of the Baroque parish church of Gharb in Gozo, which was constructed in the early 18th century.

On 10 August 1697, Grand Master Perellos made his formal entry into Birgu for which event another triumphal arch was constructed in the square. (NLM AOM, MS. 264, f. 149). The designs of these two triumphal arches are not known to exist.

the archives of the Cathedral Museum in Mdina.<sup>6</sup> The two designs although not signed can be attributed to Pietro Paolo Troisi on the basis of supporting documentary evidence. Troisi was highly versatile in a number of artistic endeavours - as an engraver, sculptor and designer of the Order's coinage.<sup>7</sup>

### The Triumphal Arch of Grand Master Zondadari (1720-1722)

On 30 June 1720, Grand Master Marc' Antonio Zondadari made his formal entry into Mdina.<sup>8</sup> A few months earlier, four designers were invited to submit their designs for a triumphal arch to be used in the 'posesso'. Two of the designs were by Pietro Paolo Troisi and Abbate Don Aloisio Buhagiar while the other two designers were not identified.<sup>9</sup> The designs were submitted to the newly elected Grand Master who after due consideration selected Troisi's design and a second design by an unspecified artist. Furthermore he instructed the Mdina *Università* to select the design which would incur the least expense in its execution.<sup>10</sup> On 24 February 1720, several carpenters and painters were summoned to advise on the anticipated costs of construction. The craftsmen reported that Troisi's design 'resto à minor prezzo', at an estimated cost of 299 *scudi*.<sup>11</sup> On the basis of this estimate, the members of the *Università* decided to award the commission to Troisi. Furthermore the *Università* reserved the right to appoint a painter of its own choice and also stipulated that the triumphal arch had to incorporate three portals so as to distinguish it from the single portal arches that were used during the formal entries of the Bishop of Malta:

"Riservandoci il Magistrato suddetto di nominar lui il Pittore, il quale dai medessimi che presero l'appalto dovrà esser pagato, essendo banditi l'arco trionfale con doversi dare finito dal tutto, e posto nel luogo attaccato all'armarie di questa Città Notabile, dovendosi fare detto arco con tre porte per differenziarlo

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6 MCM, Collection of Drawings, Inventory nos. 476 and 477. Canon John Azzopardi, curator of the Cathedral Museum in Mdina, kindly allowed me to inspect and reproduce these designs.

7 Bonello, *cit.*

8 NLM, MS. 26, *Università*, ff. 50<sup>v</sup>-53; NLM, AOM, MS. 267, ff. 77-83.

9 NLM, MS. 26, *Università*, f. 50<sup>v</sup>.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, f. 51.

da quello si fà per possessi de Vescovi come più chiaro si vede qui sotto dove siegue l'atto d'obligatione.”<sup>12</sup>

On 29 February 1720, a contract was drawn between the *Università* and the various artisans who were to construct the triumphal arch. The craftsmen in charge of constructing the arch were Maestro Lorenzo Borg from Valletta, and Mastro Antonio and Mastro Giuseppe Fabri, the sons of the distinguished stone sculptor, Maestro Gerolamo from Birgu.<sup>13</sup> The contract stipulated that for the sum of 299 *scudi* they were to construct the arch including all the woodwork, painting and any other requirements such as the transportation of the arch from Valletta to Mdina. They were obliged to:

“construerli bene, e maestrauolmente l'Arco Trionfale pianto al luogo giusto il disegno del Signore Pietro Paolo Troisi con doverlo allestire à tutto punto l'opera falegname, pittura, e di tutto quanto vi sarà di bisogno con dover anche à loro spese proprie trasportarlo da detta Città Valletta, e piantarlo nel luogo suo proprio, che li sara destinato da questo Illustratissimo Magistrato...”<sup>14</sup>

Three days prior to the formal *possession* of Grand Master Zondadari, the *mastro architetto*, Pietro Paolo Troisi and the Fabri family of sculptors were summoned to set up the arch at the corner with the Archives building which was located on the present day site of the *Banca Giuratale*. The arch was fifty palmi high and was adorned with rich polychrome marbles and gold leaf decoration. The triumphal arch was divided in three unequal tiers. The first level was dominated by a grand semicircular arch portal with decorative coffers on the underside of the arch. Flanking the arched opening were two pairs of columns raised on wide plinths and terminating with composite Corinthian capitals. The coat of arms of the *Università* surmounted by sovereign crowns were symmetrically placed in the narrow space in between the column pairs. The columns supported a plain entablature and a cornice continuous along the façade of the arch. Prominently displayed at the head of the semicircular arch opening were two angel figures holding an inscription praising the newly elected Grand Master. The inscription in Latin read as follows:<sup>15</sup>

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12 NLM, MS. 26, Università, f. 50<sup>v</sup>.

13 NLM, MS. 89, Università: ‘Siegue la spesa fatta per l'arco trionfale per il possesso di S.A.S. Zondadari’, unnumbered fol.

14 NLM, MS. 26, Università, f. 51.

15 NLM, MS. 26, Università, ff. 52<sup>v</sup>-53.

MARCO ANTONIO ZONDADARI  
SUPREMO HIEROSOLYMITARUM MILITUM MAGISTRO  
PRINCIPI OPTIMO  
OBSEQUII ARGUMENTUM  
ANTIQUA MELITENSIVM CIVITAS  
EXCITAVIT

Prominently displayed in the second tier was an ornate medallion in relief depicting the newly elected Grand Master being welcomed by his local subjects. The uppermost level was dominated by the family coat of arms of Grand Master Marc' Antonio Zondadari supported by two graceful angels upon a well-proportioned base decorated with garlands of laurels. A pair of free-standing female figures at each end of the arch completed the ensemble. One of the figures is depicted holding a mirror in one hand, with the other hand grasping a writhing serpent. Iconographically, the figure symbolizes a representation of truth and the annihilation of evil. The other figure representing virtue is that of a woman embracing an infant and accompanied by a young child.

The lateral sides of the triumphal arch framed the view along Mdina's Strada Reale which was for this special occasion adorned with tapestries all the way to St Peter's Benedictine monastery including its church. The houses along the processional route within the city were decorated as was also the façade of the Mdina Cathedral.<sup>16</sup>

### The Triumphal Arch of Grand Master Vilhena (1722-1736)

Grand Master Zondadari's reign lasted only two years. Zondadari's successor, the Portuguese Grand Master Anton Manoel de Vilhena made his formal entry into Mdina on 20 September 1722.<sup>17</sup> For the special occasion the *Università* commissioned Pietro Paolo Troisi to prepare a design for another grand triumphal

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16 *Ibid.*

17 For a detailed account of the 'posse' of Grand Master Vilhena refer to NLM AOM, MS. 1397; NLM, MS. 27 Università, ff. 19-28<sup>v</sup>.

arch. In the documents, Troisi is referred to in the documents as the 'Mastro Architetto del' Illustratissimo Magistrato della Città Notabile'. In the implementation of his design Troisi was assisted by the master carpenter, Andrea Cattari and the painter, Aloisio Buhagiar who had unsuccessfully participated in the competition for the Zondadari arch.<sup>18</sup>

An interesting fact that emerges from the archival documents is that the arch for Vilhena's 'possesto' was to be constructed from the same arch that had been previously used for Zondadari's ceremonial entry in Mdina. One of the entries for a payment made in favour of the procurator of the St Peter's Benedictine Monastery makes reference to the receipt of the sum of 42 *scudi*:

"Pagati al Procuratore del Monastero delle Monache di San Benedetto di questa Città per l'arco trionfale che servi per il possesto della Felice memoria del Serenissimo defunto Zondadari scudi quaranta due."<sup>19</sup>

A further confirmation of the remodelling of Zondadari's arch is provided in the payment entry for *Mastro*. Andrea Cattari "per haver rinovato e rifabricato il detto Arco trionfale secondo il disegno di Pietro Paolo Troisi". Don Aloisio Buhagiar was paid the sum of 80 *scudi* "per haver dipinto l'Arco Trionfale". Pietro Paolo Troisi received the un princely sum of 20 *scudi* for preparing the design and for assisting in the construction of the arch.<sup>20</sup>

The triumphal arch was erected on 19 September 1722 at a site adjacent to the corner of the the Archives building as was the traditional custom. From the existing design it appears that the Vilhena arch was of a greater width than the earlier Zondadari arch. The arch consisted of a semicircular-headed arch opening which was flanked on each side by a lower portal. On one of the lateral portals was placed the figure of a Knight courageously wrestling with a lion. The narrative scene on the right-hand portal depicted a knight of the Order of St John waving a sword and amidst various war trophies subjugating at his feet the enemies of the Order. Four ornate columns with flutings along the lower third of the shaft divided the lower level in three bays.

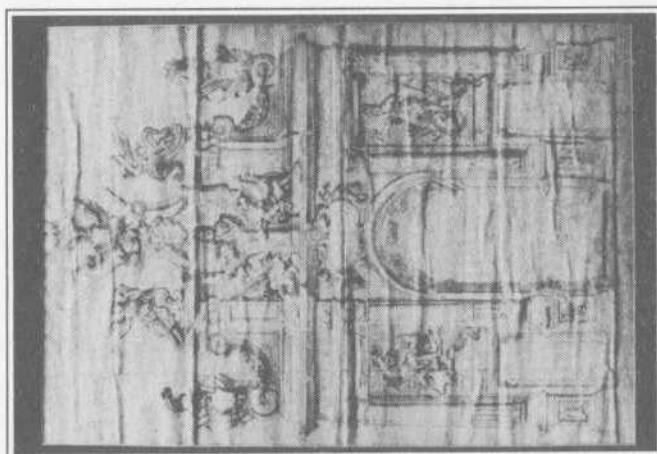
The central arch opening was crowned by an ornate cartouche that contained an inscription with engravings in characters of gold commemorating the entry

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18 NLM, MS. 27 Università, f. 19.

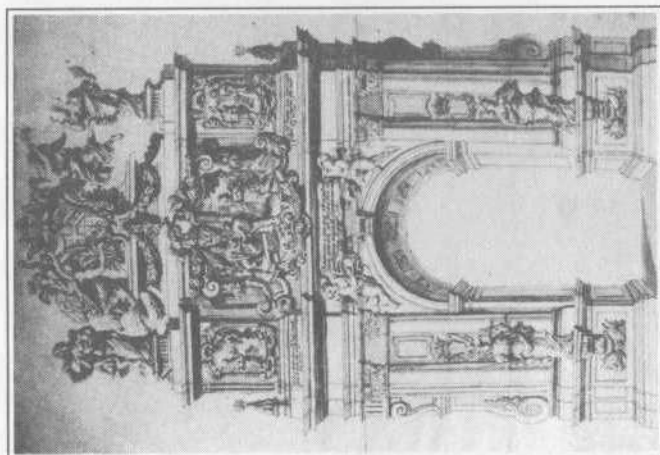
19 NLM, MS. 89 Università: Spesa fatta per il felice possesto di S.A.S. don Antonio Manoel seguito li 20 Settembre 1722, unnumbered fols.

20 *Ibid.*



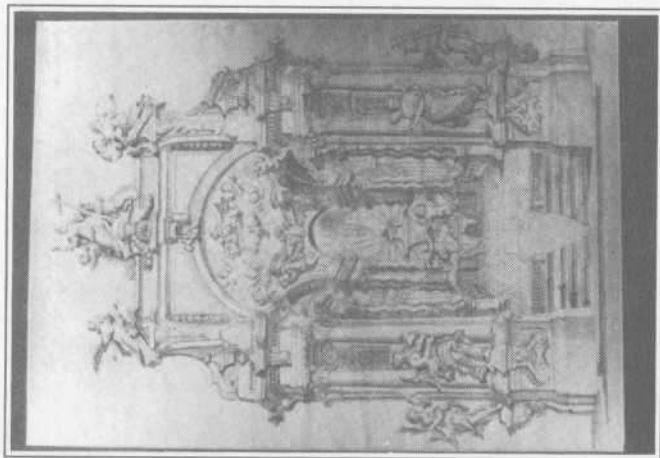
*Fig. 1: Design of the Triumphal Arch by Pietro Paolo Troisi used in the formal entry into Mdina by Grand Master Marc'Antonio Zondadari (1720-1722).*

*Courtesy of the Cathedral Museum, Mdina.*

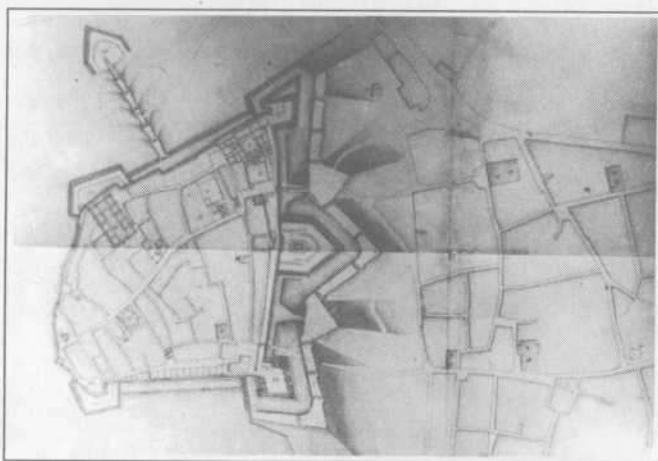


*Fig. 2: Design of the Triumphal Arch by Pietro Paolo Troisi used in the formal entry into Mdina by Grand Master Anton Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736).*

*Courtesy of the Cathedral Museum, Mdina.*



*Fig. 3: Design of the 'Altar of Repose' by Pietro Paolo Troisi.  
Courtesy of the Cathedral Museum, Mdina.*



*Fig. 4: Early 18th-century plan of Mdina delineating the architectural and urban interventions of François de Mondion. Plan pre-dates the construction of the Seminary building (1734-1742). Also note the block occupying the present day Archbishop's Square, the vacant site which was later occupied by the Bishop's Palace and the Navarri family block which separates the Strada Reale from the restricted square in front of the Cathedral.*

*Courtesy of the Cathedral Museum, Mdina.*



of Vilhena. The main highlight of the triumphal arch was the bust of Grand Master Vilhena that was raised on a podium amidst military trophies, banners and other paraphernalia. Curved volutes connected the raised centrepiece to the lower outer bays. The coat-of-arms of the *Mdina Università* were symmetrically placed on the outer ends of the volutes while two female figures were seated in a reclined posture on the inner ends. The coat of arms of Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena surmounted the bust and was accompanied by the inscription, "Amoris Argumentio Notabilis erga sum Principem". The Janus double-headed imperial eagle insignia of the Kingdom of Sicily in which the Order held the island in fiefdom was the final crowning element. The Order's chronicler describes in minutest detail the triumphal arch which description fully corresponds to the surviving design to be found in the drawings collection of the Mdina Cathedral Museum.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the writer of the "Relazione del Suntuoso Possesso..." states that the triumphal arch was widely admired for its fine painted artwork and for its rich symbolic iconography

"... che portò la commune approvazione, sì per i fini penneli, e coloriti con quali era lavorato comè anche per le figure, e concetti; che rappresentava in varie parti del suo Prospetto."<sup>22</sup>

## The 'Altar of Repose' of the Mdina Cathedral

None of the ceremonial triumphal arches used during the traditional 'possesto' of the Grand Master have survived. The custom of reutilizing the materials out of which the arch was constructed and also, the perishable nature of timber did not contribute to the preservation of these fine architectural scenographic settings. However, one notable exception to this general tendency is the movable 'Altar of Repose' that is assembled every year in the Mdina Cathedral for the liturgical celebrations of Maundy Thursday during the Holy Week. The 'Holy Sepulchre' or 'Altar of Repose' was constructed in 1751-52, by the renowned Maltese painter, Francesco Zahra (1710-1773) who had the task of implementing an earlier design prepared by Pietro Paolo Troisi.<sup>23</sup> Troisi's original design for the 'Altar of Repose' has also survived and it unmistakably

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21 NLMAOM, MS. 1397.

22 *Ibid.*

23 Canon John Azzopardi, "Francesco Zahra's works in the Cathedral Church of Mdina and its Museum", in *Francesco Zahra 1710-1773*, 77-80.

bears the same drawing style as that of his other designs for the two triumphal arches.<sup>24</sup>

In August 1727, Canon Gourgion, procurator of the Cathedral Chapter, commissioned Troisi to prepare a design for the movable 'Altar of Repose' or 'la machina del Sepolchro' as it was referred to in the documents.<sup>25</sup> On 16 February 1728, a mandato was issued which authorized the payment of 17 *scudi* to Troisi for having submitted his design to the Cathedral Chapter:

"16 February 1728 mandato... = date, e pagate a Pietro Paolo Troisi la somma di 17 scudi: per haver il medesimo fatto il disegno del Sepolcro, da farsi in servizio della medesima Chiesa." <sup>26</sup>

However, plans to implement the design were shelved for more than two decades and it was only after Troisi's death, that Francesco Zahra assumed the role of 'Architetto della Machina del Sepolcro'. For a comprehensive exposition on Zahra's involvement in the construction of the 'Altar of Repose' the reader is referred to the research contribution by Canon John Azzopardi in the catalogue on Francesco Zahra (1710-1773) which was published on the occasion of an exhibition of his artistic works that was held at the Cathedral Museum in Mdina.<sup>27</sup> A close study of the relevant documents reveals that the Cathedral Chapter was determined to ensure that Zahra would execute the works without the slightest variation from Troisi's original design.

Troisi's scenographic design is expressed in the contemporary 'High Baroque' artistic tradition. It was the designer's intention to accentuate the one-point perspective quality of the architectural setting where the sight-lines converge from the grand triumphal arch opening to a central minor arch opening recessed at the end of the ensemble. The four ornate columns that are raised on plinths on the main façade give way to receding quadri-pair clusters of Solomonic columns that frame the silver tabernacle. Even the painted floor tiling pattern above the short flight of stairs is intended to emphasize the illusionistic visual effect of spatial depth, where the perceived distance between the front elevation and the rear background is magnified. The free-standing female figures on the lower

24 The designs for the movable 'Altar of Repose' are preserved as Inventory no. 471 and 472 in the collection of drawings, Cathedral Museum, Mdina.

25 MCM ACM, Reg. Deliberationum Capitularium, vol. 7, f. 24v.

26 MCM ACM, MS. 170, f. 712.

27 Canon John Azzopardi, Francesco Zahra 1710-1773, 77-80.

base of the façade are counterbalanced by other angels and figures depicting the 'Holy Trinity' on the uppermost level. The interior ceiling takes the form of a richly painted partial dome which is supported by a series of semicircular arches set upon the quadri-pairs of Solomonian columns. The whole architectural setting was conceived as a highly ephemeral structure which was intended to convey to the external observer a sense of the unfolding drama. Pietro Paolo Troisi having studied design at the Accademia di San Luca in Rome between 1705-1706, would have been inspired by the numerous Berninesque scenographic and architectural settings that were characteristic of the High Baroque period in Rome.<sup>28</sup>

Another 'Altar of Repose' which is almost contemporary with Troisi's scenographic set for the Mdina Cathedral is that of the Carmelite church in Mdina. The Carmelite 'Altar of Repose' is of much smaller proportions and is stylistically totally unrelated to that of the Cathedral. Its highly unusual design is attributed to the Italian designer, Tommaso de Dominicis and dates to 1713, although its construction was extensively remodelled around 1758.<sup>29</sup> The decoration of the Carmelite 'Holy Sepulchre' has explicit Egyptian overtones with symmetrical winged Egyptian figures holding palm fronds and polychrome columns with unusual capitals decorated by lotus leaves. Stylistically, it defies any formal classification. De Dominicis' design is far removed from the traditional Roman Baroque scenographic settings and its highly exotic and hybrid nature was intended to project an ephemeral image of the biblical land of Moses.

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28 On 21 July 1716, Pietro Paolo Troisi made the follow declaration for the purposes of the *stato libero* in ascertaining his eligibility for marriage:

"Signori, mi chiamo Pietro Paolo Troisi sono figlio legittimo, e naturale di Carlo Troisi, e della quondam Nimfa olim giugali de Troisi nacqui in questa Città Valletta, ho l'età d'anni venti nove in circa, e dodici anni in circa sono uscì da questa Isola mia patria, e mi portai nell'Alma Città di Roma, ove mi fermai e per lo spatio di due anni in circa ad impararmi designare e dopo di nuovo feci ritorno in questa Isola di Malta ove mi ritorno fin' al presente...."

ACM, Curia Episcopalis Melitensis, A.O. 739, 1716, ff. 325-8.

I am grateful to Mr. Noel D'Anastasi for bringing the existence of Troisi's *stato libero* to my attention.

29 Archives of the Carmelite Priory (Mdina), Esito della Fabbrica 1697-1760, f. 274, cited in S. Abela, *Il-karmelitani fl-Mdina 1659-1994*, (Malta, 1994), 135-7.

## Mdina's Strada Reale in the 18th century

The Baroque scenographic element also became an integral element in Grand Master Vilhena's urban renewal of Mdina. Under the direction of the Order's French military engineer, François de Mondion (1683-1733), the entrance approach to Mdina was radically transformed so as to create a more opulent urban setting for grand public spectacles and ceremonials.<sup>30</sup> In the short span of five years between 1725-1730, several major urban interventions and architectural works were implemented. In 1725, the main gate to Mdina and the stone bridge leading to it were reconstructed with a profusion of decorative stone carvings that were intended to project to the local population the munificence and power of the Order.<sup>31</sup> The new Magistral palace that was built to replace the existing palace built by Grand Master L'Isle Adam was inspired by the contemporary Parisian hôtel palaces. De Mondion, the architect of the Magistral Palace, was preoccupied by the integration of the external public space with the palace interior so as to create a monumental and ceremonial stage-set for the Grand Master.<sup>32</sup> The alignment of the ornate outer gate leading into the forecourt with the majestic entrance portal of the palace was planned in a manner that created a dynamic visual vista from St Publius Square in front of the main gate entrance to Mdina. The proliferation of Grand Master Vilhena's family coat of arms and his bronze relief image was intended to convey to the local population the rhetorical imagery of the Order's power and influence.

Stretching all the way from St Publius Square near the citadel's main gate to Bastion Square in the North West sector, the Strada Reale (today, Villegaignon Street) bisected Mdina into two roughly equal sectors. During Vilhena's rule the Strada Reale became an impressive urban showpiece for both the Order of St John and the local Church to communicate their physical presence within the old capital. Besides the Magistral Palace, Grand Master Vilhena was also responsible

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30 Canon John Azzopardi, *Mdina and the Earthquake of 1693*, (Malta, 1993); Denis De Lucca, "The Contribution of François de Mondion in the Architectural Development of 18th century Malta", in *Proceedings of History Week 1981* (Malta, 1981), 76-81.

31 NLM, MS. 96, Università: Spese per le fortificazioni 1723-1728, — note attached to f. 195 provides a detailed account of payments for the various works carried out by the sculptor *Mastro* Gerolamo Fabri and his sons in embellishing the Main Gate and the Greeks' Gate to Mdina.

32 MCM ACM, MS. 60, f. 24: "... la facoltà di demolire il Palazzo Magistrale nella detta Città, e quello rifabbricare in miglior forma, secondo il Disegno dato dal Sig. Ingegniere Cavaliere de Mondion e perche con tal disegno vien ampliato il sito dello stesso Palazzo sino le Porte della Città..."

for the construction of the Order's Armoury building and the *Banca Giuratale*, both of which were situated in strategic positions along Mdina's main street.<sup>33</sup> There were also various religious buildings along the *Strada Reale*. The St Peter's Benedictine monastery which had been established in Mdina since the 15th century expanded even further in the early 18th century until it occupied an entire block.<sup>34</sup> The Carmelite priory and church which were constructed during the second half of the 17th century, occupied an extensive frontage along the upper part of the *Strada Reale*. Along the main street there were also a number of small chapels. These included the St Agatha chapel and St Peter's chapel which formed part of the Benedictine monastery block. The small church of St Roque was built in 1728 to replace the chapel of S. Maria della Porta which had been demolished during Mondion's replanning of the main entrance area to Mdina.<sup>35</sup>

Besides the Order and the local Church, the more prominent noble families residing within Mdina had their palaces situated along the *Strada Reale*. The palace of the Inquanez family opposite the Benedictine monastery was subject to several modifications and extensions from its original medieval form. Palazzo Gourgion, corner with St Paul's Square and the *Strada Reale*, was the palace of the holders of the primogeniture of that name which was founded in 1728. The present façade of the palace is however a later modern reconstruction.<sup>36</sup>

Architectural scenography flourished in the 18th century as the Order sought to project itself as a sovereign military Order. Grand public displays and ceremonies were common place in the urban centres of Mdina and Valletta, although the local Church was equally effective in disseminating similar religious spectacles in the smaller towns and villages. The reign of Grand Master Pinto (1741-1773) was distinguished by its opulent ceremonies and rituals. Architectural scenography was manifested in the ornate monumental staircases of the Auberge

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33 For documents relating to the construction of the Banca Giuratale in 1726-1728 to the design of François de Mondion refer to NLM, MS. 96, Università, ff. 595-613; On the construction of the Order's Armoury building in 1734 to the design of *Mastro* Petruzzo Debono refer to NLM AOM, MS. 187, Università, f. 139.

34 MCM ACM, MS. 180, p. 15: 1685 — "si comincio la fabrica del nuovo monastero, con aver preso più case, e botteghe d'intorno."

35 MCM ACM, MS. 60, f. 19, f. 22.

36 E. Sammut, *The Monuments of Mdina*, (Malta, 1967), p. 37.

of Castille and the palace serving as the Museum of Fine Arts.<sup>37</sup> Even architectural decoration became more profuse and intense as is evident in the façades of the Auberge de Castille in Valletta, the Castellania in Valletta, the Pinto warehouses in Floriana and the parish church of Gharb in Gozo, all of which buildings were constructed in the mid-18th century. One can refer to this era as the culmination of 'High Baroque' architecture in Malta.

The scenographic element was a reflection of the social and political context of the time. By the end of the 18th century when the Order of St John was irreversibly in decline, rhetorical posturing and grand ceremony appeared even more so as hollow gestures. Decorative exuberance had lost its former appeal as the Baroque style had been eclipsed by Neo-Classicism. The emotional and experiential qualities of Baroque scenography were the antithesis of the more cerebral and rational Neo-Classicism. During the last decade of the Order's rule, buildings such as the Customs House by the Grand Harbour marina and the National Library building in Valletta were representative of the new academic Neo-Classical style.<sup>38</sup> With the British occupation of the island Baroque architectural scenography was no longer the rhetorical medium of the ruling class.

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37 C. Thake, "Scenographic Baroque Staircases", in *Treasures of Malta*, (Summer 1995), vol. i, no. 3, 59-64.

38 M. Ellul, 'Art and Architecture in the Early Nineteenth century', *Proceedings of History Week 1982* (Malta, 1983).