

The French inspiration

by NOEL GRIMA

The meeting took place in a vaulted hall deep inside and underneath the Gozo Cittadella, perhaps the most apt place to hear a lecture about the historic fortifications of Malta and Gozo.

But most, if not all of those who took part, perhaps the lecturer too, had no inkling that right now the fate of one of the most historic fortresses in Gozo, Fort Chambray, is being decided, amid concerns about overcrowding, about the future of the unscheduled British military buildings and the crumbling bastions on clay foundations.

The meeting, on Friday, was organized by Wirth Ghawdex and turned out to be the Gozo launch of Dr Stephen Spiteri's book *The Art of Fortress Building*, which was launched in Malta last October (BDL publishers).

Fortress building by the Knights is perhaps the most over-documented legacy since their multiple archives contain all details of the decision-making process and building history.

The Knights came to Malta with an extensive knowledge of fortification building, but their stay in Malta widened and deepened their knowledge and skills. The first years were years of panic, as the Knights found the fortifications of Mdina and Birgu inadequate for the needs of the time. This was proved to have been only too true during the Great Siege. After which there was the huge construction of Valletta. No less than 4,000 men worked on this immense construction job under the guidance of Francesco Laparelli.

Even later, when the threat of a Turkish invasion lessened, the work continued on the outer and landward fortifications of Valletta. A further spurt of fortification building took place after 1761 following the conquest of the Corona Ottomana when the Maltese feared a retaliatory attack by the Turks.

The most detailed plans in the Knights' archives regard the building of Fort Manoel. This fort too is the best expression of the new inspiration from France in fortification building.

At almost the same level is Fort Chambray, which was not just built by a French Knight but also on wholly French lines.

For the Knights, Gozo was very important, not just for its own sake but also because it guarded the all-important link to Sicily. Gozo and its fortifications were also important in that it kept at bay the pirates that lurked around Comino.

The Gran Castello had always kept its historic importance but it was landlocked and far away from the sea. In fact, at one point, the Knights had considered building a fortress at Ghajn Damm, on top of Marsalforn. Then the Bali de Chambray came forward with his funds and the fort that carries his name was built on Ras it-Tafal. The site inside the fortress was subdivided into 22 plots and farmed out to 22 contractors. But the clay terrain proved to be a problem and the town within the walls was never built (until it was covered over by villas in our days).

Besides, there was what we could call industrial problems in that the 200 workers on site tended to skive off work and the contractors had to seek them out and bring them back to work. There was even a murder committed and the murderer took refuge in the Qala church. Slaves were used too but for the more humdrum work: most of the work required skilled labour, which invariably was Maltese (or Gozitan).

It is from such construction work that we derived some of the words we use, such as terrapien (from the French terreplein), the infill made of soil and rock that lies outside the stone facades of the bastions and which was meant to absorb heavy bombardments.
