

## The Porta Reale/San Giorgio Bridge

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I refer to the feature One World... Protecting The Most Significant Buildings, Monuments And Features Of Valletta (108), The Remains Of The Bridge Of Porta San Giorgio/Porta Reale (April 11).

As I have been calling for the Knights' bridge to be preserved for many long years now, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the remains of the bridge were scheduled by Mepa as a Class B national monument in 2008.

However, I was dismayed to read that, "What survives of the original bridge into Valletta are three rock-cut supports within the Grand Ditch which were hewn to support the arched bridgeway into Valletta through Porta San Giorgio". It seems that the original bridge was narrower than the present one. There is so much more to it than that.

For a start, it is not only the three rock-cut supports that survive. The entire three-arched stone bridge itself survives in situ (minus the drawbridge at the end of course). And the rock-cut supports were not "hewn to support the bridge". The surviving bridge pre-dates the rock supports. What happened is that after the bridge was built it was decided, on military/strategic grounds, to deepen the ditch. The ditch was deepened without demolishing the bridge, which was preserved by cutting around the pilasters of the arches, leaving the pilasters resting on huge irregular rock-cut blocks. This bridge was built in the 1580s (presumably by Geronimo Cassar), as testified by Mederico Blondel,

the Order's engineer, in 1694. In the early British period the huge irregular bedrock blocks were smoothed to allow the passage of vehicular traffic, and that is how they remain to this day. The importance of the rock-cut supports lies in the archaeological evidence they provide of the depth of the ditch at the time the bridge was built, and, of course, in demonstrating also by how much more the ditch was subsequently deepened.

After the 1850s the British, in order to accommodate the wider new gate they built, widened the bridge by simply adding masonry equally to the width on either side. When the present, even wider gate, was built in the 1960s, the bridge was further widened by adding this time to the right side only (as one faces the gate). All these interventions can be seen, as I have been pointing out for years, by simple observation from below the bridge in the ditch. It did not need an excavation on top of the bridge, as has recently been carried out, to "discover" the original bridge. Towards the gate end of the bridge one can also see a patch where the bridge took a hit by a bomb in the last war.

The point of all this is, that although "the remains of the bridge" have been scheduled, Mepa refers only, incredibly, to the rock-cut supports, and not to the entire bridge itself, which survives encased within the present structure.

This should be remedied, and the sooner the better, even though Renzo Piano is on record as saying that now that he knows about the existence of the original bridge he is eager to preserve it and incorporate it in his new plans.

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