

# VISITATIO TURRIUM

JOSEPH MUSCAT

At the Ta' Giezu Franciscan Friary Archives in Rabat, one can see an unclassified and unnumbered manuscript containing three separate sections. The last section is entitled "Vis.tatio Turrium", and deals with the coastal towers of Malta.

In actual fact this section is incomplete. The last three missing pages of this ms contained valuable information about four towers. There are another eight missing pages and the odd fragments left do not show any writing at all; but from what is left of the very last page one can still notice some traces of writing. From the survey of the towers mentioned elsewhere in the ms., one may conclude that there are three missing pages; then follow eight blank pages, the last of which must have been the index of the ms. Blank pages separate different topics.

Fortunately one can find the missing pages in a copy of this survey in the National Library of Malta under Treasury 178, series A, compiled by Notary Vittorio Gristi. Names of towers in the Ta' Giezu copy are indicated by a roman numeral from I to XXIII. Tower S. Paolo should have been allotted no. VII and Tower Selmun no. VIII; the compiler numbered Selmun tower as no. VII and left out no. VIII altogether.

One will notice that the survey does not give any details for the Towers S. Paolo, Tal-Grazzja and S. Tomaso. These were not under the jurisdiction of the Università and therefore they were not visited. At Tower S. Luciano the commissioners were only interested in the three guards paid by the Università. The terms of reference for this survey, clearly pointed out to the commissioners, had to visit all the towers, those belonging to the Order as well as those run by the Università. But when we come to the above mentioned three towers an inspection was declined "per non essere delle pertinenze di veruna di queste due Università."

Malta was visited from time to time by the plague. (1) The Order was organised and prepared as much as possible for such events, but still all measures taken were ineffective compared with what can be done in our days. (2) Sanitary regulations and stringent quarantine measures existed, but Malta could

1. In 1523, 1592, 1625, 1655, 1675, and 1813 the Maltese Islands suffered heavily from the plague.
2. The most common disinfectants were vinegar and aromatic herbs such as the local 'saghtar,' see BOSIO, Giacomo, *Historia della Sacra Religione*, Venetia, 1695, vol. 3, p.455; *ibid.* p.869 mentions also rock samples taken from the Grotto of St. Paul in Rabat as an antidote for the plague. BRYDONE, P., *A Tour Through Sicily and Malta*, London, 1774, 2nd edition, p.355 attributed to this kind of rock the chemical property of magnesia and accepted "sceptically" its healing powers. BERGNA, P.P. Costanzo, *Tripoli dal 1510 al 1850*, Tripoli, 1925, p.77 mentions: "I limitatissimi mezzi di disinfezione consistevano in lavande d'aceto e acqua di tabacco." See also BRAUDEL, F., *The Mediterranean*, London, 1973, p.333.

not remain immune from the deadly infection for any length of time. (3)

The frequent convergence of sailors from all parts of the Mediterranean meant a greater possibility for the further diffusion of disease. The great number of ships coming into the Grand Harbour always carried the dangers of the hidden enemy. The Marsamxett area was exclusively meant to harbour ships coming from places with suspicious health problems. (4) The booty itself, captured from Moslem sources was many times the cause of great harm. (5)

When the news spread that Messina was again visited by the plague in 1743 the whole operation of preventive measures was put into operation. The sanitary officials of the Order were on the lookout and the local authority, the Università, also had its part to play.

On such occasions the first measures thought of were those of piety and good works. The Grand Master himself would on such occasions show his benevolence and double his acts of charity towards the poor, "a placare ... lo sdegno Divino." For this reason on the 22nd June, 1743, the Grand Master and council ordered the customary exposition of the Holy Sacrament in the Conventual Church of St. John, for forty consecutive hours. (6) These were also occasions when the whole population of Malta would turn to God with vows, special penitential celebrations and earnest prayers.

All possible measures were taken to stop people coming from Sicily for reasons of business, or to escape from plague-infested Messina. All suspected ships were to be turned back. A galley was ordered to patrol the sea between Malta and Sicily looking for any ship coming from Messina. The galley would be relieved of its duties and replaced by another galley every fifteen days. (7) All coastal guards were doubled, and it is in this respect that the coastal towers were to play a major part in the operation of stopping all illegal arrivals in any part of the Island.

The stringent measures adopted by the Order were naturally having their toll on local commerce and provision of food supplies. The local brigantines which usually handled all traffic from and southern Italy were stranded in the harbour. Local products of cotton, cloth and other commodities were locked up in magazines. The first to suffer were the poor people of Malta; those of Gozo fared worse. On 16th November, 1743 the Grand Master pointed out that the Order had to face the situation and to help as much as possible, by way of charities, the invalids and old people. The Order was to provide also alternate

3. DAL POZZO, Fr Bartolomeo, *Historia della S. Religione*, Parte Prima, Verona, 1703, p. 337, mentions one occasion, when in spite of all measures taken, plague-infected persons from the galleys of Tuscany were admitted into the Sacred Infirmary, and spread the disease around.
4. ABELA-CIANTAR, *Malta Illustrata*, Malta, 1772, pp. 102, 103.
5. CASTAGNA, P.P., *Malta bil-Gzejjer tagħha*, Malta, 1869, p.144. DEARDEN, Seton, *A Nest of Corsairs*, London, 1976, pp. 14, 15 sustains that bubonic plague was endemic in Africa.
6. [N]ational [L]ibrary of [M]alta, Arch. 269, f.252
7. *Ibid.*

livelihood to those seamen and other people whose ships were stranded in the Grand Harbour. (8) Preventive measures were announced and strictly enforced. An infected person would normally seek refuge in a church or other place protected by ecclesiastical immunity. In December 1743, the threat of the plague was still present, and on the 7th of the month, the Order asked permission from Rome to suspend all ecclesiastical immunity for ten years so that all persons and their belongings could be removed from churches and other privileged places. Such permission was requested and granted on four other occasions. (9)

The survey of the coastal towers intended to prevent all possibilities of unauthorized arrivals of ships and passengers was left in the hands of the jurats of the Università of Valletta, Vittoriosa, Senglea and Mdina. The order from the Magisterial Palace specifically mentioned a tour round Malta by sea to inspect every tower, whether belonging to the Order or to the Università. The inspection was meant to identify all shortcomings detrimental to the good management of the towers.

The written terms of reference were handed to a group of persons forming the 'fact-finding' commission. The survey was meant to be carried out personally by the members of the commission, and the following facts had to be established:-

1. The exact name of the tower, as should be shown on the entrance;
2. the name of the chief tower guard and other guards or soldiers on temporary duties; their salary, and the authority which paid their wages;
3. the number of guns, with technical details; whether made of iron or bronze; if the carriage is on two or four wheels, and whether serviceable or not;
4. the number of swivel guns, muskets, musketoons or other firearms, and if serviceable or not;
5. the means of access to the tower, whether by a wooden or rope ladder, stone steps or drawbridge;
6. if there was a water cistern in the tower, or the distance where one could find the nearest source of water;
7. if the room for the guards was suitable enough for habitation, and whether the roof was waterproof;
8. if the chief tower-guard holds an inventory of the guns, carriages, cannon balls, musket cartridges, musketoons, speaking trumpets, etc. The inspection was to proceed according to the inventory held.

The commission included Paolo Ignatio Gauci, first jurat of the Università of Mdina, and Gaspare Fiore, second jurat of the Università of Valletta, Vittoriosa and Senglea. Notary Filippo Giacomo Tonna was to draw up the report, and Bartolomeo Gatt and Salvatore ... (surname missing) were the experts to check guns and carriages. It will be noted that only local personnel were included in this commission. All coastguard services were in the hands of the

8. N.L.M., Arch. 269, f.263.

9. *Ibid.* f.263v.

Dejma or local mounted soldiers who were controlled by the Università. (10) Therefore it was only natural that the towers should be inspected by the representatives of the Università.

The survey expedition was provided with boats which left the Grand Harbour on the 18th June, 1743; three days later the expedition finished its work. It can be assumed that at the time of the survey the weather round Malta would have been fine. But still, this cruise had to face the rugged cliffs to the south and south-west of the island which probably rendered the work of the commissioners somewhat arduous. Where possible the men passed the night in one of the towers, necessitating the unloading of food and bedding for the night. The commission worked from sunrise to sunset, and the survey of twenty three towers around the coast of Malta was thus finished in three days.

The survey was to include the description of the towers. Some of these had been built during the reign of, and financed by, Grand Master De Redin (1657 — 1660). (11) The others were built by various other Grand Masters. (12) One can still see the majority of these towers and a few of them are still there in solid defiance of time and neglect. It is a pity that two of them on the south-east of the island had to be demolished for military purpose during the Second Great War. Few others are in ruin through natural causes and this should not occasion surprise when one keeps in mind that they are situated so close to the sea. Even at the time of the survey there was a general remark on the bad state of the masonry, and only one tower had been plastered and white washed just a few days before the visit of the commissioners.

The report of the commissioners also provides considerable information about the social, economic and administrative set-up of the Maltese under the Order of St. John. Although some towers were supposed to have a knight in charge, yet, in the actual findings, there is only one single instance to denote the presence of one. The exception was at the Tower Zelaida, where the knight in charge was alone, having sent the chief guard on a personal errand whilst none of the other guards was present. One would expect a knight to run and control the towers of St. Lucian and St. Thomas which were forts rather than simple watch towers. Then there was the curious punishment in the Order for misbehaving knights by compelling them to perform a certain amount of time service in one of these coastal towers. (13) One can imagine a young knight having to leave the company of his brethren-in-arms, the city life and other amenities to spend one, two or more months in a desolate tower in the company of Maltese guards most of whom were employed as watch-dogs rather than because they knew anything about guns,

10. N.L.M., Arch. 260, f.62v.

11. HOPPEN, Alison, *The Fortification of Malta by the Order of St. John*, Edinburgh, 1979, p.108 speaks of 12 or 14 towers built by De Redin; Arch. 260, f. 62 under the date 6 July 1659 mentions 13; but many authors hold that 14 were built by this Grand Master.

12. N.L.M., Arch. 260, f.62v gives a list of towers built by various Grand Masters.

13. *Gli Statuti della Sacra Religione Gerosolimitana*, Borgo Novo, 1719, p.171, item 56.

muskets or military life. There are a few instances in the survey where one finds the odd soldier, gunner, or sailor detached from his ship and doing guard duties in the towers.

Most towers were manned by a chief-guard and three other guards mostly recruited from the common folk with no military experience whatsoever. The guards were paid 2 scudi (17c) per month while their chief was paid 2½ scudi (21c). (14) They were paid either by the Università of Valletta or Mdina, or, at times, by the Order. It is amusing to note the loosely-knit organisation of these towers; sometimes in official documents a notary had to leave an empty space, the surname of some guards being unknown. Nicknames are sometimes used instead of surnames. This means that there was no vetting or any special selection of such guards; regular name lists are a rarity.

A recurring remark about absentee guards is found throughout the survey. In the Fort of St. Lucian there was not even one guard present when the commissioners visited the place. The inspection had to be postponed; in fact there is not a single entry under this tower except for the names and salary of the guards. This was revealed to the commissioners by nearby sources. The survey had no fixed time-table or programme, and this explains the high percentage of absent guards reported on the off-and on-duty roster of the towers. If one cannot accept this reason then we have to admit that the Order permitted a serious lack of discipline unimaginable to such an institution.

Ordnance mounted on these towers was of the smallest calibre, that of French type 4 pounders. (15) In some cases the carriages and wheels of these guns were declared unserviceable. Some towers were equipped with one bronze 4 pounder, and in one instance only, the Tower of Ta' l-Ahrax, with two bronze 5-pounders. The survey reveals that the Order employed mostly bronze guns, although iron ones were in use also. (16) In his visit to Malta, Henry Teonge records in his diary for 2nd August, 1675, that he saw brass guns everywhere on the Valletta fortifications, some of them being 23 feet long. (17) On his way to Egypt, Napoleon carried off 1200 pieces of bronze ordnance. (18) The Order did make use of iron guns, but it seems that bronze was preferred.

All the towers were armed with two swivel-guns even where bronze guns were provided. Unfortunately no specifications are given for the swivel-guns, which, as the name implies, could be rotated on a special stand or pivot. (19) Muskets were issued according to the number of guards in each tower. These were of the flint-lock type and each tower was supplied with enough stock of flint stones. In the Santa Barbara or powder magazine, one

14. HOPPEN, A., *op. cit.*, p.108.

15. N.L.M. 318 f.149 gives a list of the various calibres of guns.

16. N.L.M. 223 sub voce *Cannone*; N.L.M. 318, f. 152 mentions bronze and iron guns for the Order.

17. TEONGE, E., *The Diary of Henry Teonge*, London, 1825, p.47.

18. AZOPARDI, Barone, *Giornale della Presa di Malta e Gozo dalla Repubblica Francese*, Malta, 1836, p.24.

19. N.L.M. 223 sub voce *Petriere* and *Maimonetti de Petrieri*.

would find the gunpowder, cannon balls, lengths of match, and lead. In two cases some gunpowder was declared unserviceable. Each tower was equipped with all the necessary accessories necessary for operating the guns and the small swivel-guns. (20) One could imagine all the muskets and their accessories standing upright or otherwise in a properly built wooden rack fixed to the wall.

It is a striking fact that many towers still flew the colours of Vilhena, whilst only two had the ensign of the Order, and others none. One would expect that the Order would pride itself to show its colours all over the Island. It is rather hard to believe that Pinto would permit the colours of Vilhena to flutter in the breeze during his magistracy! One would not expect the poorly paid guards to bother themselves and spend a penny to adjust a broken flagpole or even to procure a length of rope for it. In one case the guards complained that there was no rope to draw drinking water from a nearby well. How could one expect them to buy a length of rope to hoist the colours of His Highness! In the ceremonial book of the order, one finds the rules and regulations regarding the saluting procedure between the coastal towers and passing galleys flying the ensign of the order. (21) But if in the majority of cases no flag of the Order was available in the towers, what happened to the ceremonial machinery and pomp of the knights? By the time of this survey the Order was facing a decline in its corso activities (22), and maybe it never enforced the glorious ceremonial saluting ritual of the past.

In each tower there was only one guardroom, the whole living quarters for those on duty. While admitting that there were never more than four men at the same time in the towers, this meant that this single room served as a bedroom, kitchen, and dining-room not to mention toilet facilities which the survey totally ignores. In one instance the survey revealed that all cooking was done under the spiral staircase which led to the gun platform on top of the tower. The commissioners commented on the smoke and filth covering part of the staircase and the rest of the room. It is obvious that cooking was done on the open-fire system; there were no other facilities. Water was provided either from the well built inside the tower itself or from one nearest to the tower. These last mentioned were in certain cases adjacent to the tower itself, but at least one was as far away as 200 paces. The well at Ghallis was so filthy with mud and other debris carried by rainwater that a guard complained about it and asked if it could be drained and cleaned properly. At the Zonqor Tower the cistern was too close to the sea and many times the drinking water would get mixed with sea-water whenever there was a heavy sea beating against the shore. At the Zelaida Tower the guards complained that the drinking water was all used up by the farmers for watering the cotton plants nearby.

20. *Compendio d'Artiglieria*, f. 42, in the Museum of Fine Arts, lists seven tools for each gun.

21. N.L.M. 726 pp. 112, 113.

22. CAVALIERO, R., Decline of the Maltese Corso in the XVIIIth century, in *Melita Historica*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1959.

The structure of the guardrooms followed a strict pattern. (23) There were two or three stone arches supporting stone slabs which formed the ceiling of the room. This was the vaulting system, in Maltese known as "troll" (24). The stone slabs were covered with stone chippings and other fine material, well-watered and beaten to form a platform for the guns. But the survey revealed a universal complaint that in winter water seeped in between the stone slabs. Such 'diffone' roofs had to receive constant attention if they had to keep out damp and rainwater.

Wooden fittings and equipment left much to be desired. In one case the commissioners refused to enter the tower because the wooden ladder was so rickety they feared it might collapse under their weight. As a general rule, doors and windows were in a deplorable condition, lacking essential iron fittings, and protective paintwork. One well inside a tower was even without a proper wooden cover. A certain powder magazine, which in some cases meant just a recess in one of the guardroom walls, was without a proper door; another one needed badly double wooden re-inforcement; the one at St. Agatha Tower was left without the proper cattle-hide covering. (25) Another recurring missing wooden item was the door leading to the gun platform; this being constantly exposed to the sun and rain suffered the worst.

The survey also remarked that the poor guards who might be off duty and wanted to rest a little were provided with a primitive form of bed. In most cases this consisted of two or three planks of wood, nailed to two wooden supports. Even these last mentioned items were sometimes either completely lacking or else badly deteriorated.

It seems that there was a perennial shortage of oil for lighting purposes. This complaint was so common to all towers visited that it makes one think that the item in question was used or misused for other purposes. At that time pure edible oil was used for lighting; there was no other type of oil. (26) Signals at night depended mostly on bonfires and lanterns. (27) A lantern signal was the most common method of communicating with other towers. (28) These lanterns, of course, needed oil all the time.

All towers seemed to miss a speaking-trumpet: this item is specifically mentioned by all tower-guards. The necessity of this piece of equipment can hardly be overemphasised. All passing ships were obliged to hail the towers, and approaching fishermen had to identify themselves. The guard would not have liked to leave the shelter of his tower to challenge or to answer the hail

23. HOPPEN, A., *op. cit.*, p.108; at least the towers built by De Redin.

24. QUENTIN Hughes, *Architecture and Military History in Malta*, London, 1969, p.140.

25. The cattle-hide was used to minimise fire risks.

26. N.L.M., Arch. 1899, f.68; olive oil was used extensively for all lighting purposes on ships, towers and for cleaning firearms.

27. N.L.M. 110; see: 'orders for night signals'.

28. VILHENA, *Leggi e Costituzioni*, Malta, 1724, p.21, item XXXXII; lanterns were used on the church steeples of Mdina Cathedral to warn villages that soldiers and sailors were immediately to report to their respective ships in the Grand Harbour.

of passing traffic.

In the majority of cases the towers also lacked a signal bell. This was specially needed to warn passing ships of reefs or rocks at night or in foul weather.

In June 1749, just six years after this survey, there was a Moslem conspiracy to wrest the Island of Malta from the Order. The great number of slaves then present in Malta were initially to start the revolt and a supporting navy from the Barbary regencies was to help. Fortunately the conspiracy was discovered before it actually broke out and a great number of slaves were executed. (29)

One major factor of this attempted revolt was a general lack of military discipline. (30) This survey brings out clearly this well established cause. There was a general lack of discipline in all towers, and military preparedness was not adequate to meet an emergency. The high percentage of absent guards is an indication that the Order never seriously thought of the possibility of a Moslem major operation against the Island.

If the condition of the towers might have somewhat helped to ward off the odd enemy ship, they could have never functioned properly in the case of a large scale landing operation. It is a pity that we cannot consult the recommendations emanating from this survey, but it is certain that the commissioners had a tough job in presenting to His Highness Grand Master Pinto a reasonable, practical and effectively written report.

29. BRYDONE, P., *A Tour Through Sicily and Malta*, p. 349.

30. CASTAGNA, P.P., *op. cit.* p. 316.