

## New evidence on the Grandmaster's Palace in Valletta

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A newly-discovered plan showing the ground floor (Fig. 1) and a contemporary description of the Grandmaster's Palace has escaped, as far as I know, the notice of all scholars and researchers writing on the history and development of this magnificent building left to us by the Knights of the Order of St. John. The map and description are dated to post 1741, that is, after the reconstruction works of the palace ordered by Grandmaster Manoel Pinto de Fonseca, as they show and describe the palace with two entrances in Republic Street as we know it today. However, this new information contains a number of details that throw new light on the original layout of the palace.

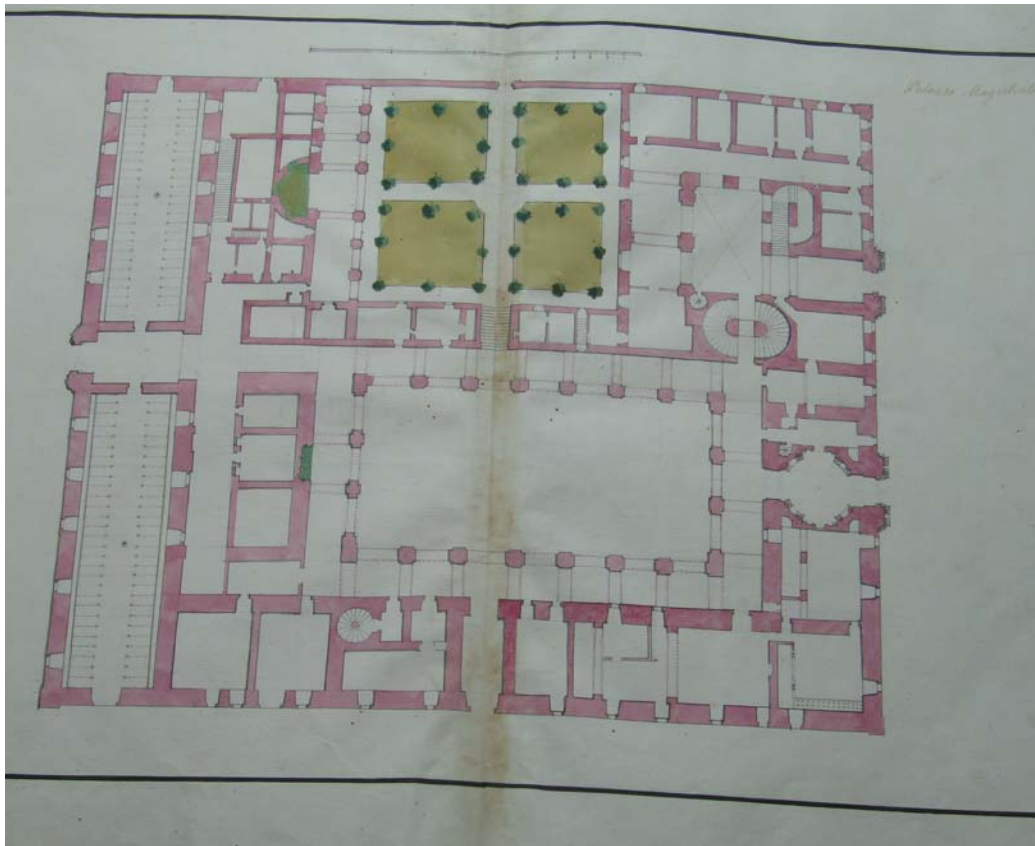


Fig. 1 Plan showing the ground floor of the Grandmaster's Palace (courtesy of the National Library, Valletta)

The plan and description are found in the *Cabreo del Magistero*<sup>1</sup> and the *Cabreo della Secrezia*<sup>2</sup> respectively. The *Cabreo del Magistero* contains illustrations in watercolour of several sites, viewed from plan and some also from perspective (Fig. 2), which were the property of the Grandmaster. Most of these properties, including the Island of Comino, consisted of rural tenements and fields, although the first few

<sup>1</sup> *Cabreo del Magistero* – National Library, Valletta

<sup>2</sup> *Cabreo della Secrezia* – National Library, Valletta

pages of both *cabrei* include some interesting buildings and sites and related descriptions such as the gardens and church of Sarria at Floriana (Fig. 3). I came across these *cabrei* during the research for my Masters Degree in Archaeology on terraced fields and rubble walls in the Maltese Islands. Most of the fields and buildings recorded in the *Cabreo del Magistero* are further presented in separate line drawings in the *Cabreo della Secrezia* which depict how the properties were surveyed by the triangulation method by the land surveyors and drawn to scale. Furthermore, the *Cabreo della Secrezia* includes a description of each property.



Fig. 2 An illustration showing fields in the vicinity of the Cittadella, Gozo (courtesy of the National Library, Valletta)

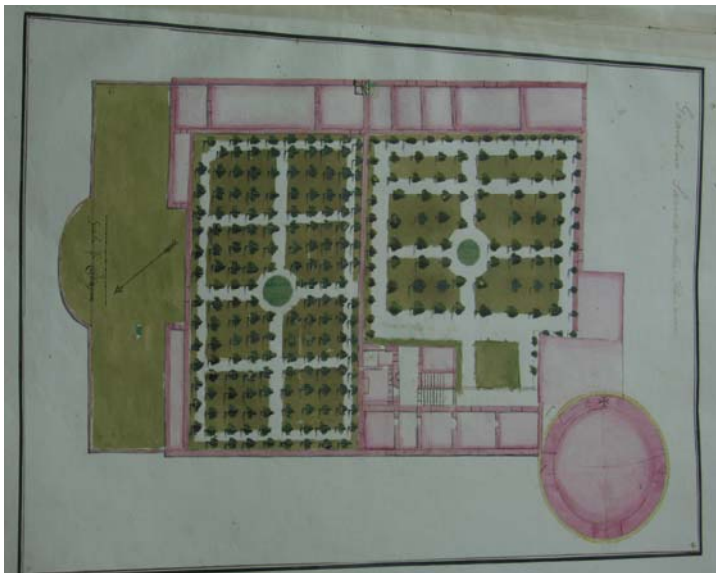


Fig. 3 Plan of the gardens and church of Sarria at Floriana (courtesy of the National Library, Valletta)

The palace of the Grandmaster is marked as Fig. No 1 in the *Cabreo del Magistero* and therefore also appears as the first description in the *Cabreo della Secrezia*. The plan, along with most of the other illustrations, is still in very good condition but the description, which is on page 1, is battered due to the worn out condition of the first *foglio* of the *Cabreo della Secrezia*. The following is a transcription (subject to revision) of what I could decipher of the manuscript.<sup>3</sup>

Il Palazzo Magistrale dove abita S.A.S.

Fig 1

Dove abita l'Altezza Serenissimo ed Eminentissimo Gran Maestro del suo ordine militare posto in mezzo situato in questa Città Valletta in figura quadrata \_\_\_\_\_ aveva quattro facciate che guardano a quattro venti collaterali in una facciata che guarda al maestrale nella quale ci sono due porte di marmo da un parte in un corpo di guardia di soldati veterani che giornalmente si scompartiscono la sentinella nel palazzo. Passando \_\_\_\_\_ entrata si arriva in una loggia et \_\_\_\_\_ consiglio \_\_\_\_\_ et in fronte \_\_\_\_\_ una fontana e di detta loggia si entra in una sala \_\_\_\_\_ (dove?) mangiano i cavalieri Paladini e li Paggi di sua Serenissima (ed Eminentissima GM) \_\_\_\_\_ contigue due cucine in una \_\_\_\_\_ di sua Serenissima e dall'altra si \_\_\_\_\_ cavalieri ed ufficiali \_\_\_\_\_ di dette cucine \_\_\_\_\_ dispense che ha la cura il guarda (mangia) \_\_\_\_\_ e distribuisce \_\_\_\_\_ e a cavalieri \_\_\_\_\_ . Di più s'arriva \_\_\_\_\_ dal Palazzo che guarda gregale. \_\_\_\_\_ la prigione degli schiavi e due gr\_\_\_\_\_ nelle quali si conservano le carrozze. Ed entra nella cavallerizza composta da (due?) Stalle di Cavalli ed altri animali e si puol entrare ed uscire \_\_\_\_\_ dal Palazzo (da una porta di grigale) ci sono camera per li guardiani e postigli \_\_\_\_\_ mastri che travagliano (mezzo?) di questa Cavallerizza vi si trova un piccolo cortiglio dal quale si passa in un giardino d'agrumi, la loggia e fontana sotto la loggia. Tornando nel cortiglio d'abasso scendendo per 18 scaline s'arriva nel medesimo giardino d'agrumi che di là si puol passare per fuori. \_\_\_\_\_ passare in una entrata \_\_\_\_\_ di loggia ed altra entrata con \_\_\_\_\_ quale si entra e si esce dalla porta di maestrale del palazzo e si puol salire da due scali una \_\_\_\_\_ dal quale si entra e s'arriva un' altra loggia \_\_\_\_\_ dalla porta d'abasso. \_\_\_\_\_ di pittura e di la si puol entrare al Partimento d'inverno e dall' altra \_\_\_\_\_ S.A.S. secondo le stagioni del caldo e del freddo. \_\_\_\_\_ vi è una sala di consiglio, e poi camera \_\_\_\_\_ , entrando poi in una cappella \_\_\_\_\_ si celebrano messe ed appresso \_\_\_\_\_ in una sala adornata con pittura e poi s'arriva nella parte della \_\_\_\_\_ nella quale si ritrovano \_\_\_\_\_ di ferro piccioli, spade \_\_\_\_\_ tornare nell' altro partimento \_\_\_\_\_ la detta loggia adornata pure con diverse pitture e si puol entrare nell' altro partimento dell' estate, nella prima entrata si trova bellissima sala e camera dove si tiene consiglio e adornate con panni \_\_\_\_\_ ed altre galantiere, e si entra in una cappella e poi comunque sito che si arriva nella prima sala del consiglio. Più che \_\_\_\_\_ il quartiere dell' estate \_\_\_\_\_ una torretta dove conservano dei denari, ori \_\_\_\_\_ ed altre galantiere di pregio della Sacra Religione, e sopra di detta torre vi è un orologio di sonare le ore. etc.

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<sup>3</sup> I am highly indebted to Mr. Stephen Degiorgio for helping me in the transcription of this document.

The manuscript describes the palace as a rectangular building in the city of Valletta facing the four winds with its façade, having two marble entrances orientated towards the northwest. There is also the mentioning of the '*corpo di guardia*' and veteran soldiers who daily changed guard at the palace. It also refers to a veranda (loggia) which I presume is the roofed arched passageway surrounding Neptune's courtyard (shown in the plan surrounded by an open arcade). The fountain referred to in the text could be the one behind Neptune's statue bearing the coat-of-arms of Grandmaster Ramon Perellos Y Rocafull. There is also a reference to the dining room used by the palatial knights and pages, two kitchens, the slaves' prison towards the northeast (facing the palace), two coach rooms, the stables, an entrance presumably the one leading to Archbishop's Street, the guard and postilion room, a small courtyard leading to an orchard with citrus trees (Prince Alfred's courtyard), a flight of eighteen steps which according to the plan should be the staircase adjoining Prince Alfred's courtyard with Neptune's courtyard, and the entrance leading to Old Theatre Street. The plan and description also indicate two staircases, one still existing (that built by Grandmaster Verdalle) and a smaller staircase that no longer exists today. From here onwards the description refers to the *piano nobile* where there is a reference to the winter and summer apartments, the latter also built by de Verdalle, the council chamber, another room, a chapel for the celebration of mass, a room adorned with paintings, a reference to *ferro piccioli* and swords probably housed in the armoury, a beautiful hall and room, both adorned and used for councils, and another chapel.

Towards the end of the description there is the mention of the tower in which were hidden the treasures of the Order, surmounted by a clock which struck every hour. Such a reference surely predates the turret clock inaugurated by Pinto on 22 June 1745. Therefore, the dating of this plan and description should be after 1741, the date when Pinto ascended to the throne and before June 1745, the date when Pinto's clock was inaugurated in the smaller courtyard. Also the mentioning of the clock on the palace tower predating the one installed by Grandmaster Pinto puts weight on what Dr. Giovanni Bonello had explained that the bronze moors and bells of Pinto's clock must have belonged to a far more ancient clock.<sup>4</sup> Could it be that these were originally installed on the Palace tower?

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<sup>4</sup> Bonello, G. 2001: The Grand Masters' Palace in the Making, in, *Palace of the Grand Masters in Valletta*, Ganado, A. (edr), pp. 40