

Knights' Fortifications around the Harbours of Malta

 [Malta](#)

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Description

Geographic location has an emphatic habit of influencing the course of history. The story of Malta is an important case in point. Sited practically in the centre of the Mediterranean, its important strategic position was such that none of the maritime powers then vying for the control of this sea could have afforded to ignore it. The island's position was ideal, for apart from commanding the narrow waters between the two great basins of the Mediterranean, it also possessed excellent natural harbours, secure havens for battle fleets. It was, above all, the presence of the Grand Harbour that was to prove so instrumental in attracting foreign occupation. And once occupied, the need to secure this anchorage from attack was to dictate the scope and form of the island's defenses. Thus, over the centuries, the harbour area has witnessed the building of great works of fortification designed by engineers from most of the major military power: Spanish, Italian, French and British, the result of which is one of the finest collections of military architecture in the world. In the words of Prof. Quentin Hughes, "a monumental heritage... for sheer concentration and majesty quite unmatched".

The process was set in motion with the coming of the Knights of the Order of St. John to Malta in 1530. Although some medieval fortifications already existed inside the Grand Harbour, it was the Hospitaller Knights who set out to establish the harbour as a fortified naval base. At first they concentrated their efforts on the southeast part of the port, strengthening the existing medieval sea-castle and throwing up new bastion encientes across the necks of the small and narrow peninsulas of Birgu and L-Isla. Their position, nonetheless, was always considered vulnerable to bombardment and after the Great Siege of 1565, the opportunity was taken to construct a new fortress on the commanding heights of the Sciberras peninsula which separated the two main harbours. Thereafter, the city of Valletta was to act as the focal point of the defences and all subsequent fortification works were primarily undertaken to consolidate the surrounding terrain in an effort to deny an enemy all the possible approaches to the city. Ambitious works of fortification were thrown up on all sides, both to guard against seaborne attacks (such as Forts Ricasoli and Tigne and the Carafa Bastions), and also to resist determined siege works and attacks from the landward sides. The most ambitious of the projects were the vast bastioned enceintes known as the Floriana Lines, the Sta Marcherita Lines and the Cottonera Lines.

By the end of the eighteenth century, following more than two hundred years of continual building activity, the Hospitaller Knights had created a vast network of permanent stone fortifications. The whole harbour area had been transformed into one huge fortress with the city of Valletta as its inner keep. In 1800, the British inherited this vast complex of fortifications and continued to augment and modify it as technology advanced and the range of attackers' guns increased. By the end of the 19th century considerable parts of the older bastioned enceinte had metamorphosed into heavy gun fortifications designed to counter the threat of the heavily armed and armoured ironclad warships.

These fortifications are unique not only for their sheer scale and concentration (totalling some 25 Km in length) but also because they document the development of the art and science of gunpowder fortifications through nearly four centuries of history. They range from the fronte bastionato of the 16th century, through the opere coronate all'olandese of the late 17th century, on to the French systems established by Vauban and his followers in the 18th century, the emergence of the polygonal style and the influences of the writings of Montalambert, on to the imposition of iron-fronted defences and eventually to the concrete emplacements of the Second World War. Scattered around the whole span of the harbour fortifications are gun emplacements which range from the simple masonry cannoniere, armour-plated embrasures, masonry casemates, concrete pens, Brennan torpedo installations, boom defences, defence electric light positions etc.

The nodal point of the harbour area, the City of Valletta, is already designated a World Heritage Site. However, Valletta, as a fortress, only forms the core part of the network of the harbour fortifications - it was the keep, or citadel, of these defences. The other harbour fortifications, although separate fortified entities, were inter-related

elements in a larger system - the outerworks, so to speak, of the fortified city itself. Therefore, the classification of the city of Valletta as a World Heritage Site while benefiting the city itself, is divorced from the whole scheme of defences.

To recapitulate, therefore, the harbour fortifications of Malta:

- a) constitute inter-related elements within a large fortress system comprising all the harbour area of which the fortress of Valletta was only the inner keep or citadel
- b) represent important examples of gunpowder fortifications designed by prominent European Engineers - Ferramolino, Laparelli, Floriani. Pagan Valperga, De Tigne etc. - with later important additions made during the British period of the island's history
- c) document the development of military architecture across a span of 400 years