

The Alleys of Birgu

— Exploring Malta's Victorious City —

by Duncan JD Smith

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Think of Malta and the dramatic townscape of Valletta often springs to mind: that fortified peninsula, steep streets and a lofty cathedral, all floating majestically above the Grand Harbour. But stand in the cathedral fore-

court facing south-east and the Maltese capital has a *doppelgänger*. On the far side of the Grand Harbour, through a tangle of yacht masts, lies Birgu, Valletta's pint-sized predecessor. Here mass tourism gives way to a more intimate visitor experience. Broad bustling streets are traded for crooked alleys, where every time-worn stone tells a tale. Not only that but it was in Birgu in 1565 that the course of European history changed forever.

ANCIENT ORIGINS

Like Valletta, Birgu occupies a peninsula jutting into the sheltered confines of the Grand Harbour. It has a fort, too, and land walls separating it from neighbouring Conspicua (the two settlements, together with nearby Senglea, forming the so-called Three Cities). But whilst Conspicua, Senglea and Valletta were all founded during the 16th century, Birgu boasts more ancient origins.

Seafaring Phoenicians were the first to appreciate Malta's strategic position in the Mediterranean shipping lanes, midway between Europe and Africa. From around 750 BC, Birgu's sheltered western shore provided their trading vessels with a haven — though little remains today, bar for a shadowy temple honouring the Canaanite deity Astarte. The Phoenicians also created a capital, Maleth (meaning 'shelter'), from an existing Bronze Age hilltop settlement in the centre of the island of Malta.

In the year 218 BC, during the Second Punic War, the Romans took control of Malta. Despite its

LEFT: The alleys of Birgu have scarcely changed since the time of the Knights Hospitaller (photo © Duncan JD Smith).



'barbarous' inhabitants speaking neither Latin nor Greek, the island prospered. Birgu maintained its status as an important maritime stopover and the capital was renamed Melite (from which 'Malta' would eventually be derived). It was during this period, too, that a shipwrecked Saint Paul brought Christianity to the island.

Later, during the 870s, Malta and Sicily fell to the Arabs. Material evidence for their presence consists of little more than a few tombstones although one need only scrutinise Maltese place names to detect an Arabic influence (Melite, for example, was renamed Mdina). The islands' Christian population was seemingly tolerated.

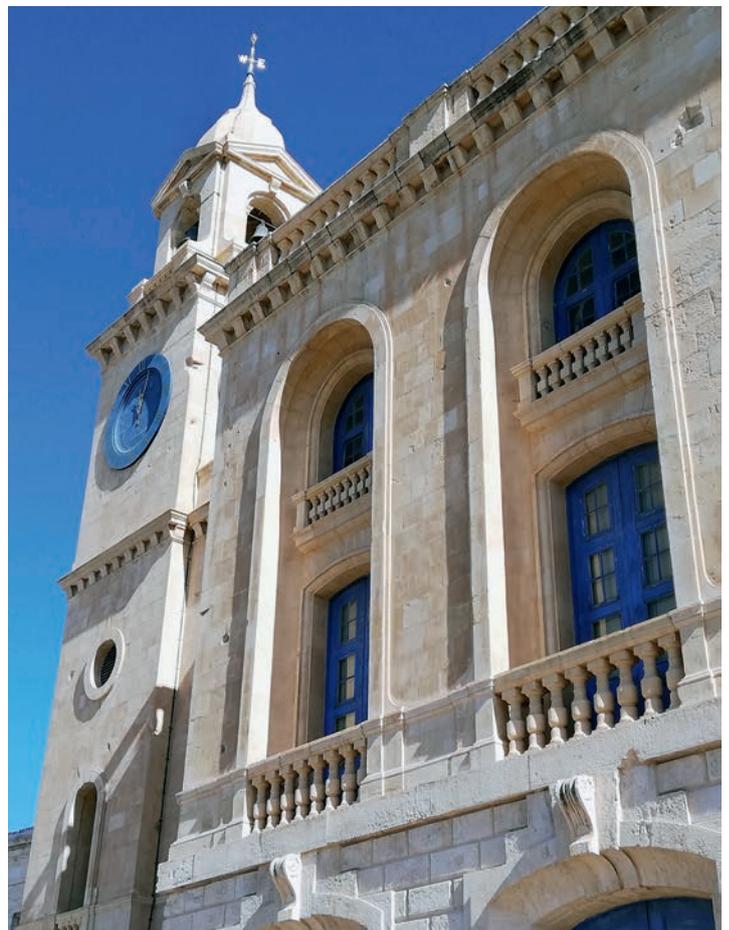
When Norman nobles conquered Malta in the late 11th century, the Arabic dialect spoken by the islanders morphed into today's Romanised *Malti* language. Then, in 1198, the Holy Roman Emperor-in-waiting, Frederick II, was crowned King of Sicily. With his authority at home unsure, he made Sicily his base of operations and in 1220 appointed a feudal lord (*castellan*) to secure Maltese interests for the German crown (a fine house in Birgu with Siculo-Norman features survives from this period). Birgu's first fortress, on the rock at the end of the peninsula and commanding the southern side of the Grand Harbour, also dates from this time. It appears in contemporary accounts as *Castrum Maris* (Castle by the Sea).

The rest of Birgu's mediaeval history is taken up with the Aragonese and Castilians, who ruled the islands from 1283 onwards. Birgu's fort was again occupied by *castellani* although they had little jurisdiction beyond the walls since the Maltese were ruled by their nobility in Mdina. Another 250 years would now pass until Malta changed hands again.

RIGHT: Birgu's Maritime Museum occupies the imposing former British Naval Bakery (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

MONKS IN ARMOUR

In January 1530, a flotilla arrived off Malta's eastern shore. It was carrying the Knights Hospitaller (Order of Saint John) and their Grand Master, Fra' Philippe de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam. The Order had been established just prior to the First Crusade (1095–1099), when Benedictines set up hospitals for pilgrims to the Holy Land. The European noblemen they treated helped swell their ranks and together with the Knights Templar they reconquered Jerusalem. With papal protection, these 'monks in armour' quickly became a powerful and independent religious order carving out a handful of East Mediterranean states known collectively as *Outremer*.



When the forces of Islam recaptured the Holy Land in 1291, the Knights sought refuge first on Cyprus and then Rhodes. There they became formidable corsairs adept at harrying Ottoman shipping, prompting Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent to oust them again. This time they relocated to Malta at the behest of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who hoped their naval skills might provide an effective bulwark against Ottoman expansion. The nominal rent was one falcon a year.

Just before their arrival, the Order sent a commission to Malta to assess their new home. Although the island lacked Rhodes' fertility and was a long way from the Holy Land, which they still hoped to re-conquer, it did have Birgu, which despite being described as a sleepy fishing village, offered a fine anchorage and a fort ripe for strengthening. Thus Birgu became the *de facto* capital of Malta and the Knights set about replicating the infrastructure they had enjoyed on Rhodes.

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abundant supply of limestone. The dry ditch separating the fort from the rest of the peninsula was also deepened to create a sea moat crossed by a drawbridge. Christened Fort St Angelo (Forti Sant' Anglu), this became the Knights' new headquarters. The Order then built a land wall at the

opposite end of the Birgu peninsula and in the space in between erected their domestic and public buildings. Barely a third of a mile square, this maze of alleys was named 'Birgu', after the Italian word *borgo* denoting a suburban settlement.

The settlement was bisected by the axial Main Gate Street (Triq il-Mina Kbira). To the west, the Maltese lived in their flat-roofed Arabic-style houses around

a large public square with a watchtower. Lower down, the Knights converted one of Malta's oldest parish churches into their conventual church, where they stored precious religious relics brought from Rhodes. The church overlooked Birgu's all-important western shore, where the Knights' galleys were built, anchored and repaired. Known as Dockyard Creek, this is also where the Knights located their arsenal, bakery and treasury.

The area east of the main street was reserved for the Knights' exclusive use. Called *Il-Collachio* ('the citadel') and delineated by granite bollards, this is where hostels (*auberges*) were built for the young knights. Rendered in warm, honey-coloured stone, they were typically two-storey structures, with rooms set around an internal courtyard. Most distinctive were the street fronts featuring Rhodian-style corbelled balconies and triple-rolled mouldings around the doors and windows. The *Collachio* was also home to important buildings such as the Knights' Armoury, an Inquisitor's Palace housing law courts, a *Università* from where the popular council orches-



LEFT: Fort St Angelo at the tip of the Birgu peninsula, with Valletta in the distance (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

RIGHT: The so-called Cuvre Porte, one of several gates giving access to fortified Birgu (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

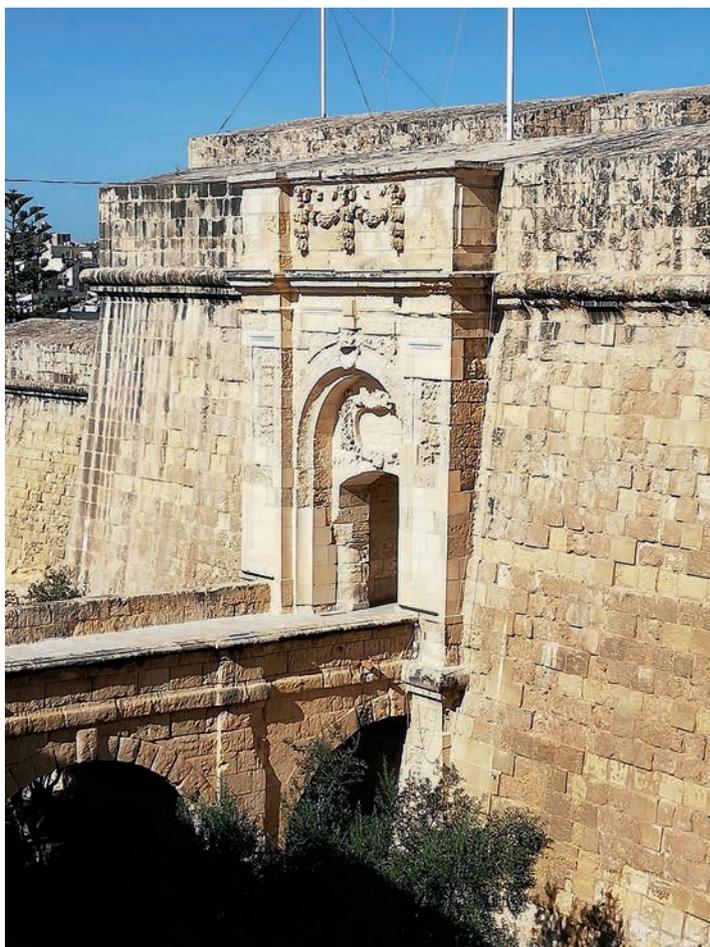
trated the distribution of grain, and a state-of-the-art hospital (*Sacra Infermeria*).

THE GREAT SIEGE

In 1557 the Knights elected Jean Parisot de La Valette as their 49th Grand Master. As a young knight from Provence he had been in the flotilla that departed Rhodes almost thirty years earlier. Despite Malta being almost a thousand miles from Constantinople, Valette knew it was only a matter of time before Suleiman would send his fleet to subdue the island in preparation for an invasion of southern Italy. Accordingly Valette further strengthened Birgu's Fort St Angelo, as well as Fort St Michael on the Senglea peninsula and Fort St Elmo across the Grand Harbour on Mount Sciberras. The Knights' galley fleet was then brought into the safety of Birgu's Dockyard Creek and a great chain stretched across the harbour mouth to deter enemy vessels. Food, water and weapons were stockpiled, and requests for help sent to the Pope and the Emperor's Viceroy in Sicily.

The Great Siege of Malta commenced in May 1565, with the arrival of the Ottoman fleet carrying some 40,000 troops. Opposing them were just 700 Knights, around 9,000 Maltese irregulars and mercenaries, and a conviction that the future of Christendom was at stake. First to fall was Fort St Elmo though it cost the lives of 8,000 Turkish troops. Looking across the water at the redoubtable Fort St Angelo, the Ottoman general Mustafa Pasha is said to have muttered, "Allah! If so small a son has cost us so dear, what is the price we have to pay for so large a father?"

Next the Ottomans turned their guns on the forts in Senglea and Birgu launching a series of blistering mass attacks. Remarkably, both forts held out, while Turkish morale was gradually drained by mounting losses and a long hot summer. Finally on 7 September a relief force arrived from Sicily. Undeterred, Mustafa Pasha pressed his troops into battle again but many mutinied and were cut down. With some 30,000 Turkish troops now lost, the siege was lifted the following



day, leaving the standard of the Order of St John tattered but still fluttering over the Grand Harbour. The event marked a key moment in the collapse of the Ottoman dream to conquer Europe, with 8 September becoming a Maltese public holiday.

The bravery of the Knights and the Maltese alike earned Birgu the honorific title *Città Vittoriosa* (Victorious City) although much of it now lay in ruins. Seeing this as an opportunity to reaffirm their position, the Knights created a new capital for themselves on Mount Sciberras, moving there in 1571. It was named Valletta after the man who had led them to victory.

BIRGU TODAY

With the Knights relocated and the Ottoman threat blunted, Il-Birgu (as the Maltese still know it) lost some of its importance. It did, however, retain its strategic relevance as a fort, dockyard and landing stage. Accordingly it continued to develop so that Birgu today offers a remarkable architectural palimpsest.

THE BOAT TO BIRGU

For a first visit to Birgu, why not take the boat from Valletta? Ferries shuttle across the Grand Harbour every 30 minutes from the Maltese capital, departing from the waterfront by the Lascaris bus stop. The ferry runs up Dockyard Creek past the marina, with fine views of Birgu to the left. The ferry terminal is by St Tereza. From there it's an easy walk up into Birgu. The one-way fare from Valletta is €1.50.

For travellers wary of leaving dry land, bus route 4 links central Valletta (leaving from the Vjal Nelson or Floriana) with Birgu. It is a 25-minute journey. Like the ferry, the bus leaves every 30 minutes.

With few cars present (most alleys are too narrow for them), Birgu is perfect for exploring on foot. An informative walk begins outside the land walls at the base of the peninsula. The defences here date in part from the 1580s, when the Knights repaired the walls and excavated an impressive new ditch which film buffs may recognise as it doubled as ancient Rome in *Gladiator*.

Concealed within the thickness of the walls is the Malta at War Museum. The exhibits displayed in this former barracks (and the air-raid shelters beneath it) are a reminder that Malta survived another great siege during the Second World War.

It was the culmination of a turbulent period that began in 1798 with the arrival of Napoleon and the departure of the Knights for Rome. With French forces garrisoned in Valletta, the Maltese blockaded the Grand Harbour aided by Britain, Portugal and Naples. When the French capitulated in 1800, Malta became a British protectorate, with the Royal Navy's Mediterranean Fleet based in Birgu. Its presence was instrumental in resisting attempts in 1940–1942 by Germany and Italy to neutralise Malta in an effort to safeguard their shipping.

Birgu inside the land walls remains a place apart. Unhurried and unspoilt, the current population of 2,600 hasn't increased since the heyday of the Knights. The streets remain largely residential, reflecting a mixture of influences: a Maghrebi penchant for enclosed wooden balconies and caged birds, houses named for Catholic saints, and British-style red-painted post boxes. Front doors are adorned with figurative religious plaques and an occasional door knocker takes the form of the Knights' eight-pointed cross symbolising the Eight Beatitudes.

Although the Knights' *Collachio* is no longer divided from the rest of Birgu, it retains its own distinct charm. The homes here exude civic pride, their doors left deliberately ajar to reveal hints of fine furniture and Maltese lace. Dotted here and there are many of the Knights' original buildings. Of their *auberges*, two remain unchanged: the Auberge d'Angleterre (Berga tal-Ingilterra) on Triq il-Majjistral, is now a health centre, and the Auberge de France (Berga ta' Franza) on Triq Hilda Tabone, is the seat of Birgu's local council. The Inquisitor's Palace on Triq il-Mina Kbira has been turned into a museum, its former detention cells still scrawled with prisoner graffiti. The *Università* around the corner on Triq il-Kunsill Popolari is currently being converted into a boutique hotel, while the Armoury on Triq l-Arcisqof Mikiel Gonzi awaits reuse. The hospital on Triq il-Miratur



LEFT: Traditional boatbuilder Andrea Delceppo in his Kalkara Creek workshop (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

has long served as a convent for Benedictine nuns.

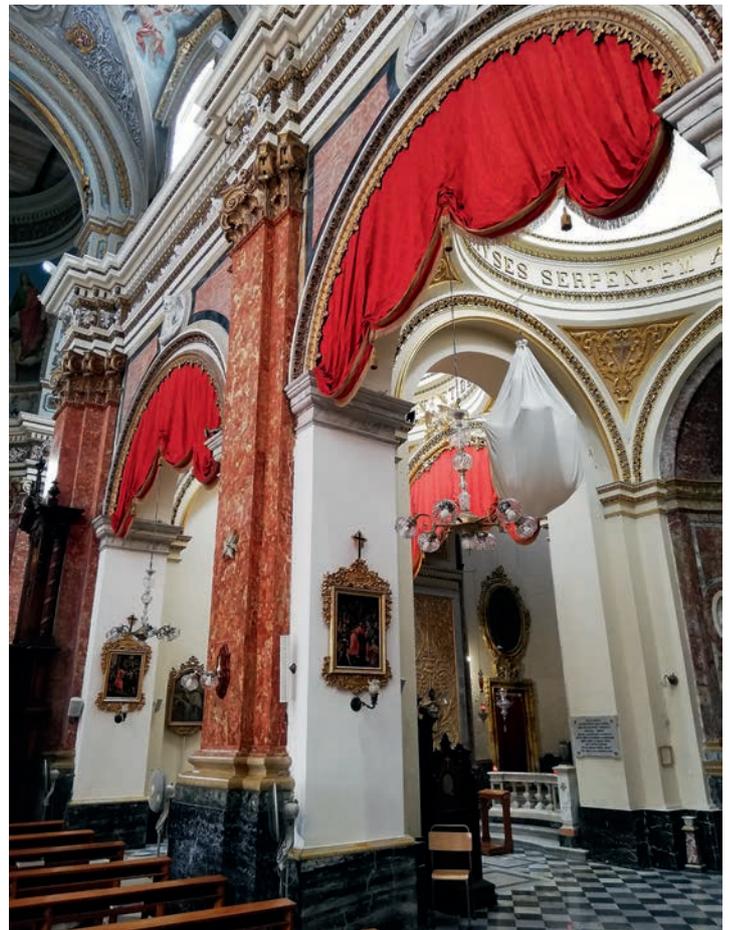
Birgu's west side was heavily damaged during the Second World War due to its proximity to the Senglea shipyards. One casualty was the old watchtower in the main square. The latter, known since the Great Siege as Victory Square (Misraħ ir-Rebħa), features a late-19th century Venetian-style *palazzo* used by the St Lawrence Band Club, which plays an important role in Birgu's colourful Feast of St Lawrence each August.

When the Knights raised a new cathedral in Valletta, their old conventual church was re-dedicated to St Lawrence. It was replaced in 1696 by the present Collegiate Church of St Lawrence (Knisja kolleġġjata ta' San Lawrenz) built to a baroque design by renowned local architect Lorenzo Gafà. Treasures include a painting by the Calabrian knight-cum-artist Mattia Preti depicting the martyrdom of St Lawrence. Next door in the Oratory of St Joseph the *prie-dieu* used by Grand Master Valette is on display, as well as his hat and cane. In front of the church is the Freedom Monument erected on the spot where on 31 March 1979 the Union Jack was lowered and replaced by the Maltese flag marking the end of British rule.

The waterfront so valued by the British and those before them is still operational and is these days a haven for sleek yachts and power boats. Today's cafés and chandlers occupy some impressive old waterfront buildings, including the Knights' 16th-century bakery and treasury, and the 17th-century palaces of the general and the captains of the galleys.

Most remarkable is the former Royal Naval Bakery built in the 1840s to a design by British architect William Scamp on the site of the Knights' arsenal. At its peak it was generating 30,000 pounds of bread and biscuits a day! Today the building houses the Malta Maritime Museum (Mużew Marittimu ta' Malta) containing a model of the Knights' flagship galleon (*caracca*) and the world's largest Roman anchor.

For a taste of traditional boatbuilding one should make a diversion here and cross to the eastern shore of the peninsula. There, in the Kalkara Creek, can be found a motley assortment of vessels, old boathouses and a solitary traditional boatbuilder. Andrea Delceppo builds and repairs



Baroque splendour inside the Collegiate Church of St Lawrence, Birgu (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

high-prowed Maltese gondolas (*dghajsas*), which are used as water taxis around the Grand Harbour.

This walk finishes with Fort St Angelo, which still squats formidably at the tip of the Birgu peninsula. Modified in the late-17th century, it was later garrisoned by the British as a 'stone frigate'. With the British departure in 1979, the fort passed to the Maltese government and is now a tourist attraction. Most recently, in 2001, part of the fort was granted to the Sovereign Military Order of Malta. The presence of this Catholic lay religious order that claims continuity from the Knights Hospitaller brings history almost full circle in Malta's Victorious City. ■

Duncan JD Smith is the author and publisher of the 'Only In Guides', a series of city guides aimed at independently minded cultural travellers. You can find out more about his work at www.onlyinguides.com and www.duncanjdsmith.com.