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THE REALISATION OF THE ROTUNDA OF MOSTA, MALTA
GROGNET, FERGUSSON AND THE EPISCOPAL OBJECTION

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Abstract

The Rotunda of Mosta is the parish church of the town of Mosta in mainland Malta. It was designed in the early nineteenth century in Neoclassical idiom by the Maltese architect-engineer of French decent Giorgio Grognet de Vassè. It was modelled on the Pantheon in Rome. Objections against its construction were levelled, the main opponent of the design proposal being the bishop Francesco Saverio Caruana. Following its completion the leading Scottish architectural historian James Fergusson had included a very negative review in his seminal publication History of the Modern Styles of Architecture. This paper concludes that the episcopal objection was a feeble excuse rather than a reason whilst the opinion of Fergusson was not based on an informed, possibly even biased, judgment of the professional abilities and uprightness of Grognet.

Keywords: Mosta Rotunda, Mosta Dome, Giorgio Grognet, James Fergusson, Malta

1. Introduction

The Rotunda of Mosta, a nineteenth century Roman Catholic church dedicated to the Assumption of Mary, is the one of the earliest significant Neoclassical inspired architectural buildings in Malta, at the time a British Crown Colony. It has one of the largest masonry domes in world architectural history. The design, undertaken by Giorgio Grognet de Vassè (1774-1862), was challenged by the bishop of the island. The decision to erect it was taken in 1812 as the then parish church was too small to cater for the spiritual needs of the community of the village of Mosta, pronounced in old Maltese as 'Musta'. At the time the parish priest was Felice Calleja. He had supported the idea of the locals and the design of Grognet [1]. In his will Calleja left his property for the construction of the Rotunda. It barely covered the cost to a fifth of the height of

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the drum; the rest was raised through contributions from wealthy Maltese and British Officers of the Garrison [2].

Following the endorsement by a technical commission of four 'periti' (plural of 'perit') appointed by the British Governor General, building works commenced on site in 1833 for the realization of the projected design. The construction, except for the lantern, was complete by 1861. The profession of perit, the Maltese architect-engineer which dates to the sixteenth century [3-5], is still practised nowadays. Various reviews followed; most were positive but one by the leading Scottish architectural historian James Fergusson (1808-1886) included in his seminal publication *History of the Modern Styles of Architecture* [6] was particularly critical of the execution of the project.

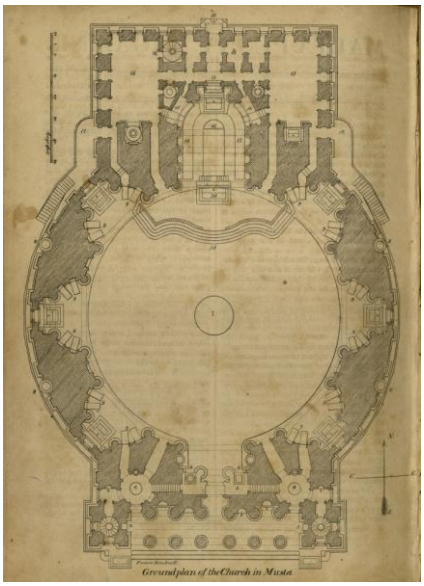
This paper aims to investigate: 1) the criticism levelled by Fergusson versus Grognet and 2) the grounds of the episcopal objection to the design of the Rotunda. In addressing these questions, use was made of primary sources, essentially original documents by the architect-engineer reproduced unedited by Salomone [7], and the publication of Fergusson [6].

2. The context

2.1. The Pantheon - the model for the Rotunda of Mosta

The proposed architectural plan and elevation of the Rotunda of Mosta were synonymous with imperial architecture (Figure 1). In designing it, Grognet had unequivocally stated that his source of inspiration was the Pantheon. Gavin Stamp observes that, although the Roman building may have been Grognet's source of inspiration , the Rotunda has a higher drum and thus it may have been influenced by the early nineteenth century church of San Francesco di Paola in Naples which also recalls the Pantheon [8]. The original purpose of the building of the church of San Francesco was as a tribute to Napoleon Bonaparte, planned by Napoleon's brother-in-law King Joachim Murat, and completed in 1816 by King Ferdinand IV after the city was restored back to the Bourbons. It is Ferdinand's ex voto for his return to the patron saint who resided in a monastery located on same site. He had converted the building into the present church. The author does not concur to Stamp's conclusion that the ponderous neoclassical style of Mosta Rotunda is more akin to this church. Grognet had consistently claimed and made reference in his technical submissions to the Pantheon [9, 10]; it was the case study on which he had architecturally and structurally modelled Mosta Church. Variations present were modified due to reasons of economy [1, 11]. Until the late 19th century, the Pantheon had twin bell towers on the sides on the main elevation which were added in the early 1600s by Pope Urban VIII. This may be read in parallel with a contemporary photo of the Rotunda (Figure 2 [https://i.pinimg.com/736x/d8/09/50/d80950b6cd338b186881528d8949af5b—antique-photos-ancient-rome.jpg, accessed July 06, 2017]).

(a)



(b)

Figure 1. The proposed Rotunda of Mosta as designed by Giorgio Grognet de Vassè: (a) elevation which includes the main entrance and (b) ground floor plan [11].

(a)

(b)

Figure 2. (a) The Pantheon in the late nineteenth century with the twin bell towers [https://i.pinimg.com] and (b) the Rotunda of Mosta as at present.

2.2. Architect-Engineer Giorgio Grognet de Vassè

Grognet was a Maltese architect-engineer and antiquarian with a sound knowledge of the classics; his ancestors were French. They were compelled to leave France when the Edict of Fontainebleau, which repealed the Edict of Nantes, came into effect in October 1685 [11]. His education in Frascati, a town located 20 kilometres south-east of Rome, was directed towards priesthood. He sympathised with the Society of the Friends of the French Constitution, later

referred to as Jacobins, and enrolled to serve Napoleon Bonaparte's army where he spent 13 years at the Civil and Military Department of Engineers preparing and drafting drawings [11]. After serving as a military engineer in the French campaign in Ottoman Egypt and Syria he returned to Malta. Although his matrimonial home was in the capital Valletta, he lived in Mosta at the residence of a local notary to be able to supervise the construction of the church.

The Editor of *The Malta Times and United Services Gazette* noted that "Nothing discouraged or dispirited by difficulties, opposition, or neglect – with but few resources of money or friends, he [Grognet] persevered, and lived only just long enough to witness the completion of his plans" [12]. He was responding to the letter sent to him a week earlier by the Scottish physician, naturalist and geologist Andrew Leith Adams (1827-1882). Whilst noting that shortly before his death he was given a Royal bounty in recognition for his work on the Rotunda, Grognet had lived until then as "a poor withered form that was wont to shuffle along the streets in little more than rags .... He was deserted and shamefully neglected by his countrymen, and that the hand of charity was but sparingly extended towards him, and not until near his latest day." [13]

2.3. The account of James Fergusson

Fergusson had included the Rotunda of Mosta in his *History of the Modern Styles of Architecture* [6]. This publication was the first comprehensive study of its genre. Indeed it was a precedent to the influential publication by Banister Fletcher's *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, first issued in 1896, and Auguste Choisy's *Histoire de l'Architecture* issued in 1899 [14]. Fergusson noted that although the idea to enlarge the parish church for this 'little agricultural village' was conceived in 1812, works did not commence until 1833 as all funds were directed to several local calamities. He had attributed the merits for the design and the erection of Mosta church to the master mason rather than to Grognet: "Although the merit of the original suggestion of the design is due to a local architect of the name of Grognet, the real architect of the building was the village mason - Angelo Gatt. … Following his own constructive instincts and the dictates of common sense, he has successfully carried out every part of the building. It was he who insisted on erecting the dome without scaffolding, and showed how it could be done by simply notching each course on to the one below it" [6].

Fergusson observed that Gatt and the other masons operated in Medieval spirit except that the style was Classical. He noted that this gave rise to several mistakes in grammar of architectural ornament as they were not versed in this style. Fergusson states that they followed the drawings furnished from textbooks by Grognet "or some one else" and this gave rise to "faults of grammar and false quantities apparent everywhere in the building". He further argues: "Had the designers of this building only got a learned architect to look over their design, and to correct the details, it would have been one of the most beautiful, as it is one of the most remarkable, churches in Europe. It pleases those who worship in it

quite as much, or perhaps more, than if its details had been purely Classical; but it is so distasteful to the educated man, that he turns from it more with a feeling of disgust than with anything like the pleasure its dimensions and form ought to produce." [6]

2.4. The position on the bishop

The general public opinion on the island was against the construction of a round church, including the bishop Francesco Saverio Caruana (1759-1847) who did not approve of the design as it did not comply with traditional ecclesiastical architecture. It has been consistently claimed by publications issued to date [e.g. 1, 2, 15, 16] that he: 1) preferred the traditional Latin cross plan for a church and 2) detested the Pantheon for its pagan associations and thus its form was not read as fitting for the Christian cult.

His opposition was either due to prejudice or ignorance. It may have been genuinely motivated by the belief that round temples were associated with pagan worship and thus not suitable for rites of the Roman Catholic Church [2].

3. Discussion

3.1. Grognet - a pragmatic neoclassical visionary

It has been argued that Grognet never received a formal education in either architectural or building engineering and, during the construction of Mosta Church, he consulted "a member of the Sammut family" [The Malta Independent, 11 March 2012, http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2012-03-11/news/200-year-old-history-in-an-old-musty-archive-307055/, accessed July 29, 2017]. Before entering into the service of the French, "he was already noted for his proficiency in architecture" [11]. In fact, when joining Bonaparte's service where he was involved in the erection of forts in France and Egypt [15], he was already skilled in architecture. The historical guide to the island of Malta and its dependencies published in 1830 states that Grognet was a "very capable engineer" who had drawn up a new plan for "the metropolis of the Ottoman Empire ... which has been approved of, and met the approbation of all those who have examined it" [17]. In reaction to Fergusson's claims Edgar Salomone published unedited original documents which vindicate the theory that Grognet was an ingenious architect-engineer [7, p. 9-21]. Leonard Mahoney provided evidence that Grognet was versed in classical architectural grammar. Based on original representations available at the archives of the heirs of Grognet he makes reference and reproduces architectural drawings dating to Grognet's student days which represent a small Pantheon resembling church [15]. With respect to Fergusson's claim that Grognet was not "a learned architect", Mahoney argues that "Fergusson may have meant that Grognet was not well versed in Greek, as distinct from Roman, architecture. But not even this can explain Grognet's lapses; as, for example, the proportions of the Corinthian columns, or his substitution of a

regular entablature by an architrave of the same height as the replaced entablature. Is it not clear that Grognet was inventing and rearranging the Classical elements to his own tastes? Very curiously Grognet protested strongly ... when the master-mason ... built the main door with Baroque mouldings. ... As the offending door was demolished it is to be presumed that all subsequent 'faults of grammar and small quantities' were of Grognet's own doing – in pursuit, i.e., of the 'vero bello' as understood by the architect." [15] In 1834 Grognet had rebuked the work on the mouldings of the main door which were undertaken when he had to leave from the building site for a few days and had ordered their removal [18].

Grognet's design may be read in the context of the architectural philosophy of the French trio of visionary Neoclassical-inspired architects: Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728-1799), Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736-1806) and Jean-Jacques Lequeu (1757-1826). Their designs, grounded in the intellectual freedom of the Enlightenment, were not only megalomaniac in scale but included motifs which were their own creation giving rise to a unique stylistic expression. Further to modifications to his architectural design concept to address the structural considerations relating to the compressive bearing stress of local limestone, Grognet introduced a plethora of ornament; the cornice embellished with lotus and honeysuckle carved in relief reads as a massive imperial crown. The stepping inward of the drum forms a balcony all around and the space is roofed over by masonry shell with end and tongue moulding (Figure 3): "Under the cornice will be a running band of lotus and honeysuckle ornament in relief, and the cornice will have some kind of Grecian tile at the top by way of ornament. – At this point the building is recessed forming a gallery all round; .... Above the cornice of the attic is a second gallery, and then a series of twelve steps leads up to a leaf ornament which gradually gathers in till it reaches the top or third gallery; – at the back aspect there is however a series of smaller steps ... to the third gallery. This is composed of a large egg and tongue mo[u]lding supported by large projecting brackets." [11]

Grognet was considered a 'dreamer' by his contemporaries [15] and his idea for the rotunda was ridiculed when initially proposed [16]. He was indeed a pragmatic Neoclassical visionary who broke away from the traditional chains of local Baroque ecclesiastical architecture (Figure 4) [http://www.it-tarka.com/mosta--facts-and-figures.php, accessed July 10, 2017]. He remained adamant in his conviction that his proposal was the best option and saw it through until finished with the exception of the lantern which was erected in 1889; he designed the Rotunda as his profession and supervised its execution as his vocation.

Fergusson's publication appeared in the same year of Grognet's decease. He was not only unsympathetic but levied a ruthless attack on Grognet's professional credibility; "in arrogance he [Fergusson] occasionally even surpasses [John] Ruskin [1819-1900]" [19]. This queries the motive/s underlying his criticism, whether it was driven by scholarship or by a subjective opinion. The German-born British scholar of history of art and architecture Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-1983) had noted that "Fergusson mixes objective and subjective criteria,

and ... subjective criteria play havoc with his assessment of buildings of the past" [19]. There is no available evidence of the sources which he used to form his opinion on Grognet. Although not trained as an architect Fergusson did practise architecture on a limited scale and was the 1871 recipient of a Royal Institute of British Architects gold award [19]. He was well conversant with the French military agenda which Grognet supported and had a number of publications spanning from 1845 till 1856 on matters relating to the defence of Britain against the French [20-22]. Indeed, in 1859 he was the only civilian appointed on the Royal Commission for the Defence of the United Kingdom [23].

(a) (b)

Figure 3. Details from Figure 2b: (a) cornice with lotus and honeysuckle ornament in relief and (b) pediment, the ornament in relief was introduced after 1860.

Figure 4. An early twentieth century aerial photo of the village core of Mosta taken circa a century after building works on the Rotunda commenced; Neoclassical visionary architecture realised [Ħarsien Patrimonju Mosti, available at http://www.it-tarka.com/mosta--facts-and-figures.php, accessed August 12, 2017].

3.2. The episcopal objection - an excuse not a reason

Another suggestion for bishop Caruana's refusal to endorse the design was recently put forward by Krystle Farrugia [24, 25]. Grognet's design was preferred over the proposal of Giorgio Pullicino (1779-1851), a Professor of Drawing and Architecture at the University of Malta responsible for the teaching of "Civil Architecture, Perspective, Ornament, and those principles of Elementary Geometry necessary for the understanding of architectural models" [26]. As a contemporary of Grognet, Pullicino was versed in Neoclassicism but, given the limited appeal of this style in Malta, he opted for a Baroque proposal for Mosta church which ironically was rejected for Grognet's Neoclassical design [15, 26]. The bishop, who was the former Rector of the University of Malta, preferred his protégé's work and thus he was annoyed by its rejection and subsequently his dismissal [24, 25].

The anti-French sentiment at the time was still present. Caruana, not a Francophile like Grognet, was a rebel leader during the uprising of the Maltese against the French. This political sentiment was shared by Count Saverio Marchese (1757-1833), an art connoisseur, a man of letters and Grognet's uncle [24; 25, p. 35]. Being a member of a Committee of the University, Marchese was a friend to both Caruana and Pullicino and likely supported the latter's design [24-27]. Marchese did not approve of his nephew's career and he was the only one excluded from his will [24]). Having disregarded his father's wishes to enter priesthood and having instead joined Napoleon's forces in Italy, he was a disgraced member of the family.

The *Malta Penny Magazine* published an article on Mosta Church over two issues: 24 and 31 July 1841. The first entitled 'Colossal Church of Musta' gives an insight into the latent motive underlying the Bishop's position: "In whichever way however the bishop's opposition be explained, it was unjust in him to interfere in the disposition of the will of the late Calleja; he even went so far as to insist upon the adoption of a plan drawn out by his own architect [Giorgio Pullicino] in the style and after the fashion of the other numerous churches in Malta in the form of a Greek cross. Much angry feeling was of course excited; at this critical moment, another architect Mr. Grognet presented the plan of a round temple which so pleased the inhabitants of Musta that they formed a strong party in opposition to the Bishop – petitioned the Governor, and demanding an audience, laid before him a copy of Calleja's will, with Grognet's plan." [2] Although it was officially claimed that the bishop did not turn up for the ceremony of the laying of the foundation stone of the new church because of ill health [2], the reason acknowledged by later historians was his disappointment that the proposal of Pullicino, "Mgr. Caruana's architect" [26], was not selected [26, 28].

The claim that the bishop had rejected Grognet's design on the grounds of its association with the non-Christian pagan cult is unreasonable on other grounds. The Pantheon has been used as a Christian church since 609 A.D. when it was converted and consecrated to Saint Mary and the Martyrs soon after it was

handed to Pope Boniface IV by the Byzantine Emperor Phocas [29], which is well over a millennium earlier. Thus, Caruana was either ignorant of this fact, surely not a kind attribute to the holder of the highest academic position on the island, or his objections were based on a weak excuse which even the gullible illiterate locals of the "remote and poor village" [2] did not uphold given that their Parish Priest Calleja had celebrated his first mass in this Roman building. He surely was not ignorant of art. As a Rector, his brain-child was the foundation of the School of Design which, in 1834, was split into Applied Drawing and Architecture [30], the latter being the discipline in which Pullicino had a professorship.

4. Conclusions

Grognet was versed both in architecture and structural engineering. He had studied and practised architecture prior to his design of the Rotunda of Mosta which is roofed over by one of the largest masonry shells in history. The realisation of his design was a significant challenge. He had to direct its execution to the masons who were neither versed in neoclassical architectural grammar nor had the experience required to erect such a building. The geocultural activity of earlier centuries had been noted [31]. A recent study had identified the source of the limestone used in the erection of the church [32]. The voluntary workforce on the building site of the Rotunda, based on the free labour of the villagers who were not builders, gives an insight into such activity during nineteenth century Malta.

The Pantheon was not only an architectural case study but also a structural one for the design of the rotunda. This point is missed in Fergusson's assessment. Grognet's design was in tandem with Fergusson's notion of beauty in architecture which resided "in the thoughtful appropriateness of design and intellectual elegance of detail" [33]. Fergusson's opinion was not based on an informed judgement on the professional abilities of Grognet.

The objection of the bishop was not a reason but an excuse as his protégé was not awarded the project and, instead, the design of Grognet, who was politically of a staunchly different opinion, was selected. The bishop's position was weak and contradictory due to a statement of fact. The Pantheon was originally for pagan worship but was converted and consecrated as a Christian Church over a millennium earlier. Arguing that he was not aware of this incident in church history is absurd. He was the bishop of a diocese where members of the clergy had their prima messa at the Pantheon and the first Rector of the University of Malta under British rule.

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