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Heading in the right direction: the maps which shed a light on Malta's past

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Historically speaking, few things are considered to be more fascinating than maps. In the age before the advent of GPS, the internet, and the ever-reliable Google Maps, cartography was the backbone of geography – allowing explorers to depict and account their travels and explorations.

Today, in an age where maps are almost taken for granted, there is a community which remains enthralled by the map. The Malta Map Society was set up in 2009 by Albert Ganado, the undisputed and internationally-recognised beacon of knowledge for Maltese cartography, a year after he ceded his remarkable collection to Heritage Malta in exchange for a house – a collection which now forms part of the collection at MUZA in Valletta.

The Society, which acquired the patronage of President George Vella – himself an avid map collector – in 2019, aims simply to support, encourage, and disseminate the study and preservation of maps with a particular emphasis on early maps. In fact, the society has published nine newsletters and four journals, along with five books which delve into topics such as early Maltese cartographers, the Brocktorff Mapmakers, and pre-siege maps of Malta. A publication on French maps of Malta is also in the works.

Joseph Schiro is the society's honorary secretary, and owner of a treasure trove of maps. A paper restorer by profession, Schiro's collection is wide-reaching and contains pieces which are in many ways. Maps of all shapes, sizes, and orientations adorn the walls of his home – but some pieces are more unique than others.



Photos Alenka Falzon

It is a love that started on a small scale with miniature maps. Why? “They were cheaper”, Schiro says with a wry smile; “but the bug eventually gets to you and things get bigger and bigger”, he continues. Now, his aims are altogether loftier: “I am looking for maps which are not in Albert Ganado's collection – what's the point of having something which already exists in a collection? I don't have children so I will give the maps which are not in Ganado's collection to the state so the collection will continue to grow”, he explains.

The two main techniques for making maps are through either wooden blocks or copper plates. Original copper plates are especially rare, namely because copper was expensive at the time and once the plate was used to make the necessary map, it was melted down.

“This makes the plate I own particularly rare”, Schiro explains as he lifts a flat box out of a drawer and puts on a pair of white cloth gloves. He lifts a copper plate out of the box, and turns it over to reveal a map of Mount Sciberras and the Three Cities during the Great Siege of 1565.



Made in 1568, the map is found on the wall paintings of the Grandmaster’s Palace in Valletta amongst the paintings of Matteo Perez d’Aleccio – who traced the history of the Great Siege in a cycle of wall paintings at the palace. Schiro explains that he had acquired this map from Peru, where Perez d’Aleccio had ended up. The reason that this plate survived, Schiro explains, is that Perez d’Aleccio used it while in Peru to teach artists on how to do oil painting on copper; evidenced by an unfinished painting of the Madonna engraved into the back of the plate.

For a long time, it was thought that the engraving was Perez d’Aleccio’s own work – right up until 2012 when a print was pulled from the plate revealing a very slight difference from the original – the letters ‘NB’ at the top right corner. The initials were eventually traced to be those of Natale Bonifacio – a famous Croatian engraver who spent most of his life based in Rome.



Another impressive piece which Schiro owns is a manuscript map which is linked to a grizzly story. Dating back to 1691, the map depicts the story behind the killing of a certain Lippu Fenech in Hal-Muxi.

Fenech, Schiro explains, had botched a robbery and killed someone in doing so. He escaped and sought sanctuary in the church of Hal-Muxi where, owing to the fact that he could claim sanctuary inside the church and nobody could apprehend him.

However, Malta's governor of the time Mario Testaferrata was seemingly determined not to allow Fenech to get away with his crime, and sent soldiers to suss him out. Taking up a post in an alleyway opposite the church, the soldiers waited until Fenech emerged – apparently carrying a bucket of his excrement which required disposal – from the church. The map shows how, as soon as Fenech stepped off the parvis – which was still technically church property, meaning that he still enjoyed immunity there – they shot him. Fenech somehow succeeded in crawling back into the church, but the shots did the job they intended, and he was dead by the next day.



The inquisitor was, at the time, furious and the resulting furor saw him, the archbishop, Testaferrata and even the Grandmaster be drawn into the case. In the end, there was a trial over Testaferrata's actions which hence needed a map of the scene to be drawn out. The map goes into fantastic detail – showing the plan of the church, the shots fired and where they precisely hit, and spreading across to show the whole village and the Zebbug parish church in the distance.

“Why go through all the trouble of showing the village of Hal Muxi and part of Zebbug”, Schiro asks rhetorically. He continues by explaining that he believes that the map was drawn by Lorenzo Gafa – renowned designer of churches such as St. Paul's Cathedral. He explains that Gafa had just completed the column in front of the Zebbug church and some works to its façade, and took the opportunity to show off by including those works in the map.

The map is a phenomenal compendium of vernacular architecture, showing features of traditional Maltese homes of the time such as the muxrabija, settah, and mensole while also showing other parts of the village such as the church dedicated to the Immaculate and another dedicated to St. Roque.



The aerial shot is startling. “How I wish I knew”, Schiro says when asked how – in a time where no drone cameras or satellite imagery existed – capturing the village at such an angle was done. He explains however that someone had once explained to him a possible technique that would have been used: a flat plan is first drawn, and the elevations are taken accordingly. “You will find that the dimensions are very precise, so maybe there were also some vantage points he could take at certain places as well”, he explains.

Schiro’s collection is not limited to what is hung on the walls. In fact, in his view, maps aren’t meant to be hung on walls. “They are meant to be used and read, and in fact a lot of them are found in books”, he explains. “People just cut the map out and ruin the book”, Schiro laments before noting that as a society they then try their best with putting maps back to the book it belongs in.

Owing to this regrettable notion though, finding maps inside their original books is most times rarer than finding maps as stand-alones.



Schiro proceeds to raid one of his book cabinets, and emerges with a small book which is more akin to a notebook than anything else in size. “Another one like this was found in Athens, but not in great condition – this one is pristine”, Schiro explains as he opens the small book.

The book – which is only a few pages long – contains one of the very first accounts of the Great Siege of Malta. It’s date of writing is marked as being 13 September 1565 – only five days after the Ottomans had retreated from Malta after their defeat. The notebook contains a map which shows the key points of the Siege. It is, however, woefully inaccurate; Schiro directs his finger towards a point which isn’t hard to miss: Fort St. Elmo is drawn to be in Marsa as opposed to at the tip of Mount Sciberras.

The book was issued in various languages such as French, Dutch, and German, but many copies of it come without the map because, owing to its inaccuracy, it was simply removed and replaced by a list of the Knights of St. John who had been killed in the three-month siege. It remains, however, the very first account of the Great Siege.



Another map of note, Schiro explains, is a Russian map – which is in fact the only map of Malta in Russian made – of which there are only four known copies. The map forms part of a book which is an account of Malta under the rule of the Knights of St. John by Grigory Krayevsky, who was the translator for Count Paul Martinovitch Skavronsky in 1785, which was published in 1800 – two years after the Order had been told to take their leave from Malta by the French, and a year after Russian Emperor Paul I became the Grandmaster of the Order.

One copy is found in St. Petersburg, one, minus the map, in Moscow, one in the National Library in Valletta, and the other in Schiro's collection. The map in Schiro's collection is the only one drawn out on thick green paper, and the book was a copy made especially for the owner who himself was the first person to give rights to authors on sales.

The book was translated and published in 2017 under the title 'The Islands of Malta and the Order of St John: Grigory Krayevsky', coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the Russian Embassy opening its doors in Malta.



Schiro's collection is much more extensive, containing miniature maps, leaflets, panorama maps, and even much more recent guidebooks which depict Malta amongst others.

He is but one of many avid collectors who are fascinated by the beauty of maps which, besides having practical uses, are works of arts in and of themselves. The Malta Map Society brings together these collectors, with representatives in countries such as Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, and the United States.

The society continues to host talks each year, delving into different cartographical views of Malta from different eras. Their sixth publication, currently in the works, will see a focus on French maps of Malta and will no doubt continue to shed new light on the annals Maltese history.

