18 – The Three Cities

The Three Cities are Vittoriosa/Birgu, Cospicua/Bormla and Senglea/L'Isla. Most of the Three Cities was badly bombed, much of its three parts destroyed, during the Second World War. Some inkling of what the area went through is contained in Chapter 15. Much earlier, it had been bombarded during the Great Siege of 1565, as described in Chapter 5, which also tells how Birgu grew from a village to the vibrant city of the Order of the Knights of St John following their arrival in 1530. You cannot travel to the other side of the Grand Harbour without bearing those events in mind. And yet, almost miraculously, the Three Cities have been given a new lease of life, partly due to European Union funding. You would really be missing out not to go. Most of the sites concerning women are in Vittoriosa/Birgu.

From the Upper Barracca Gardens of Valletta you get a marvellous view of the Three Cities, and I think the nicest way to get there is to take the lift down from the corner of the gardens to the waterfront and cross the road to the old Customs House behind which is the landing place for the regular passenger ferry which carries you across the Grand Harbour. Ferries go at a quarter to and a quarter past the hour, and return on the hour and the half hour. That is the way we went. Guide books suggest how you make the journey by car or bus. If you are taking the south tour on the Hop-On Hop-Off bus, you could hop off at the Vittoriosa waterfront (and then hop on a later one). Arriving, as we did, at the St Lawrence Wharf, leading into the Marina Waterfront, also known as the Cottonera Marina, determined the order of this itinerary. We were met off the ferry by our friend Colin Westmarland, denizen of Birgu, whose impeccable guidance proved indispensable.

Vittoriosa/Birgu

Historically, you need to begin with **Fort S Angelo** so from the ferry landing turn left and walk along the waterfront past an unimaginable display of wealth contained in the array of large yachts berthed alongside. Eventually you reach steps leading upwards to the walkway that overlooks the moat separating the fort from the peninsula. At the time of devising this itinerary, September 2014, the whole fort was closed for renovation, due to be completed in 2016 in time for Valletta becoming European Capital City of Culture in 2018. Until it becomes accessible, you can let your imagination rip – S Angelo is so full of Malta's history. And when it is accessible, hunt down the evidence of the following people and events.

As Chapter 2 mentions, there was first a Phoenician temple dedicated to the goddess Astarte which, in Roman times, became that to Juno. Some sources suggest it was at Tas-Silġ; I have nowhere seen this contradiction resolved. In the Middle Ages, 1000–1500, the fortress was the residence of the Counts of Malta and of the *Castellans* and their families. As Chapter 3

relates, Ricca Cafor in 1275 and Constanza Monroy in 1426 were confined there when their husbands were in trouble with the powers-that-be.

Upon her release Constanza handed over the contents of the fortress to the representative of Guterra de Nava and, from 1430, the Sicilian Aragonese de Navas provided its governors for centuries to come, one of the de Nava governors also providing the resident ghost – the Grey Lady. She was his mistress who turned up inopportunely to see him when his wife had arrived from Sicily. He hurriedly ordered the guards to relieve him of this embarrassment, which they did by disposing of the young woman in a way that he had apparently not intended. Thereafter, she haunted the fortress. She was seen, for example, in 1940, when she saved the lives of four British soldiers who followed her away from where they had been sleeping during a bombing raid.

The united arms of the Inguanez-Gatto families on the façade are personified by Imperia Gatto Inguanez *c.*1402–*c.*1457 who appears in Chapter 3 and Chapter 20 itinerary.

With the arrival of the Order in 1530, S Angelo was extended, becoming the headquarters of the Master. It is here, particularly, that you can imagine what the women who lived in Birgu, or sought refuge there, went through when the Turks attacked in 1565; this whole area bore the brunt. Following this event, Birgu was renamed Vittoriosa. The names are interchangeable, Birgu perhaps predominating.

The Knights moved over to the newly built city of Valletta in 1571 then, in 1583, S Angelo became the nunnery of the 15 nuns of the Order of St Ursula, until they moved in 1595 to their current location in St Ursula Street, Valletta (Chapter 6 and the last Chapter 17 part-itinerary).

On 25 August 1939, Caroline Vernon, as Chapter 14 relates, received notice to report the following day to the Royal Naval Headquarters, renamed HMS S Angelo, to begin training as a cipher clerk in preparation for the coming war.

You started this itinerary facing Senglea/L'Isla across the Dockyard Creek. Now, passing round the headland at the rear of Fort S Angelo, you are facing the Kalkara Peninsula across the Kalkara Creek. The large building over the water started life as the **Villa Bighi**; by at least the 1760s, it was the home of Elena Dodsworth and her intransigent English Consul husband, John, their children and her mother. There they barricaded themselves in when the soldiers of the Order surrounded the villa (Chapter 9).

Thomas Freller quotes a visitor to the Villa Bighi (Bichi) in 1797 which belonged then to 'Baroness Zara':

> Parts of the garden were finely laid out, but it cannot be denied that the orange trees, with fruits in abundance, were the real beauty of the place. We went up to the large palace, and here a *janitor* accompanied us around everywhere, except in the apartments; due to the amount of gold and silver kept there he was not entrusted with the keys. The garden was disorderly and in no good taste, but the large open space around the

> building surrounded by balustrades, erected in stone to this height, with the wonderful view over the sea and town opposite, was the finest I had seen of this kind.

I discuss the possible identity of the baroness in a Chapter 17 itinerary. The building was converted into a hospital during the plague of 1813 (Chapter 9) and later became a Royal Naval hospital. It came into its own during the First World War (Chapter 13). In 1949 Princess Elizabeth visited it, accompanied by Lady Mountbatten, during one of her stays with her husband serving in Malta in the Royal Navy (Chapter 19 itinerary).

Climbing up steps brings you to St Scholastica Street. The Benedictine **St Scholastica Nunnery** and the Benedictine **Church of St Anne** are obvious. From 1532, the nunnery was the Order's *Sacra Infermeria* until it moved to Valletta (see a Chapter 17 itinerary). With the removal of the Knights, the nuns took it over in 1604. The nunnery continues and, through the open outer door, you can see the grilles through which residents traditionally communicated with the outside world. In the façade is the *ruota* where foundlings were placed. Bettina Dorell placed her daughter Angelica Moscati Xeberras here to be educated during her tug of war with her husband (Chapter 7). The relics of second-century martyr St Veneranda (Venera), said to have been brought from Rome in 1728, are venerated in the church.

At the time of the Great Siege, the nuns from two Benedictine nunneries in Mdina, St Peter and St Scholastica, were moved for safety to Birgu, as Chapter 5 recounts. Not all the nuns were particularly well behaved.

Turn left into Hilda Tabone Street, on some maps called Britannic Street. **Hilda Mallia Tabone** (1932–1978) was born and died in Vittoriosa. Employed as an accountant with Simonds Farsons Cisk, founded by the Marquis Scicluna, she was heard singing at the factory's Christmas party at the Phoenicia Hotel in 1950 by the Marchesa Scicluna. It was the beginning of Hilda's soprano career. Perhaps her most appropriate performance and, indeed, the triumph of her career, was at the première of Carmelo Pace's opera *Caterina Desquanez* at the Manoel in 1965. The plot is based on a historical event that took place during the Great Siege. Hilda had married Carmel Mallia in 1962 and her family regrets that the street's name is Hilda Tabone and not Hilda Mallia Tabone.

Further along on the left of this lovely narrow street, which seems little changed since the time of the Knights, is the original ***Auberge de France***. There is an ambiguous sentence in John Manduca's *The Three Cities* (2005) which I left it too late to clarify with him. It comes in his entry for the *Auberge de France*: 'Relations between Malta and France were often close and French spoken by many. The daughters of King Louis XV rented a garden in Malta …'. Was it here? The building is now council offices and open to the public.

What is said to be the original ***Auberge d'Angleterre***, though this claim is disputed, is beautifully restored in Mistral (Majjistral) Street, a turning on the right, and is now a public library. When the Knights arrived, the English *Langue* bought the mansion from Catherine Abela. The *Langue* ceased to

function after Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries, the ramifications of which and the queens involved, are discussed in Chapter 5.

The next stop is the **Inquisitor's Palace** in Main Gate Street (Triq il-Mina l-Kbira) which you reach by turning right then left from Mistral Street. The palace was the *Castellania* of the Order until it moved to Valletta then, from 1574, housed the Inquisitor and his court. The palace is being restored and is open to the public as the Museum of Ethnography.

Chapter 6 tells the stories of women appearing before the Inquisitor. Isabetta Caruana of Rabat, Gozo and Betta Caloiro stood trial accused of witchcraft in 1599, Caterina Vitale in 1608 and Sulpitia de Lango in 1617. You can see the room where they were tried. Betta spent eight years of her life imprisoned in the cells and, indeed, died there aged nearly 90. Colin and I searched in vain for where she was buried, and he went back some weeks later hoping to find someone better informed, without success. Let's not give up!

The two English Quakers Sarah Cheevers and Katherine Evans who gave the Inquisition a run for its money were imprisoned here from 1658 to 1662. The day we visited, their cell was being restored, but we were able to look in and a detailed notice about them should be back on the door by now. The workman had a large electric fan on a stand; imagine what it was like for the prisoners!

Two other women fared better in the Inquisitor's Palace. Vincenza Matilde Testaferrata began her 18 years as the Inquisition's *Depositario* in 1760 – an unprecedented position for a woman (Chapter 7). And four years later, Bettina Dorell's daughter Angela, who may have been fathered by the Inquisitor, was baptised in the bijou chapel which today looks much as it must have done then (Chapter 7).

Turn down St George's Street from Triq il-Kardinal Fabrizzio Sciberras and on the corner with Wenzu Dyer Street stands Bettina's Palace. It is sometimes called Cardinal's Palace because Bettina's nephew, who became the first Maltese cardinal, was born there and inherited it. The building has a sadly neglected air and even the dolphin door knocker is missing, but the hole it has left does allow you to peer inside. There is not much to see, but all you need is imagination.

Chapter 11 tells the story of Emilie de Vialar, later St Emilie, founder of the Order of St Joseph of the Apparition, who was shipwrecked on Malta travelling with some of her nuns from her mission in Algeria home to France. It is speculated that in George Street they stayed in Palazzo Bettina. Emilie then set up a Congregation in Malta which still flourishes, before moving on.

Wend your way now back towards the waterfront, but stop at the **Church of St Lawrence**. There may have been a Birgu parish church here of that name as long ago as 1090; this was certainly the first Conventual Church of the Order of St John in 1530. If you want to go inside, you probably need to get there before 11.30 am, so you could do so when you first arrive (you can see it from the waterfront). But this itinerary needs it as a climax, not so much because Grand Master de Vallette's natural daughter Isabella Guasconi

was married here (Chapter 6), but because Bettina Dorell was buried in the family vault in the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, on the right hand side of the high altar, one-third down that side of the nave. The chapel was built in 1786 on land donated by Baroness **Francesca Viani**. Your purpose in visiting it has, however, been thwarted by wartime bombing. The chapel and vault were reduced to rubble. The chapel has been rebuilt and Bettina's grave may well be underneath. There is no sign either of the three paintings by Maltese artist Michele Busuttil which she donated, and no record of them. If they hung in the chapel, they, too, would have been destroyed.

The *Malta Government Gazette* of 16 September 1829 records (and on the opposite page in Italian):

> Died on the 8th Instant the Marchioness Elisabetta Moscati Cassia *nata* Dorel, aged 88. She was Lady of Honour to the late Queen of Naples, with whom she resided many years in that capacity. Her remains were interred on the 10th, in the family vault in the Collegiate Church of St Lorenzo at Vittoriosa, attended by a very numerous retinue of friends, by whom she was much lamented for her private virtues, and a great concourse of people who voluntarily joined in this last act of respect, in testimony of the general and extensive acts of charity, which her abundant means enabled her to dispense.

So before you return to the waterfront, and perhaps lunch, spare a thought for the *grande dame* Bettina Dorell, known to all simply as the Lady Bettina. She may have been well born, rich and privileged, but her life was not without adversity in a period when women's lives were much constrained, yet she rose above it all. There will be further meetings with Bettina in the Chapter 22 itinerary that includes Gudja and the Inquisitor's Summer Palace.

Cospicua/Bormla

You could now take the ferry back to Valletta but you have only done one of the Three Cities. There is much less to see concerning women in the other two, but at least one street in Cospicua/Bormla is a must. So, as if from the ferry, turn right instead of left and make your way up to Pilgrimage Street (Triq il-Pellegrinagg) and the Church of the Immaculate Conception which, miraculously, escaped wartime bombing. The first church on the site dates from 1584, but it was enlarged in 1637. What you have come to see is the wooden statue of the Virgin Mary, carved by Maria de Dominici in about 1680 (Chapter 6), and covered in silver in 1905.

The statue is very important to the people of this city. Festivities begin before December but culminate on the 8th – the Feast of the Immaculate Conception – in a procession, led by the statue carried shoulder high. Even the black and white photograph overleaf shows how she shines. But I also notice that women don't seem to feature in the procession; there are only

45. Maria de Dominici, sculpture of the Virgin Mary in procession, Cospicua, courtesy of Caroline Said Lawrence

black-clad figures pressed against the wall. I have not managed to be in Malta on 8th December but the studio of artist Caroline Said Lawrence is in the same street, and in two emails she has given me invaluable information and impressions. Apparently Maria de Dominici 'used a young Jewish resident of Cospicua as her model, wishing to maintain some authenticity in the likeness of the Madonna'. And, of the procession itself, Caroline writes:

> I'm more a spiritual than a religious person but every year I find this procession a very moving experience. Particularly on its return journey to the church when it is being brought up my street and passes under my balcony. The street is heaving with people and those in front of the statue walk backwards up the hill so as not to turn their backs on the statue. The crowd of worshippers sing a beautiful song about Bormla and the community's passionate devotion to the Madonna and those who can manage to, raise their arms towards the statues. It is a goosebumps moment and time and again my eyes involuntarily fill with tears.

It is also well worth visiting Caroline's studio at No. 62. Brought up in Kenya, she trained at St Martin's School of Art, London, and her first exhibition was in 1992 in Bahrain. She settled in Malta in 2002. Her background, and the Malta landscape, combine to stimulate her work of mixed media paintings which include depictions of the 'magical antiquity' of the Three Cities.

Senglea/L-Isla

Come back to the waterfront and walk round the end of the creek to Senglea. The severely damaged aircraft carrier *Illustrious* was docked alongside Senglea in 1941, not only for urgent repairs, but also to disembark the members of the crew badly burnt following the air attacks on the vessel. Its presence resulted in the whole area being bombed to smithereens. Tamara Marks describes the scene in Chapter 15. Although Senglea is coming back to life, particularly where a colony of artists has moved in, and it has a quiet and picturesque charm, there are, I believe, only two sites that have a woman connection, and one is a bit nebulous. But if you are in Malta on 8th September, that is the time to go, to see the celebrations for Victory Day.

The 1743 Senglea parish church, **Our Lady of Victories**, is at the landward end of Victory Street. At the other end is a garden – the *Vedette* – from where you get a fine view across the Grand Harbour to Valletta and across Dockyard Creek to Fort S Angelo.

The church, which was severely damaged during the War and re-constructed after it, also has its statue of the Virgin Mary and its procession. This celebrates not only the Feast of her Nativity but also that of the end of the Great Siege of 1565, a promise made during the plague of 1676, and that when the Italian Navy surrendered to the British off Malta in 1943 (Chapter 15).

The origins of this Madonna are more exotic than those of Cospicua's. It is said that in 1618 the statue – known as Il-Bambina – was found floating among wreckage in the Adriatic by one of the Order's galleys. It is assumed to have been the figurehead of a Christian galleon. Two passengers on the galley from Senglea petitioned the captain to donate it to their parish church, which he did. A solid gold crown studded with precious stones, presented by the people of Senglea, was placed on Il-Bambina's head in 1921.

If you stand in front of the Maritime Museum on the waterfront in Birgu and look across Dockyard Creek to Senglea, you will see the house of marine archaeologist **Honor Frost** (*c.*1928–2010). She is the sort of 'artist' who moved into a revitalising area after the War. As early as the 1950s, she was a pioneer in underwater archaeology. In 1967, she was on her way to the Middle East with a diving team when her work was postponed by the Arab-Israeli War. The National Maritime Museum of Malta promptly took up her services and she began a brief but scientific and fruitful excavation of a Roman shipwreck in Mellieħa Bay, confirming that Malta was very much part of a Roman Mediterranean maritime network. Her work was continued

after her departure and still is, thanks to the Honor Frost Foundation. Her drawings and notes are stored in the archives of the National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta. She later returned to set up a second home in Senglea. Where exactly it is, and its status, I do not know. But someone will, and it should be noted.

The last site of this itinerary is a bit of an oddity on the map. The address for **St Edwards College** is Triq il-Kottonera, Birgu, but it is away from the centre, near the Żebbuġ Gate, and probably only fits in if you are travelling by car. It is certainly of some significance in its two separate manifestations which create several historical links. From Cospicua you could leave via Cottonera Road.

Florence Nightingale's involvement in Malta's hospitals, following her return from the Crimea in 1856, is partly described in Chapter 12. Her more general criticism of medical facilities for British troops led to the setting up of a Royal Commission of which a sub-committee looked into those on Malta. This resulted in the building of the Cottonera Hospital in 1873. Florence's strictures were carefully followed, not just for the care of patients, but also for the accommodation of nurses, a role increasingly taken on by women.

'Cottonera Hospital and Malta as the Nurse of the Mediterranean' (2014) by John Mark Portelli and Alfred Cassar Reynaud, on the St Edwards website, makes the link with Dr Louis Hughes who, it suggests, based his classic 1897 work 'on his observations at Cottonera Hospital and Malta more generally'. During the First World War (Chapter 13), Cottonera Hospital played a major role, as this photograph illustrates, and one of the consultants from Britain who worked there, Sir Arthur Garrod, his wife and archaeologist daughter, Dorothy, appear in that chapter.

In 1929, the hospital's role was completely changed when Margaret Strickland, Countess of Catena, funded the setting up of St Edwards College for boys which took over and extended the hospital buildings (Chapter

46. Cottonera Hospital in the First World War, from Manduca, *The Three Cities*

14). Two connections then arose. A young nurse from the hospital, **Violet Briffa**, became matron in the college from 1930 to 1965 – 'a towering personality who left her mark, the result of the realities of World War I and Cottonera on generations of Edwardians'. The second rector of the college was Fr Henry Brackenbury Louis Hughes, son of Dr Hughes and his wife Katherine Hughes.

Żabbar

If you are visiting by car, and if you are interested in Malta's first woman president, Agatha Barbara (Chapter 16), her birthplace, though not one of the Three Cities, can be reached either by going via Cottonera Road from Cospicua, or by driving from St Edward's College. There is a monument to her in Sanctuary Street.