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A NOTE ON STEFANO AND SEBASTIANO ITTAR

The National Library of Valletta, the BIBLIOTHECA, is not only the last important building erected by the Knights of St. John in Malta, but it is also one of the most imposing in the City, particularly as its splendid architectural features are so admirably set off by its position and surroundings.

There has always been something intriguing about the unusual name of the Architect, Stefano Ittar, as well as in the fact that, in spite of his obvious merits, few people in Malta seemed to know very much about him. Before being engaged by the Council of the Order of St. John, Ittar had been working in Catania and the buildings he had erected in that City during twenty years of intense activity were of sufficient importance for his name to be included now in all the major histories of Sicilian Architecture.

Stefano was born in about 1730 (1) and was a descendant of the noble house of Guidone de Hittar, Conti del Balneo di Toscana. According to a recent writer (2) he was born in Poland, where his father had gone owing to financial difficulties following a quarrel with the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Shortly afterwards the family moved to Rome where, in due course, Stefano studied architecture and became a protege of Cardinal Alessandro Albani, the celebrated Vatican Librarian and Patron of artists (3). He was certainly attracted and, to some extent, influenced by the style of Francesco Borromini and his later followers, which is revealed in most of his earlier Sicilian works. He also travelled in Spain before settling down in Catania in 1765.

During that period Catania was passing through one of its greatest architectural phases; most of the ravages of the earthquake of 1693 had been made good and, since the appointment as city architect of Giovanni Battista Vaccarini (1702-1768), a man who dedicated his whole life to the reconstruction and embellishment of the City, work had been proceeding apace, especially in the area around the great Duomo of St. Agatha. Shortly after his arrival, Ittar met Don Ignazio Paternit, Principe di Biscari (1719-1786), who was then building his fantastic Palazzo overlooking the harbour and filling it with antiques and works of art of every kind. Don Ignazio, with whom Ittar was to spend most of the next few years, was an authentic Renaissance Prince living in Sicily when the type had long departed from the rest of Italy. He was fabulously wealthy, powerful, cultured, endowed with numerous titles of nobility and, above all, noble in character and demeanour. Most of the foreign travellers of the period, including Jean Houel, Patrick Brydone and Goethe, bear witness to this. When Brydone visited him in 1770, although suitably impressed by house and museum, he remarked that "the polite and amiable behaviour of the owner gives more pleasure than all his curiosities" (4).

The Prince persuaded the architect to remain in Catania. Stefano not only did so but married Rosaria, daughter of Francesco Battaglia (1702-1788), the architect in charge of the building. In due course, while his father-in-law loaded him with work Rosaria dutifully presented him with half a dozen healthy sons: Sebastiano, Errigo, Salvatore, Giuseppe and Franco, and three daughters: Agata, Francesca and Concetta (5). When Ittar joined the team of builders, Palazzo Biscari was already far advanced and it is unlikely that he had any hand in the design of the frothy decorations of the water-front facade. On the contrary, he may have influenced the calmer atmosphere prevailing in the inner courtyards, while he certainly worked on the upper floors of the building.

Stefano joined his father-in-law in many other works, notably the enormous Benedictine Monastery, which had originally been planned as a city within a city and is still the second largest of its kind in Europe. Like so many others, the original building had been destroyed in the earthquake of 1693 and a new project had been elaborated; but even this had been altered and enlarged by successive architects who worked on it from time to time. Ittar's major contribution to this huge enterprise, and probably his own most successful work, was the dome over the monastery church of San Niccolò l'Arena, which he designed and built between 1768 and 1783, while still in the regular employment of the monks (6). With its tall, circular drum, wide-ribbed dome and elegant lantern which seems to float on air, it is one of the most graceful features of the Catania skyline. Ittar also designed the layout of the semi-circular piazza opposite the Church, as well as the facade of some of the houses on its fringes, but the Church itself was never completed and the facade remains unfinished to this day.

Another work in collaboration between Ittar and Battaglia was the beautiful Porta Ferdinandea, now Porta Garibaldi. It is a lively creation in alternate layers of black lava and white granite, decorated with trumpeting angels, heraldic trophies and surmounted by a large clock. With its curved wings it looks more like the setting for a fountain than a city gate. Most probably they also designed the layout of the adjacent Piazza Palermo, one of the few

1. The Statut Animarum of the Parish of St. Dominic, Valletta, for the year 1787, gives his age as 57.
4. Patrick Brydone: "A tour through Sicily and Malta, etc.",
the precarious state of the books in the library collections, which were riddled with statutes, and topped by a richly decorated, central belfry, also crowned with statues, produces a striking effect of chiaroscuro worthy of the best of its contemporaries.

At the back of the Duomo he designed the Church of San Placido, a vertical composition on two storeys sharply divided by a heavy cornice and surmounted by another central holly crowned with statues. It has a longitudinal plan, with five side altars placed in recesses in the walls so as not to disturb the long perspective to the deep alcove of the presbytery. The undulant facade, with the wings set at an angle, is built entirely of the creamy pietra di Sircusa, akin to the Maltese limestone, which has now acquired a mellow, golden patina we know so well.

By that time Stefano Ittar was well established as one of Catania’s leading architects and he was working on the severely classical facade of the Collegio Cutelli when, as a result of the decision taken by the Chapter General of the Benedictines of Catania towards the Roman High Baroque. The following year he produced what must be his masterpiece, the facade of the Collegia, a fine church originally planned by Antonio Amato (c. 1700-1750), in which Ittar gave all he could remember of Borromini but with characteristic Sicilian overtones. The sinuous facade, divided into three vertical bays by pairs of columns, surmounted by a deep, arched alcove with a smaller niche on either side containing statues, and topped by a richly decorated, central holly, also crowned with statuary, produces a striking effect of chiaroscuro worthy of the best of its contemporaries.

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The death of Vaccarini, Ittar was engaged by the Authorities to produce an up-to-date planimetry of the City, which he later engraved and had printed. It is a remarkable piece of work showing the City as reconstructed after the great earthquake, with its long, straight roads cutting across the Via Etnea at right angles. The main crossing, known as the Quattro Canti di Città, for which Ittar designed the corners of Via Etnea and Via di San Giuliano, is one of Vaccarini’s major achievements.

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helps to keep out the damp Scirocco wind which harms the books, but it is extremely uncomfortable for students who use the place in winter. The proportions of the facade are so exact as to be misleading with regard to size: for instance, one can only obtain a precise idea of the height of the balcony by standing on it and trying to look out. One can only do so by looking through the balusters.

The Bibliotheca was completed in 1796, six years after Ittar's death and, in this connection, a rather interesting story was published recently. It is related that Ittar committed suicide because, during construction, the flat arches over the ground floor of the Bibliotheca started to give way and had to be supported by the insertion of additional arches between the columns of the facade, which spoiled the tone and rhythm of the original project. The work was then finished by the Capo Mastro Cachia (12). On closer examination, the whole story appears extremely unlikely; in particular, there is no evidence at all of a possible suicide. On the contrary, the appropriate entry in the Liber Mortuorum of the Parish of Sancta Maria Portus Salulis, dated the 18th January, 1796, declares that Stefano Ittar, husband of Rosaria, died "in communion Sanctae Matris Ecclesiae" and "Sanctis munitus Sacramentis" (13). He was buried in the Church of Sancta Maria de Jesu where, on the same day, a High Mass for the repose of his soul was celebrated by the Franciscan Friar, Padre Carlo da Villanova (14). At that time, when Church and Inquisition were all-powerful in such matters, all this would have been impossible had he taken his own life.

A close look at the facade of the Bibliotheca shows that a couple of the "piattabande", the enormous monolithic lintels which rest directly on the half columns, are indeed cracked; but the damage extends down through the sup­ tions of the facade are so exact as to be misleading with regard to size: for instance, one can only obtain a precise idea of the height of the balcony by standing on it and trying to look out. One can only do so by looking through the balusters.

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A close look at the facade of the Bibliotheca shows that a couple of the "piattabande", the enormous monolithic lintels which rest directly on the half columns, are indeed cracked; but the damage extends down through the support arches which, obviously, must have been there when it happened. It may also be seen that the arches between the columns and the great vault over Treasury Street, including the cassettoni and the triangular pendentives at the junctions, are designed and constructed as a whole with no visible additions. Once no source of the story is given it is difficult to explain the damage, unless it can be attributed to settling of the mortar filling. There is no doubt that, after Ittar's death, the Bibliotheca was completed by Cachia in his official capacity. As will be seen, the Capo Mastro had had another clash with no doubt that, after Ittar's death, the Bibliotheca was completed by Cachia in his official capacity. As will be seen, the Capo Mastro had had another clash with
hardly any space in between; but it should be remembered that, at the time, Strada Strettia had not yet been widened, and it was necessary to obtain as much light as possible. Very little attempt has been made at decoration, apart from some rather freely designed scroll work over the first floor windows and the continuous "key" motif along the string-course. There is a flash of the old brilliance in the carved pediments of the second floor; and the monotonous relieved, but only just, by three staggered, wooden balconies, though even these lack the usual carved stone brackets.

Stefano was survived by his six sons, at least two of whom, Enrico and Sebastiano, also achieved some prominence as architects. They both left Malta immediately after their father's death, the former going to Poland, where he worked for the Radziwills and the Zamoyskis, eventually changing his style from the neo-classic to the Gothic Revival (19). Sebastiano went to Rome where, in 1799, he met Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, who had just been appointed British Ambassador to the Sublime Porte. At that time Greece was a Turkish Province and, although Lord Elgin's official residence would be at Pera, he worked for the Radziwills and the Zamoyskis, eventually changing his style with terraced gardens, nymphaeum and blind arcades frescoed with Barone Nicolosi di Villagrande, for whom he designed the elegant Villino later published in bookform (21). In 1810 he was called to Acireale by the antiquities of the Near East and also of Sicily, some of which were next few years, he was busy making and selling engravings from his drawings, and the case is now with the Elgin Collection in the British Museum.

In 1801 and 1802. His numerous, careful drawings of the temples, including the celebrated friezes of the Parthenon by Phidias, which Elgin later carried off, are now with the Elgin Collection in the British Museum.

In 1804 he returned to Catania where he settled for good and, for the next few years, he was busy making and selling engravings from his drawings of the antiquities of the Near East and also of Sicily, some of which were later published in bookform (21). In 1810 he was called to Acireale by the Baronone Nicolosi di Villagrande, for whom he designed the elegant Villino Nicolosi, in the style of an antique Roman country-house, standing on an eminence with terraced gardens, nymphaeum and blind arcades frescoed with mythological subjects. The garden paths and the tops of the outside walls are lined with Greekian urns and "antique" busts in Caltagirone ceramics (22).

Across the road from the Villino is the Church of "La Madonna dell'Indirizzo", which was originally built in 1706. In 1812 Sebastiano gave it a new facade, a plain surface with a steep, raking cornice and a circular recess in the cornice, containing a bust of the Madonna and Child. In front, he added a semicircular pronao with six, slender columns supporting a shallow, saucer-dome of red brick, the whole reminiscent in a way of the work of Giorgio Pullicino, whom he may have known.

During 1829, he prepared the designs for the Naval Hospital, which the British Admiralty had decided to build in the grounds of the Villa Bichi, overlooking Grand Harbour (23). The foundation stone was laid on the 23rd March, 1830 and the work was carried out under the supervision of the Admiralty architect Salvatore Scerri (24). It was completed a couple of years later and an engraving by Luigi Brocktorff, showing what it looked like in 1840, was published in the Malla Penny Magazine for that year (25).

In the meantime, Sebastiano's drawings of the Acropolis and of the numerous classic monuments in Athens and other Greek cities were being published not only by the Artist himself but also by Elgin in London; so that now Ittar found himself very much in demand as a lecturer on the subject. In April, 1830, he travelled to Paris, stopping on the way in Naples where he was received by King Ferdinand II (26). In Paris, he spoke to the Society of Fine Arts about his drawings of the Greek monuments, the talk being later published in Palermo (27). On his return to Catania he was appointed "Architetto del Comune" and, on 20th June 1836, he was elected an Honorary Corresponding Member of the Institute of British Artists (28). He died on the 20th October, 1847, having obtained far greater recognition than his father for a much lower performance.

A biography published anonymously in Palermo, in 1880, has this to say of him: "Sebastiano Ittar di animo grande, d'integerrimi costumi, ornamento della patria, sostegno dell'arte architettoniche, passava al numero dei Piu, lasciando opere pregevolissime, povertà e onorata memoria" (29). And we may as well leave it at that.

26. Anon., op. cit., p.10
28. The letter dated 21st June, 1836, sent to Ittar by Mr. Thomas J. Donaldson, Secretary of the Institute, is published in "Cenni Biografici", p. 7.
3a. Stefano Ittar: The Bibliotheca, Valletta.

3b. Stefano Ittar: Villa Agata, Floriana.

2. Stefano Ittar: Collegio Cutelli, Catania.