## THE MEDIEVAL FORTIFICATIONS OF CORONE

by

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(Chapter I of <u>Castles of the Morea</u>)

## CORONE

The capture of Corone in the summer of 1685 began the conquest of the Peloponnese. Venice's line of communications through the mouth of the Adriatic was secured by the extension of her sway over all the Ionian islands, and the next step on her advance into the Turkish realm was the Messenian peninsula. A Venetian fleet of twenty-six vessels moved down to the island of Sapienza off the southwestern coast, where a council of war was held and the point of attack chosen. 1) Meanwhile envoys were sent to negotiate with the inhabitants of Mani who in their barren mountains and ferocious nature had preserved a virtual independence from the Turk. As soon as word came back that they were ready to revolt, Morosini decided to set his forces against Corone, preferring it against Methone or Navarino for its more strategic position on the eastern coast. Commanding a view of the whole of Mani from Calamata to Cape Tainaron, it



provided close approaches by sea
across the gulf, a convenient
starting point for co-ordinated
warfare with the Maniates who as
wild but dangerous allies needed
both encouragement and surveillance.

Accordingly the fleet sailed round Kavogallos and on June 25th an army of ten thousand debarked

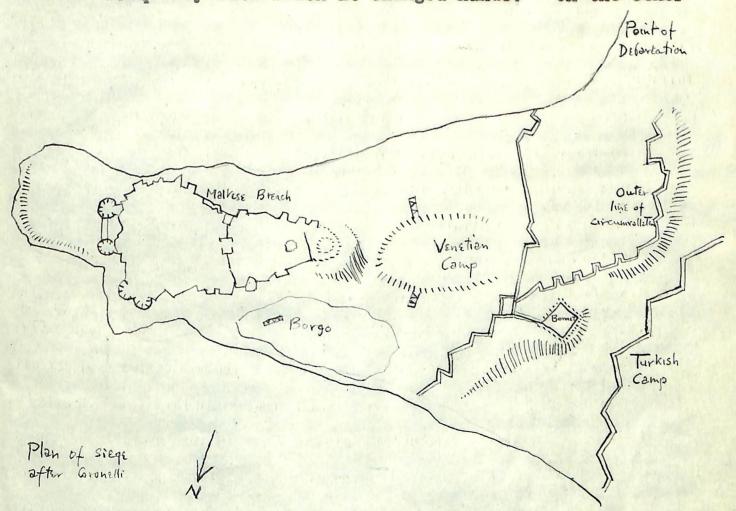
<sup>1)</sup> A. Locatelli, Racconto Istorico della Veneta Guerra in Levante, Cologne, 1691, pp. 123 ff.

on the southern shore of the peninsula at the end of which the fortress stands, and crossing to the other side occupied without resistance the small borgo beneath its walls. In two days the lines of circumvallation were dug extending one mile between both sides of the sea. Beyond these the clive orchards, the chief wealth of the region, were cut down according to the military needs of general destruction, in order to remove any natural cover when the enemy should arrive to raise the siege. Batteries were set up in the borgo and on the high ground west of the castle. Six vessels fired on the stout double circular



bastion that rises above the sea in the northeast corner (left of Fig.2), while the great redout at the western or landward end became the target of a bombardment which continued until the final assault. On July 7th the Turkish army appeared and took up positions one mile from the Venetian earthworks. During the following weeks their camp swelled to ten thousand with troops gathered from Methone and Calamata, but the Venetians kept the offensive in the face of increasing odds. A small hill between the two lines was fortified by them with a bonnet and covered way, upon which seemed to hang the fall or resistance

of the fortress itself for the fighting which raged around it and the frequency with which it changed hands. 1) On the other



side the Venetians ceaselessly tried to open a breach at the great west bastion. It was decided meanwhile to make a feint with a flank assault in the south curtain wall. Under the direction of the engineer Verneda the Maltese troops prepared a charge of a hundred barrels of powder, but on July 24th whether through discovery or failure of ignition the mine had no effect. Earth was dislodged but the stones of the wall filled up the breach and the cliff still stood. The Maltese assault was frustrated, but the explosion itself was sufficient from a distance to provoke an attack from the Turkish lines, in which the Venetians were driven from the bonnet and the

<sup>1)</sup> P. Garzoni, <u>Istoria della Republica di Venezia in tempo della Sacra Lega</u>, Venice 1705 pp. 100 ff.

outermost arc of their defenses. 1) It became doubtful now whether their attack at the proposed breach would succeed with the enemy in the rear. Morosini saw that the castle could only be taken after the Turks were driven from the field. So on the morning of August 7th before sunrise he attacked. The enemy were taken by surprise and routed completely, leaving the Venetians free to attend wholly to the siege. Mining operations under the engineer Bassignani were pushed forward at the west bastion during the days following after the victory. Two parallel galleries were extended beneath the tower, and in the subterranean chamber at the end were placed two hundred and fifty powder barrels salvaged from the Turkish camp. At dawn of the 11th the mines were exploded and the breach opened. The Venetians attacked immediately. After three hours of fighting they were pushed back but returned at mid-day. A picked body of troops put to shore on the tongue of land beyond the fortress and prepared to storm the eastern defenses. sign was given for a general assault from all sides, but the white flag was raised and halt was made. During the parley an accidental explosion from a Turkish cannon excited the Venetian army to enter the castle and set themselves to a massacre of fifteen hundred defenders and inhabitants. A Te Deum was sung afterwards amid the carnage, and the proud Venetians turned to repair and renovation of the fortress, which after a lapse of a hundred and eighty-five years returned into the hands of

<sup>1)</sup> V. Coronelli, <u>Memorie Istoriografiche del Regno di Morea</u>, Venice 1688, pp. 66 ff.

its builders. 1)

Little is known of the early medieval history of Corone. It was the seat of a bishopric which was suffragan of Patras, and the Arab geographer Edrisi speaks of it in 1153 as a small but fortified place. 2) In the early years of the twelfth century Greece lay open to the first invader, virgin soil for conquest and settlement by ever expansive voyagers from the West. The Morea was conquered by the Frankish crusaders in 1205, but the Venetians setting out a year later to occupy their new stations in the Ionian and Aegean seas sailed into the ports of Methone and Corone, drove out the Frankish garrisons and availed themselves of the two most valuable sites in the Peloponnese, so completing their chain of communication to the Middle East. They were to serve as the half-way point along her trade routes and as port of call for all vessels bound for Crete and Egypt, Syria and the Holy Land, Byzantium, Pontus, and Russia. For the Venetian government they were a watchpost for all traffic bound to and from the Levant, "the chief eyes of the Republic."3) Methone had been accorded to Venice in the partition of the Byzantine Empire after the fourth crusade, but Corone belonged as fief to Geoffroy de Villehardouin. However the Frankish chief had

<sup>1)</sup> Relation de la Prise de Coron, Amsterdam 1686.

La Morea combattuta dall' Armi Venete, Venice 1686.

Rossi, Successi dell' Armi Venete in Levante, Venice 1687, pp. 34 ff.

Il Regno della Morea sotto i Veneti, Venice 1688, pp. 17 ff.

History of the Venetian Conquests, London 1689, pp. 35 ff.

M. Foscarini, Dell' Istoria Veneta, Venice 1722, pp. 166 ff.

G. Cappelletti, Storia della Republica di Venezia, Venice 1854,

Vol.XI, pp. 42 ff.

S. Romanin, Storia Documentata di Venezia, Venice 1856, Vol.VII,

p. 488.

<sup>2)</sup> K. Bembonis, Κορώνης 'Ιστορικές Σελίδες, Athens 1906, p. 27.
3) W. Miller, The Latins in the Levant, London 1908, p. 152.

need of Venice's naval support, and in 1209 ceded Corone and confirmed her possession of Southern Messenia.

Under Venetian rule the two places had a common history, or rather absence of history, since it was Venice's concern to keep history removed from her possessions. Business, safety and self-interest were the keynote of her dominion, while the cities escaped the major turmoils of three centuries. After the recapture of Constantinople by the Greeks the emperor Michael VIII in 1265 promised not to molest the Venetians in their Messenian ports, a pledge which was subsequently renewed and held throughout most of the struggles of Byzantines, Franks, Angevins, and Florentines for supremacy in the Peloponnese. 1) A state of disorder among numerous small powers was of interest. to Venice who could play off one against the other, but as the Latin states weakened or reverted into Greek hands and the greater part of the Morea came under the sway of one master, the ancient jealousy of Venice and Byzantium broke out once more. Even while the shadow of Turkish expansion spread toward the shores of Greece, the despot of Mistra anxious to regain the whole peninsula and drive the Venetians from her stations, constantly incited raids on the territories of Methone and Corone. However the danger was not only from Byzantine hostility. Menaced by Turkish descents into the Peloponnese in 1387 and 1388, Methone and Corone were at last attacked and pillaged by sea in 1428.2) However the peril of a common enemy was not enough to unite the Eastern and Western Christians.

<sup>1)</sup> A. Mompherratos, Μεθώνη καὶ Κορώνη ἐπὶ Ενετοκρατίας, Athens 1904,

<sup>2)</sup> Phrantzes, ed. Bonn, p. 83. D. Zakythinos, Le Despotat Grec de Morée, Paris 1932, p. 212.

On the eve of the Turkish conquest while the despot Theodore struggled to reorganize and unify the Peloponnese, Venice only saw in his efforts a danger to her own interests, and refused her aid. Precautionary measures on her part consisted in strengthening the Messenian fortresses and attempting to placate the Greek inhabitants, whom her rigid and tyrannical rule was forcing to emigration, by lowering their taxes and allowing their bishop to live within the walls of Corone, a concession to their national no less than their religious feelings. But the doom of the Venetian colonies only lingered after the Morea fell to Mohammed II in 1460. When the Byzantine state no longer existed, Venice as indeed all of western Europe found herself at last face to face with the enemy of Christendom, with all the outer defenses gone. Venice still tried as best she could to preserve relations with the Turks under the precept that essendo noi mercanti non possiamo viver senza loro, but the Turks were more intent on territorial and religious expansion than doing business with any westerner who still retained possessions in Greece, and in 1463 war broke out between them. Sixteen years of fighting led to the loss of Euboea and Argos and in 1500 the inevitable blow was struck in the south of the Peloponnese. Bajazet II who had failed to capture Nauplia fell upon Methone and after a three months' siege captured it and put the fortress to fire and sword. At Corone the Venetians were ready to withstand a siege, but the inhabitants, terrified by the example of Methone and persuaded by Turkish promises of life if they surrendered, overruled their governors and gave

up the citadel. Afterwards they were banished by the Turks to Cephalonia. The long Venetian rule was at an end and the entire Peloponnese, except for Nauplia and Monemvasia which held out for forty years longer, passed under Turkish sway. 1)

Corone again suffered a change of masters in 1532 when Charles V sent his admiral Andrea Doria with eighty-three vessels to harass the coasts of Greece as a countermeasure to the Turkish expedition against Vienna nine years before. The two fleets lingered many months equally balanced off the coast of Acarnania, each dubious of victory, until the Turks withdrew to Euboea and Doria siezed the initiative. He attacked Corone and after three assaults from the side of the small peninsula which extends beyond



the fortress on the east
captured the place and installed
a garrison of eight thousand
imperial troops under the command of the Spaniard Mendoza,
who held it until the next year
only. The Turks returned under
Khaireddin Barbarossa and laid

siege, while in the outside world the Holy Roman Emperor cast about him for a likely legatee. But neither Venice nor the Knights of Malta to whom he offered Corone were willing or able, in the sixteenth century, to defend and support an isolated outpost in Turkish Greece. Their refusal was wise in the event, though it showed how the western strength had weakened in the Eastern Mediterranean. The defenders of Corone could hold out no longer

<sup>1.</sup> Miller, op.cit. p.497. Mompherratos, op.cit. p.68.

and when five Sicilian ships made their appearance in the port ostensibly to bring relief to the besieged, the soldiers with five thousand of the population, now mainly Albanian, embarked and were transported to Sicily and Naples. For the second time Corone was left empty of life when the Turks re-entered.

The long history of the citadel, built in the earliest times and in subsequent centuries recast and enlarged, has left it for the present day an outstanding example of the development of fortress architecture. The style of construction is prevailingly and characteristically Venetian, but the plan itself reveals the changes which took place in the art of fortification from the medieval to the renaissance period. The original castle was built on the height of the peninsula ridge and consisted of a keep or tower and a triangular court girdled with a curtain wall. Outside of the lay a large plateau above the natural sandstone cliffs which in turn was walled within another great loop four times the area of the first enclosure. Beyond it on the east extended the lower plateau of the linguetta or tongue of land Whose south side provided a point of debarkation and assault. To defend the curtain above it, elaborate fortifications in two levels were constructed according to the system evolved in Italy during the fifteenth century. From its western apex proceeding to its eastern flank the fortress shows an organic growth from the simple tower and curtain of the middle ages to the embrasured

<sup>1)</sup> Miller, pp. 505 f.
Bembonis, pp. 3 f.
Coronelli, p. 64.
P. Paruta, Historia Vinetiana

bastions and great terraced defenses of developed artillery warfare.

The oldest section of Corone is not the original bastion at the west end, which was destroyed and rebuilt on a different scheme around the turn of the eighteenth century, but the wall which divides the two enclosures and the prominent bastion at the north end where it joins the curtain. These are built of miscellaneous stones and cut blocks of different sizes, pieces of marble and fragments of earlier construction, classical column drums and Byzantine cornices. The haste and carelessness with which the pieces have been reassembled would point to a period following on destruction when defenses were raised with what materials lay nearest to hand, a time close to the Slavic invasions of the sixth and eighth centuries. This is the only part of the fortress that may be said to date from pre-Venetian occupation.

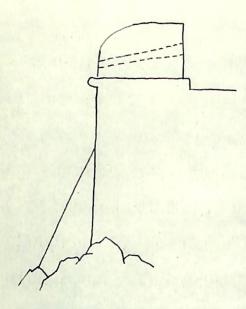
The bastion stands on high rock dominating the approaches from the town, and marks the beginning of the outer enclosure. The curtain that runs from here to the fortress gate is of a form singular though not rare among the medieval castles of Greece, the re-use of classical stones. Twenty to thirty courses of enormous blocks, measuring up to eight feet in length give the impression of Hellenic masonry. It is probable that the Venetians built it at the beginning of their occupation, all' antica and out of ancient materials. It was topped with a crenellated parapet of slotted merlons, as old engravings and the present bare traces show, which leads us to date it before the introduction of artillery. The remains of the classical Asine, whose site

Corone occupies, achieved a longer usefulness in a different pattern, though at the time of building for a form of warfare still primitive. The gateway whose western flank is built of these monumental blocks is a great square pylon projecting from the face and above the level of the curtain, whose tall

element of the Gothic. Above it is a semicircular opening in the façade beneath the high narrow vault of the passageway. The inner face of the gate shows the type of wall construction which characterizes Venetian building, small blocks, square or rectangular, measuring up to one



alongside the wall, which bore amid scrolls and ornamental pinnacles the winged lion of Venice, disappeared during the nineteenth century and only the foundations remain, as drawn on the first of the two Grimani plans. Above it and beyond the gate the curtain belongs to the age of artillery, bearing low heavy ramparts curved on the exterior slope pierced with cannon embrasures ten feet deep. A cordon or string course molding, one of the emblems of Venetian architecture, runs the length of the wall marking the level of the embrasure platforms and the ground within. Between



the five gun ports on this stretch of the curtain are square, downward sloping loopholes for musketry, excessively deep in relation to the size of the opening, of a form peculiar to the fortifications of Corone. The ramparts as they stand to-day date for the most part from after 1685. Morosini's guns destroyed almost

all the embrasures during the siege. 1)

The northeast corner of the fortress is occupied by a bastion consisting of two colossal circular towers adjacent but built on different levels. The base of the lower is built of large squared stones two to three feet long of a type similar to those seen in the gateway and north curtain. No mortar is visible between the joints. In the upper section, however, as in the wall of the bastion above it, the blocks are of the familiar Venetian pattern, one foot square with only the central part of each block showing through the thick white mortar. The lower tower supports a great gun platform thirty-five feet across between the walls of the rampart. This contains five embrasures with sloping floors twelve feet deep and twelve feet wide at the opening, which cover



the gate and curtain, the harbor and the northern approaches by sea from Calamata. The rampart is bored through with long square loopholes at different levels, which cover the closer points of danger, the shore and

<sup>1)</sup> Relation de la Prise de Coron, p.11.

the base of the adjacent walls. A string course follows round the bastion at the level of the gun ports and the exterior crest of the parapet, which closing the circle of the lower platform connects with the ramparts of the upper by way of two great buttresses which flank the entrance. A vaulted passage leads up through it to the platform above, a two-thirds circle whose embrasures are oriented across the Messenian gulf toward Taygetus. The wall immediately next to the lower tower is vertical but spreads out gradually into an enormous reinforcement, battering at an angle of sixty degrees from the rocks on the water a hundred feet below. The same scarp carries round the angle of the fortress sheathing the sandstone bluffs and forming a great armored front to the sea on the fortress' eastern side, an example of the extraordinary plasticity of Venetian architecture, its adaptation to the forms of nature, which molding itself to hill and shoreline resembles mountains and cliffs rather than the usual man-raised defenses. A long section of this splendid bulwark unfortunately has collapsed, not through the action of time or the sea which since Venetian days has encroached up to the base of the walls, but by the activities of the clay diggers in recent years who without respect to the fortress or hindrance from authority undermined the wall and caused



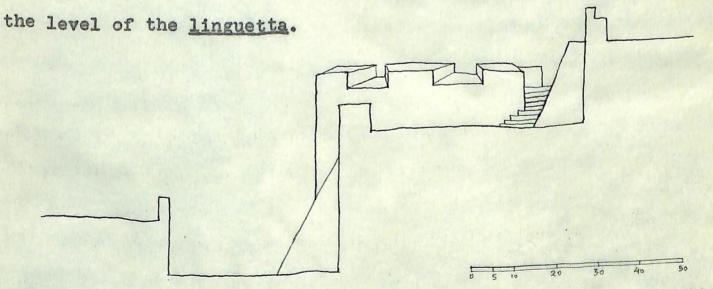
the ruin of one of the finest
sights of medieval architecture
in Greece. Now vast fragments
of masonry lie about in the sea
which washes beneath the battering
walls of the tower. A chasm of sand
remains exposed above it, and it is
to be feared that other landslides

only await the erosion of wind and rain.

Below the curtain at a space removed lie the level wheatfields of the small peninsula. Directly beneath extends a platform fifty feet across by two hundred long, closed at both ends
by huge round bastions. Between them along its outer edge runs
a faussebraye or parallel rampart pierced alternately with
embrasures and tapering tunnel-shaped loopholes. This wall



of the platform is strengthened on its outer face by four pointed buttresses descending into the ditch forty feet below, which runs from the northern of the two towers to the southern edge of the peninsula cliff. The counterscarp rises into a wall that stands a man's height above



One descends to the platform near the sad ruin of the north bastion, used as a storehouse for explosives by the Germans who blew it up in 1944, a more dramatic way of marking their retreat than to dispose of their amunition in the sea. Nothing is left amid the

debris to tell the form of the structure, though its stoutness
is visible from the Grimani plans. The south bastion is something
to rank with the greatest monuments for the size and impressiveness
of its building. A vast drum planted at one of the keypoints of
the fortress it commands the southern sea approaches and would
have been the watchpost for ships from east and west rounding
Tainaron and Kavogallos. It stands directly above the cliffs



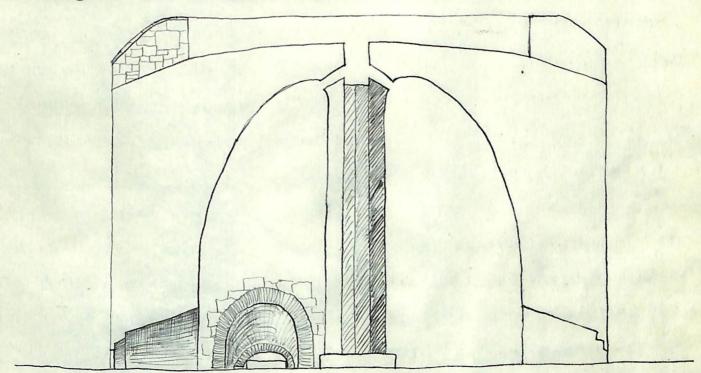
and the everencroaching sea, and rises to the level of the interior ground behind the curtain, to which the circle of the platform is tangent. There are five embrasures covering an arc of two hundred degrees of the compass from Ithome to the island of Venetiko, set in a rampart interspersed with numerous carefully pointing loopholes of the

pattern already seen. The exterior walls are of small rectangular

blocks of varying size. The parapet is of larger blocks and its upper surface is covered in big square tiles, a feature not used by the Venetians. There is no string course molding around the outside. The



floor of the platform slopes gently down to the wide embrasure jaws. In the center is a hole which forms a lantern for the interior. The descent from the <u>piazza bassa</u> leads into an enormous ovoid tholos supported on an octagonal pillar fifty feet high. Four casemates of cavernous size cover the water



and the fields of the linguetta. In the western side next to
the curtain, hidden in the vast thickness of the wall, a wide
ascent by long sloping steps curves up to the cannon platform.
The pillar and lower section of the circular wall are of large
poros blocks. The casemates are vaulted in brick, a construction
which shows on the interior face of the wall in the shape of wide
brick fans against the stone. Fifteen feet from the floor the vault
begins, long flat bricks laid in rings and rings up to the summit
of the dome.

The curtain proceeds round the southern bulge of the enclosure along the edge of the sandstone cliffs which have become so eroded that sections appear from below to be perched in mid-air. The wall is at first a simple uncrenellated parapet varying in height according to its state of preservation, the need of stronger defense

below. The angles are all built strongly after the Venetian manner of well fitted blocks, but the main sections are of miscellaneous stones held in rubble mortar. Beyond its southernmost point the form of the curtain changes into an artillery parapet whose varia-



tions in style bespeak many periods and repairs. A small pentagonal bastion built out on a point of rock contains some



material. A long section of rampart at the point marked E on the first Grimani plan shows a different construction from the preceding. It contains embrasures set slantways and oriented out toward the line of shore on which the Venetian army of 1685 disembarked.

The top of the parapet is sloped and the outer face scarped with a general appearance of well bevelled neatness on a small scale.

The wall jogs back twenty feet in a simple cremaillere or indented trace forming a re-entrant right angle with the curtain beyond, and contains beneath the cordon a plaque bearing two shields and

the inscription



1690

IS IV

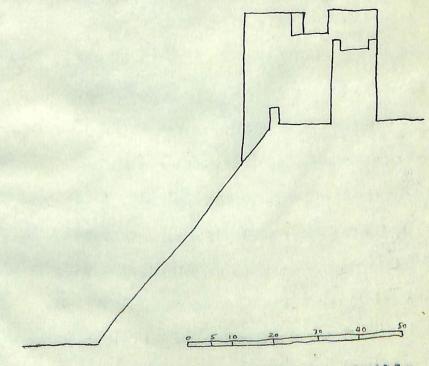
PROV GENERAL MORAE PRETOR

The whole section is repair of the Maltese breach during the period

immediately following the siege.

and dates from the earliest Venetian times. Three square towers project out over the great batter that descends at an angle of fifty degrees some seventy feet to the ground below. The stones of the scarp are large and rough-hewn. The lower sections of the towers and the wall between them are built of dressed blocks of similar size though the upper portions show the effect of destruction and later building. Between the first and second towers is a cistern





which communicates with an aqueduct built into the scarp visible

on the photograph and written on the first plan as condote della fontana. The source is shown to be in the open country to the west, where tile piping has been found along the course marked out. Until recently a fountain stood at the point shown on the second plan, and it is reasonable to suppose the castle's external water supply came from both sources.

At the western end on the site of Corone's oldest medieval defenses is a bastion of the last period of Venetian building. Here on the high land stood the chief key and strongpoint of the fortifications, the nucleus of the successive cells which spread out over the peninsula toward the sea. It is hard to tell the form of the original Torrion Maggiore, though some idea may be gotten from the Grimani plans which were drawn while the new works were still in progress. In Coronelli's drawing it is shown as round, which is evidence of nothing and has no correspondence with the present remains. A contemporary account of the Venetian siege speaks of a plaque found tra due armi del baloardo, which bore the inscription

HOC OPUS FECERUNT

MAGNIFICI

ET CLARISSIMI DD

BERNARDUS DONATUS CASTELLANUS

ET

LUDOVICUS CONTARENO CAPITANEUS

ET PROVISORES CORONI

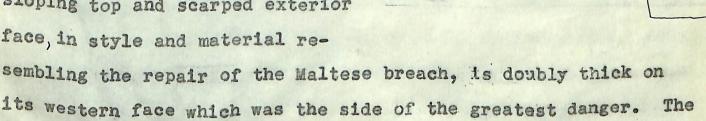
MCCCCLXIII1)

It was probably not a tower or single bastion so much as a

<sup>1)</sup> LaMorea Combattura dall' Armi Venete, p.94.

collection of batteries occupying the summit of the rock, an area as marked on the plans bounded by a long buttressed retaining wall on the east and a rampart on the west with a lower platform or plazza bassa beneath it. To-day the rampart stands isolated

from the walls to the north and south. The piazza bassa as it is drawn on the first plan disappeared in the new construction of 1700. A great quadrilateral bastion a hundred feet high embraces the older defenses, with gun ports that cover the north curtain wall, the harbor, the mainland to the west and the southern shore. The parapet, with sloping top and scarped exterior face, in style and material re-





but a fragment of its lower section which shows it to have had a stepped access. Not shown on the plans is the passageway that descends under a projection of the southwest corner and would have originally communicated with

a third level of defense never completed either by the Venetians or the Turks. This is a triangular ravelin whose one side is a

projection of the north face of the bastion of the north face



was to have extended the line of the south curtain to meet it at an angle. All that stands to-day is shown on the second plan, a piece of wall buttressed on the interior ending short of its projected termination. The

platform to protect the base of the bastion's west face from positions which might be set up on the high ground immediately opposite. Otherwise it was set on ground too low to be of any offensive advantage. The work was abandoned and a ditch cut across its mouth instead. Under the wall that stands, running in a hundred feet from the ditch, is an underground passage which may be identified as one of the galleries extended under the bastion in the siege of 1685. Behind the bastion on the north side a great battering wall closes the circuit. High up on its face, beneath the trace of one of the towers it supported, is an empty niche whose ponderous mouldings held the lion of St.Mark now fallen amid the cluster of houses beneath the wall, a memorial of the stern merchants who once ruled over an empire of harbors.



