

Antonio Giancix - an Ignored Genius?

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Abstract

Giancix was a Dalmatian (Croatian) officer and engineer in the Venetian service, whose name appears in archival documents in numerous versions. He spent his entire career in the Venetian army, advancing from the lowest to the highest rank. He gained extensive practical experience by participating in battles and was wounded several times. As commander of the defence of Modon (1715) he fell into Ottoman captivity, from which he was released after five years. He continued his career, eventually becoming the third person of the Venetian army in the rank of *tenente generale*.

Croatian literature does not provide much information on Giancix. More can be found in foreign professional literature, where he has been termed ingenious. Such a rating is primarily associated with his main work, the fortress of Palamida in Greece. It was the only fortress that he built from the foundation, while in many other cases he was responsible for modernisation interventions. His activity was particularly intense shortly before the second Morean War (1714-1718), when he was visiting and designing improvements for the most critical strongholds threatened by the Ottoman forces (Knin, Corfu, Castel di Morea, Nauplia, Modon).

Keywords: Antonio Giancix, Venetian Republic, Ottoman threat.

Giancix was a military architect in the service of the Venetian Republic. Numerous documents on his activity have been preserved, providing us with a fairly broad knowledge on the role he played. However, as is usually the case, regardless of how much is known about a historical phenomenon, there are always as many gaps and ambiguities. In archival documents Giancix's name appears in different forms (Giansich, Giaxich, Jancix etc.), and he himself used different signatures. Based on his name, it can be concluded that he was of Dalmatian, i.e. Croatian origin (Croatian: Antun Jančić).¹

Our research of this architect was inspired by the fact that more attention was paid to him in foreign than in Croatian professional literature. Moreover, these foreign authors, starting with Gerola, often identified him as a highly prominent, important and original architect (Gerola, 1933: p. 384). Still, all available data

about his life and work remained fragmentary, and it is only now that efforts are being made to complete them and obtain a fuller picture on Giancix's life and work.

1. Research questions

It is fundamental for Giancix that he spent his entire life in the Venetian service as an officer, and his career from the lowest to the highest rank progressed relatively fast. Rapid advancement in the military hierarchy was frequently achieved on the basis of war merits, and Giancix entered the Venetian army in 1684, at the outbreak of the Morean War. At that point he was mentioned in the rank of an *alfiere*, later on he was *capitano*, *tenente colonello*, *quartier mastro generale dell'armata*, *sargente maggiore del campo*, *colonello*, *sargente maggior di battaglia*, *sargente generale* and *tenente generale* (Le opere..., 1736).



Fig. 1- Town of Napoli on the right, Palamida on the left

His career ended with the second-highest rank in the army, as indicated in a list of the highest Venetian officers in 1739: the chief commander of the land army *marascialo* Schulenburg was followed by two *tenenti generali*, one of whom was Giancix.²

As he lived in the second half of the 17th and the first half of the 18th century, an investigation of Giancix's life and work involves researching late Venetian fortifications and the practices of military engineers in Venetian service in that period. There seem to have been no clear procedures and defined guidelines for engaging engineers at that time, and thus it is not easy to assess Giancix's case and compare it to others. Let us try to outline what we have been able to conclude so far. Certain provinces of the state employed so-called public engineers as well as military engineers (*ingegnere pubblico, ingegnere militare*), whose competencies were not strictly separated. The military engineers, if necessary, also worked on civilian constructions, and vice versa (Bilić, 2013: pp. 33, 129). The scope of their tasks varied, ranging from the erection of fortifications and construction of lazarets, administrative buildings, bridges, port infrastructure and warehouses to designing or restoring churches. Both types of engineers were associated with particular provinces (e.g. Dalmatia), and were as a rule assigned tasks by the provincial *proveditore generale*. Military engineers, in addition, had their own rankings, but they were not associated with particular units. As

far as it can be inferred, they usually rose in the ranks up to the level of *colonello*, and then would sometimes keep that position for several decades.

Giancix's position was different. We have already seen that he practically reached the highest rank and commanded military units. He distinguished himself in battles and was wounded several times (in the battle at Argos in 1686 and in the defence of Modon in 1715). It is particularly interesting that in historical sources, as a rule, he is not mentioned as an engineer; there is only one (printed) source claiming that he held such a title, while in numerous archival documents – which always refer to him as a builder – he is noted only by his military rank. It can be assumed that although he was engaged in the army primarily as a commander rather than a builder, with his experience and obvious talent he gained authority that enabled him to become very active in fortification construction, perhaps even against certain established procedures and mechanisms.

Giancix enjoyed a great reputation, testified by a number of archival records in which he is highly praised by senior Venetian officials. Of course, other engineers were judged positively as well, but Giancix's renown appears to have been outstanding. This can be seen, for example, from the documents compiled by the Dalmatian *proveditore generale* Vincenzo Vendramin in 1709, by the *proveditore* of Morea Agostino Sagredo in 1711-14 or by Johann Matthias von



Fig. 2- Coronelli: *Napoli di Romania, e monte Palamida Colle Proposte del Giancix*

der Schulenburg after 1720. They all praise Giancix's professional abilities, which served to create a basis of mutual trust and respect. It should be noted that Giancix's engagement was fundamentally different from the practices of the aforementioned engineers related to particular Venetian provinces: he operated throughout the territory of the Republic, from Bergamo in the west to the last Venetian possessions in the Aegean Sea (the island of Tine). It is obvious that he was not involved on just any kind of fortifications, but was engaged on the construction of strategic fortresses, those for which an approaching conflict with the Ottomans was anticipated: examples are the fortifications of the Corinthian isthmus and Knin in Dalmatia, as well as the fortresses of the Morea (Peloponnese). Such top-ranking and high-priority engagements bear witness to the reputation and importance attributed to him. Finally, in contrast to locally engaged engineers, as far as we know he did not work on other building tasks, but was focused only on fortifications, undoubtedly the most important infrastructure for the survival of the state and its possessions.

Thus Giancix's career raises the issue of interpreting a renowned, influential and obviously important engineer who was so distinguished that he was sent to the most critical

points of defence of the Venetian state. He was not a civilian in the service of the state, like Michele Sanmicheli, nor a *condottiere* engaged for a certain period, like Sforza Pallavicino or Schulenburg, but spent practically all his life in the Venetian military organisation, advancing in it owing to his courage, ambition and diligence.

2. Highlights of Giancix's activity

What do we know about Giancix as a fortress builder so far? Let us mention only the most important episodes of his career. He joined the army at the beginning of the Morean War, and by the end of the war he had already participated in discussions on the securing of the Corinthian isthmus.³ This complex fortification was to protect the Peloponnese peninsula from a future Ottoman landside attack. In the first years of the 18th century, Giancix was present in the Terraferma during the War of the Spanish Succession. Venice was neutral, but had to be careful because the battles between France and the Habsburgs were fought at its border; Giancix's analysis of the Terraferma fortresses with recommendations for their reinforcement date from that time (1701).⁴ In 1707, he participated in the discussion about fortifying Nauplia (Venetian Napoli di Romania), the capital of the Peloponnese.



Fig. 3- Palamida (Geotag Aeroview)

The ramparts were to be modernised on the access side, from where the town on the peninsula had to be better protected. Giancix provided recommendations for such a construction and designed the project, part of which seems to have been realised.

In this review of Giancix's important engagements we also mention Knin, where he was sent, as elsewhere before and after, by the decision of the Venetian Senate. Knin is a fortress in the hinterland of Dalmatia, which was included in the first class of Venetian fortifications in 1710, together with fortresses such as Verona, Zara or Corfu. Shortly before that, Giancix had visited Knin and prepared a reinforcement and modernisation project that was executed.⁵ After Knin we find him in the south again, on the Peloponnese and the Ionian islands. Venice felt that a new conflict with the Ottomans would arise over the Peloponnese, as was the case, so fortresses in the area underwent extensive modernisation; here Giancix played a prominent role, visiting the fortresses and designing projects on the Peloponnese, on the island of Lefkada and on Corfu.

Let us now have a look at Giancix's main work, the fortress of Palamida on the hill above the aforementioned Nauplia. As far as we know, it is his only work that was raised from the foundations, while elsewhere he was usually modernising and adding to already existing fortifications. Palamida is a hill looming above the city and therefore had to be protected from enemy occupation. Because of its very inadequate form there was much hesitation, but in 1711 construction began according to Giancix's project. The work progressed well, but it was not entirely completed before the new war and the Ottoman attack in 1715. In July Nauplia and Palamida were lost, and soon the whole of the Peloponnese followed.

Giancix established control over Palamida by arranging several separate buildings there, among which the bastion *Staccato* and the *Piattaforma* stand out.⁶ The architect himself explained that he did not want to build a huge fortress, but to compose it of small, separate buildings. The intention was for the cannons from one building to defend the space around the neighboring one, in the sense of mutual support. Because of this,

the Palamida fortress is considered not only Giancix's masterpiece, but a masterpiece of military architecture in general. Ch. Ottersbach devoted it very inspiring lines, assessing that its concept anticipated fortification of the late 18th and 19th centuries, and that its author Giancix was ingenious (Ottersbach, 2005. p. 20). A building of such an original concept and such historical importance obviously deserves further interpretation, and we are pleased to announce that a paper on this is in preparation.

During the Palamida construction Giancix was very busy, rushing from one site to another to oversee the work on the fortresses that Venice was getting ready for the upcoming war with the Ottomans. Those were the fortresses for which he designed reinforcements, and which, like Nauplia, belonged to the strategic Venetian strongholds: Castel di Morea in the north and Modon in the south of the Peloponnese. Engineers were engaged on the sites, while Giancix visited them and supervised the progress of the works. As mentioned before, he also visited Corfu, the key Venetian fortress at the entrance to the Adriatic, for which he made projects as well.

At the time of the new war with the Ottomans and their conquest of the Peloponnese in 1715, Giancix found himself in Modon and took over its defence. He showed determination, encouraging the crew even when everything seemed lost. But in the end Modon fell, and Giancix came into Ottoman captivity. He spent several years jailed in Istanbul and was probably released in 1720, the year that Schulenburg, since 1715 in the Venetian service as chief commander of the land army, mentioned in his writings as the year of Giancix's return from captivity.⁷ Schulenburg remained in the role of chief commander for the rest of his life, until 1747; so he obviously left a considerable impact on Venice's history and fortification building, which also gave importance to his relationship with Giancix, his subordinate. Schulenburg included him into the command structure again after his return from captivity, deciding to use his abilities and experience in the area of fortification. The main task now was to strengthen the Corfu fortifications and to secure this southern Venetian possession after the loss of the Peloponnese and after the critical defence of

Corfu itself in 1716. In Schulenburg's records we find only words of praise for Giancix, and in 1723 he appointed him military governor of Corfu, considering that as a proved fortification expert he was also qualified to hold the position of governor.



Fig. 4- From the work *Le opere di Senofonte Ateniese...*, 1736

The last known record on Giancix is the already mentioned document from 1739, when he was 73 years old. We believe that the research on his dynamic biography deserves to be completed, leaving as few gaps as possible. It is necessary to complete the list of Giancix's engagements and the sites he was working on, which is already quite comprehensive. The most complex issue will be to evaluate him as a creative person, i.e. to outline his creative profile based on his projects.

As we have already discussed the fortress of Palamida, emphasising its almost cult status which keeps eliciting admiration not only from experts but also from a wider audience, let us look at how confusing its position has been in the recent process of the registration of Venetian fortresses to the World Heritage List (UNESCO). The registration was an international project, since the former Venetian Republic extended over several of today's countries. At the start, Greece participated in the project, but soon withdrew for unclear reasons; thus, the project stood deprived of some of the most important Venetian fortresses. The other countries (Italy, Croatia, Montenegro) continued the process of registration and completed it in 2017, with six of the local fortresses included into the List.⁸ The question is whether Palamida would have made a candidate even if Greece had participated, given that the 17th century had been determined as the

upper time limit, also for no apparent reason. After withdrawing from the project, however, Greece registered its fortresses to the so-called Tentative list, obviously planning for them to run for separate enrolment in the future. Again, almost the same Venetian fortifications are listed there, but this time without the mention of Venice in the title. Instead, the title contains a confusion of ideas, presenting a combination of disparate terms, namely the Middle Ages and bastion engineering. So now we are faced with the title "Late Medieval Bastioned Fortifications" which includes Palamida, built in the 18th century. We do not know how the duration of the Middle Ages is perceived by the Greek colleagues, but it is clear to us that the concept and the essence of the Palamida fortress has nothing in common with that historical period. Thus we can conclude that in this case the fate of Palamida is the result of

strangely motivated decisions and some chaotic reasoning.

Notes

- (1) This work has been fully supported by Croatian Science Foundation under the project IP-2016-06-5776.
- (2) Biblioteca del Museo Correr, Venice (from now on: BMCVe), Venier, 9.
- (3) BMCVe, Morosini-Grimani, 557, XVII.
- (4) Archivio di Stato di Venezia (from now on: ASVe), Provveditori Terra e Mar (from now on: PTM), 78.
- (5) ASVe, PTM, 378.
- (6) ASVe, PTM, 632.
- (7) Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice, ms. it. VII 1210 (9026).
- (8) Bergamo, Peschiera, Palmanova, Zara, S. Nicolò (Sebenico), Cattaro.

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