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THE DISTRIBUTION OF MARSHLAND IN MALTA DURING THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

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THE purpose of this short paper is to build up a picture of the distribution and utilization of marshland in seventeenth century Malta. Two major sources of evidence are available. Firstly documents, particularly property books of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem which owned large areas of the Island, and secondly, place name evidence. Frequently descriptive names remain attached to an area long after the phenomena which originally produced them have disappeared. There are numerous marshland names on the present six inches to one mile map of Malta, attached to land which no longer displays such characteristics. Even when such names have disappeared from speech there is frequently some written record of their existence.

Until recently any analysis of former landscape features, based on place name evidence, was handicapped by a lack of adequate linguistic knowledge. However, in 1961 Aquilina published *Papers in Maltese Linguistics* and this contained an explanation of place names¹ appearing on the six inch map.

At the seaward end of virtually all the important valleys finding an outlet on the east coast of Malta, there were, during the early part of the seventeenth century, tracts of marshland. The names used to describe these areas, in documentary evidence, are imprecise. The Maltese word 'Ghadira' and the Italian 'Pantano' can be used to describe anything from a pool to a bog. Some of the 'Pantani' were certainly no more than winter marshland, whilst others, contained water throughout the year.

ORIGIN AND DISTRIBUTION

The torrents produced by Malta's sharp winter storms wash down large quantities of debris which are dumped in the lower courses of the wields. Unless the lines of drainage are carefully maintained they are rapidly blocked and pools of stagnant water develop.

Marine forces also contribute to these processes. During the winter

¹ Aquilina J. 'A brief survey of Maltese Place-Names' in *Papers in Maltese Linguistics*, Malta 1961. The same author's *Influenza arabe sulla toponomastica maltese* VII Congresso Internaz. di Scienza Onomastica Firenze-Pisa Aprile 1961, also provides much useful material.

the strongest seas are generated by the north, north westerly and north easterly winds. The majority of the east coast bays, where the wields run into the sea, face into the north east wind, or 'grigal'. This wind drives material onto the foreshores and produces humped beaches which act as barrages, preventing storm water reaching the sea. Occasionally, during violent storms, the barrage is breached or over-ridden and the land behind flooded. There are several recorded instances of this in the seventeenth century.² Flooding has also been caused by earthquake tremors.

The sites of 'Pantani' are indicated by a number of sources of evidence. Some have never been successfully reclaimed, as is the case with the winter floodlands behind Mellieha Bay. Others, whilst no longer subject to flooding, except on very rare occasions, have subsequently gone out of cultivation after attempts have been made to irrigate them with water drawn from too near sea level. The lands lying behind St. Paul's and Salina bays are of this type.

Some sites are recorded today only in place names. There are a number of names which can indicate former marshland but the commonest two are 'Ghadira' and 'Pantano'. The latter is particularly common in written records as officials of the Order, Notaries etc., used Italian. The word Simar, meaning reed, is another place name indicative of marshland.

The most useful sources, in many ways, on seventeenth century marshland, are the descriptions of such land contained in the *Cabrei* (property books), and other volumes, stored in the various collections of archives in Malta.

UTILIZATION OF THE MARSHLAND

As a result of periodic floodings by the sea some valley mouths became salt marsh and developed halophytic vegetation. At Salina and the Ghadira behind Mellieha Bay this vegetation was periodically collected, burnt and the ash sold as a fertilizer.³

Many 'Pantani' were quite highly developed. At Salina Bay a series of salt pans were laid out and, near Msida, a flax retting pond was constructed in the valley infill a few feet above sea level. The pond was fed by a brackish spring.⁴

In 1639⁵ the cultivation of hemp and flax was forbidden and the pond was stocked with fish.⁶ The 'Pantano' at St. George's Bay had a similar

² Treasury B. 289 ff. 95-97. Except where otherwise stated references are to the manuscript collections of the Royal Malta Library.

³ Ibid. ff. 95-97 and f. 52.

⁴ Abela G.F. *Della descrizione de Malta*, Malta 1647, p. 28.

⁵ R.M.L. 1210 ff. 5-6.

⁶ Abela op. cit. 1647, p.28. Treas. B.289 ff. 39-40.

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history.⁷

Fish ponds may have been created in the lower courses of other valleys. Today they exist at Marsascala and Marsaxlokk but we have no evidence relating to their date of origin. The name 'Menqa', shown on the six inch map of the Island adjoining the Grand Harbour near Hamrun, means little pool or fish pond.⁸ During the seventeenth century the 'Pantani' were regarded as being under-utilized and unhealthy. This last point is worth some discussion as it had a bearing not only on the efficiency of the population but also on the utilization and settlement of the marshlands.

According to the account given by Giacomo Bosio the commissioners, sent by the Order to assess the suitability of the Island as a base, reported that each year, particularly in the month of August, the inhabitants were subject to a contagious fever. This they attributed to the practice of washing 'lini'⁹ in the fountains, which produced 'Mal'aria'.¹⁰

Nearly all the 'Pantani' had a reputation for producing 'Mal'aria'. The Marsa was notoriously unhealthy.¹¹ There are direct references to 'Mal'aria' in association with the 'Pantani' at Mellieha,¹² St. Paul's Bay,¹³ St. George's Bay,¹⁴ Marsa,¹⁵ whilst the land behind Salina Bay is named Bur Murrad, which can be interpreted as meaning 'sickly meadow'.

DRAINING OF THE PANTANI

Thus, there were two reasons for draining the 'Pantani' - firstly, to create tracts of deep soiled, flat agricultural land and secondly, to eradicate possible sources of disease.

The largest and most important area of marshland was at the Marsa where there were at least two lakes.¹⁶ The area was traditionally unhealthy and the people living nearby were continually subject to sickness.¹⁷ The area was frequently flooded, both by storm water, borne into the kidney shaped lowland by the tributary wields and by invasions of the sea.

⁷ Abela op. cit. 1647, p. 109.

⁸ Aquilina op. cit. 1961, p. 198.

⁹ Here this probably means flax but it has been interpreted simply as linen - Cassar-Pullicino 'Malta in 1575: Social Aspects of an Apostolic Visit', *Melita Historica*, Vol. 2 No. 1 1956, p. 21.

¹⁰ Bosio G. *Storia della sacra religione militare di S. Giovanni Gerosolimitano*, 1603, p. 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 689.

¹² A.O.M. 1185 f. 45.

¹³ Deed of Giovanni Battista Micallef C. 1650 - Notarial Archives, Valletta.

¹⁴ Treas. B. 311 f. 16.

¹⁵ A.O.M. 258 f. 210 v.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

In 1650¹⁸ the council of the Order of St. John decided to drain the marshland, anticipating that the costs would soon be recovered from the newly created agricultural land. It was determined to exclude the sea from the entire inner basin of the Grand Harbour by erecting a sea-wall from one side of the harbour to the other. This was probably never built, but by 1654¹⁹ drainage channels had been excavated to act as a storm water course through the Marsa lowland. The account of the area, given at this time, makes it clear that a considerable tract of marshland remained²⁰ although some land had been reclaimed and cleared of marshland vegetation.²¹ The situation in 1654 was closely akin to that shown in the accompanying figure; the small island being a knoll of globigerina limestone which stands a little above the general level of the Marsa.

The Order continued to reclaim land, as the infilling of the area progressed, until late in the eighteenth century when the remaining marshland was virtually choked up. By this time the valley had become 'the broadest, the most extensive and fertile in the whole island'.²²

Early in the seventeenth century a would-be drainer of a piece of land behind the foreshore at Mellieha Bay successfully petitioned the Grand Master that the land might be transferred to him on condition that he reduced it to cultivation.²³ An official of the Order reported²⁴ that the area had always been marsh, was useless and, in fact dangerous by its production of 'Mal'aria' and suggested that, with strong works to exclude the sea, the land could be rendered cultivable. Whether or not the supplicant achieved this we do not know, but today the land still floods in the winter.

About 1650 the 'Universita' of Mdina had undertaken the draining of just over four and half salme²⁵ of marshland lying behind the foreshore of St. Paul's Bay.²⁶

This land was transferred from the ownership of the 'Universita' to that of the 'Fondazione Lascaris' and is described in the *Cabreo* of that foundation, completed in 1658. The land had been walled and provided with drainage channels. Four salme of the former marsh had become good quality arable land whilst the rest yielded only herbage.²⁷

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Treas. B. 289 f. 25.

²⁰ *Ibid.* f. 16.

²¹ *Ibid.* ff. 24-25.

²² Boisegelin Louis de. *Ancient and Modern Malta*, London 1805, p. 123.

²³ A.O.M. 1185 f. 45.

²⁴ *Ibid.* f. 45 v.

²⁵ A salma = 4.4 acres.

²⁶ Deed of Giovanni Battista Micallef op. cit.

²⁷ R.M.L. 1302 f. 22 v.

Lying behind the beach at Mellieħa, just to the north of a low limestone ridge which bisects the lowland, is a 'Pantano' of long standing. The land still floods in winter as the Ghadira name suggests. This area had probably been developed as salt pans during the mediaeval period and in the mid seventeenth century it was still referred to as the 'Pantano delle Saline Vecchie'.²⁸ During the early sixteen fifties this land had been producing 'Bellissimi meloni d'acqua', later however the sea had broken in and soured the area.²⁹ By 1658 the land was owned by the 'Fondazione Lascaris' and had been provided with drainage channels. Of the four salme of land only one had recovered to the point where it could be sown, whilst the remainder yielded water melons, vegetation for burning and possibly herbs (Carebarte).³⁰

This rehabilitation was never completed. Later *Cabrei*, compiled in the eighteenth century, show that a large part of the area remained waste – as it does today.³¹

The 'Ghadira' at St. George's Bay was used, during the early seventeenth century for retting. In the eighteenth century the 'Fondazione Manoel' acquired the land and drained it in 1736.³²

The small stretch of water at Msida was probably not drained until the nineteenth century and certainly it still existed in the eighteenth century.³³

Other small 'Pantani' existed at Pietà, St. Julians and there may well have been others at Marsascala and Marsi xlook but documentation is lacking.

Inland small pools frequently formed in low lying areas. Abela mentions several which were persistent. Ghadira Bordi (the first part of the name is now extinct) was one of the largest.

The total area of marshland, and land flooded during the wet season, can never have been very large but it did make several interesting contributions to the economy and health of the population. It may have influenced the settlement pattern. For instance the Romans had port facilities and possibly a town adjacent to the Marsa. The unhealthiness of the area may well have been a factor contributory to abandonment. In the north west of the Island, which was largely uninhabited during the rule of the Order, the large number of 'Pantani' found in the region may well have been one of a group of unfavourable factors which helped to keep the area empty.³⁴

²⁸ Treas. B. 289 f. 95.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ R.M.L. 1302 f. 19 v.

³¹ Treas. B. 296 f. 387 v. 1721 and Treas. B. 294 f. 65 c. 1794.

³² Treas. B. 311 f. 116.

³³ Treas. B. 290 f. 8 and Treas. B. 291 f. 4.

³⁴ Boisgelin op. cit. 1805, p. 44.

SUMMARY OF MARSHLAND PLACE NAME EVIDENCE

Abela (1647) pp. 64 – 109

'Ghadira ta Xara'.

'Ghadira ta Rez Latomia o pantano' (Near Zabbar).

'Ghadira tal Bordi'.

'Ghadira di Rorbet Ghar Sagna'.

'Ghadira di S. Giorgio'.

*Documentary Sources in the Royal Malta Library-
(Eighteenth Century unless otherwise stated)*

Treasury B. 289 (1654) f. 24 Reference to 'gionchi' at Marsa.

Treasury B. 289 (1654) f. 42 'Ta raml tal gadira' – near Benuarrat.

Treasury B. 289 (1654) f. 52 'Simar ta Saline'.

Treasury B. 289 (1654) f. 95 'Pantano delle Saline Vecchie'.

R.M.L. 1302 (1658) f. 22 v 'Simar tal Puales'.

A.O.M. 262 (1673) f. 24 'Essimar tal Puales'.

Treasury B. 294 f. 107 'Il pantano, sive il Ghadira, ossia le saline vecchie'.

Treasury B. 294 f. 70v 'Santa Maria tal Mahatap, appellata tal Hadira'.
(Arable land when the volume was compiled).

Treasury B. 302 f. 71 'Pantano Puales'.

Treasury B. 303 f. 29 'San Giorgio tal Ghadir'.

Other Documentary Sources

Deed of Giovanni Battista Micallef C. 1650 Notarial
Archives. Valletta – 'Il pantano tal-Puales'.

