

THE SEA BOARD AND MARSHES OF QORMI

by

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There is a well founded tradition that in olden times, even before the advent of the Knights in Malta, the inner reaches of the Grand Harbour extended inland as far as the village of Qormi.

The historian *Abela*¹ states that under the rule of the Knights, ships and galleys used to draw water from a fountain called "**Għajn Filep**" which was situated inside the Marsa basin within the limits of Qormi. The said fountain supplied fresh water to the new city of Valletta, before the Wignacourt aqueduct was constructed. One of the localities of Qormi was known as "**Taċ-Ċaghqi**" because of the large quantity of pebbles found there.

According to *Ciantar*², at the time of the Knights, Roman remains were found on the seashore of Marsa, and recently in 1956³, other remains were discovered on the bank of the Marsa canal, which is the outlet of the valleys of Qormi into the sea. The remains were deemed to represent the foundation of old store houses and of an old sea-wall which might have been built to provide a sea lane for the convenience of vessels sailing further inland towards Qormi to hibernate there during the stormy winter months. Besides the old foundations, the excavations uncovered much pottery and coins dating from the Fourth Century B.C. to the Third Century A.D. thus testifying to seven centuries of maritime and commercial activities in the area.

At that time Qormi, for all intents and purposes, was a seaside settlement, but the stretch of water between it and the deep sea at the Marsa basin was so shallow as to form many pools and marshes, rendering the area unhealthy⁴, most probably because of the incidence of malaria resulting from the breeding of mosquitoes in the stagnant pools of water.

Anti-malarial works were undertaken under Grand Masters Lascaris and Cotoner in the early half of the seventeenth century. The marshes were filled in and reclaimed for agricultural purposes. Large tracts were covered with soil and irrigated; but the whole plain of Marsa was reshaped, and the seashore transformed into commercial quays in 1859 under the Governor, Sir Gaspard Le Marchant⁵, when the whole area was renamed New Port, (Port Novu).

- 1) G. F. ABELA, *Della Descrittione di Malta*, Malta, F. Bonacota, 1647, p. 93.
- 2) G. F. ABELA-G. A. CIANTAR, *Malta Illustrata*, Malta, St. del Palazzo, 1772, p. 79.
- 3) *Report of the Museum Department for 1956*.
- 4) ABELA, *o.c.*, p. 94.
- 5) T. ZAMMIT, *Malta: the Maltese Islands and their history*, Malta, Aquilina, 3 ed., p. 319.

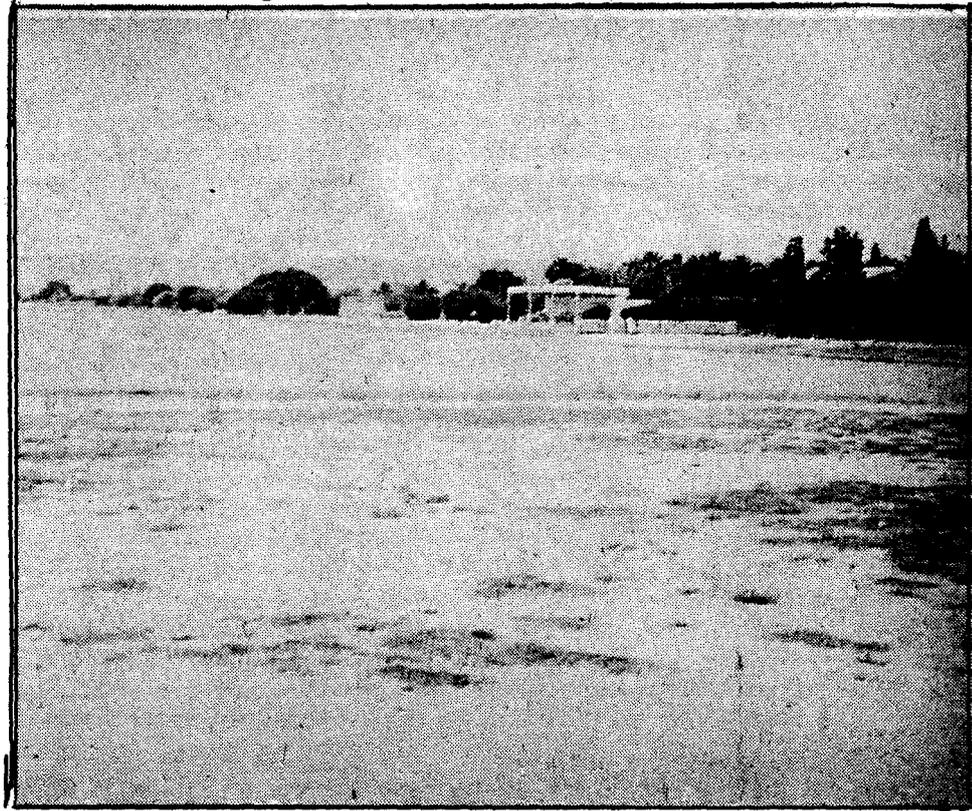


(Photo J.M. Spiteri - Museum)

"Pebbles and shingle in deep layers uncovered during foundation work."

The subsoil water pumped from wells for the irrigation of gardens now surrounding Qormi, is brackish, thus indicating its origin from the sea, and its filtration through a made-up rather than a rocky, layer of land formation.

Lately, in 1967, however, foundation works for the construction of new buildings at Qormi, revealed the characteristic conformation of the area as it was in the distant past. The excavations were dug at the lower (East) end of St. Sebastian Street, near the archway which spans the valley in the locality known as "**Erba' Qaddisin**". The layer was made up of debris topped by alluvial soil; the debris represent the material used for filling the shallow pools and marshes; some of the top soil was laid for the purpose of turning the reclaimed areas into agricultural land, but most of the soil was carried there throughout the centuries from higher levels by floods during the rainy seasons. The deep part of the excavations was however, the most interesting and significant; it was made up of a thick layer of mixed material consisting chiefly of sand and pebbles of all shapes and sizes. This layer not only accounts for the old name of the locality mentioned by *Abela*, i.e., "**Tat-ċaghqi**" (Pebbles), but also proves beyond doubt the existence of a pebbly beach or shingle at that area hundreds of years ago when Qormi was a seaside village.



(Photo J.M. Spiteri - Museum)

"The Marsa pologround reclaimed from marshes."