THE SAN NIKLAW CAVE-SETTLEMENT

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The adaptation of caves as dwellings and shrines represents an ancient Mediterranean practice. Places such as Granada in Spain, Matera in Apulia, Matmata in Tunisia and Cava D'Ispica in Sicily show that "Mediterranean people have always chosen caves and grottoes, natural or excavated, as providing cool and often defensible dwellings, stores, stalls, cisterns, churches, burial places and catacombs".[1]

Malta is no exception and the practice of occupying caves for habitational purposes, has been popular since prehistoric times. At Ghar Dalam, remains of prehistoric man have been dated back to c. 5000 B C.[2] In the caves at il Mixta, near Ghajn Abdul in Gozo, Ghar Dalam phase material has also been discovered, pointing to the occupation of these caves in the prehistoric era.[3] The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum and the Xaghra Circle[4] complexes, besides being multi-period burial places, also had a cultic significance. To the Punico - Hellenistic period belongs the rock-cut sanctuary of Ras il-Wardija in Gozo.[5]

To a later period, possibly late Roman and Byzantine times, belongs the cave known as I-Ghar ta' lburdan where fragments of late-Roman coarse pottery and medieval glazed ware were discovered.[6]

In the middle ages, troglodytes were widespread throughout the Mediterranean basin wherever environmental conditions were favourable. In Malta, the idea of cave-dwelling and that of hewing churches out of rock became highly popular in the middle ages because of the prevailing environmental conditions. The fact that the Maltese natural environment suffered from a lack of timber, but on the other hand provided plentiful natural rock shelters and an abundance of easily quarried stone, conditioned a type of architecture which was entirely stone orientated besides encouraging cave-dwelling. The utilisation of caves for habitation, has made necessary the construction

1. A. Luttrell, "Malta Troglodytica: Ghar il-Kbir", *Heritage*, Vol. 2, 1979, 461 - 4.
2. D. H. Trump, *Malta: An Archaeological Guide*, 1993, 82 - 84.
3. *Ibid.*, 166.
4. Also known as the Brochtorff Circle, the Xaghra Circle is situated in Xaghra, Gozo.
5. M. Buhagiar, "Two Archaeological Sites; Ras ir-Raheb, Malta and Ras il-Wardija, Gozo", *Melita Historica*, vol. X, no. 1, 1988, 69 - 87.
6. M. Buhagiar, "Mediterranean Architecture: Medieval Cave Dwellings and Rock-Cut Churches in Malta", ATRIUM no. 3, Mediterranean & Middle East Architectural Construction Review, 1984, 17.

of dry-walling to screen the cave entrance and partition the interior, thus creating different living units.

Three different types of medieval cave-settlements have been identified in Malta.[7] These consist of (a) the adoption of a natural carstic depression[8] for habitational use,[9] (b) the occupation of naturally formed caves, most commonly present in valleys and cliff sides,[10] and (c) the adoption of caves to serve cultic purposes.[11]

Geography and History of the San Niklaw Site: The San Niklaw troglodytic settlement, situated at an altitude of c. 180 meters above sea level, is embedded in the sides of Mellieha Ridge and overlooks Ghadira Valley and Marfa Ridge (fig. 1). This cave settlement can be reached via a foot-path branching from the Mellieha by-pass which from Ghadira Valley, leads to Mellieha Ridge. Globigerina Limestone known as *il-gebla tal-franka*[12] in Maltese, predominates in this region. As is also the case with the San Pietru medieval settlement in Naxxar,[13] the toponym of the fields surrounding this area is that of ta' San Niklaw.

In the valley below the San Niklaw settlement is a fresh water spring, flowing out of an arched stone gallery at the foot of the cliff ridge, which even during the summer months, yields a constant supply of water.[14] It is highly unlikely that this arched structure of unknown antiquity is Roman as suggested by Messina.[15] It is more likely to date back to the middle ages.[16] Water channels, conducting the spring water to a modern reservoir are later accretions. The presence of a permanent source of water would have rendered the location increasingly attractive to any troglodytic community in search of a prospective settlement site.

Description of Remains: The San Niklaw settlement is a particularly impressive example of a troglodytic settlement (fig. 2). The relative inaccessibility of the large

7. Aldo Messina, "Trogloditismo Medievale a Malta". *Melita Historica*, vol. X. no. 2, 1989, 109 - 120.
8. A carstic depression is formed by the thinning out of a clay stratum present in rock-pockets. When the clay erodes, a natural depression is created.
9. The Ghar il-Kbir and Latnija cave dwellings are a typical example of such a settlement.
10. The San Niklaw cave-dwelling and cave-church is a typical cliff face settlement.
11. The San Niklaw cave-church was originally a smaller cave. In the middle ages this was enlarged, a dry-wall was built to screen the facade and the cave started being used for cultic purposes.
12. Globigerina Limestone is the most important building stone on the island.
13. The San Pietru settlement is situated at an altitude of c. 200 meters above sea level, directly beneath the ridge marking the great fault on which the Victoria Lines are built. This settlement can be easily reached through a country lane branching from the ta' Alla u Ommu hill at San Pawl tat-Targa.
14. A. Messina in *Melita Historica*, *op. cit*, 114 - 115.
15. *Ibid.*, 115.
16. The size of the stone blocks forming the arch and the crude construction method, make it highly unlikely that this is a Roman structure.

cave that gives shelter to the settlement has aided its preservation and enough of the rubble walling has survived to show how the cave was partitioned in an attempt to create separate areas in an already confined space. It is through such a system of dry-walling, that the cave-church is separated from the cave-dwelling site. The idea of a terrace facing Ghadira Valley again recurs at San Niklaw and as is the case with the San Pietru settlement, this links the domestic area to the sacred space.

The San Niklaw Cave-Church: The largest cave (fig. 2; A), that used for man and animal habitation, is situated exactly towards the middle of the terrace (fig. 2; B). To the right is a half apsed rock wall enclosed by a rubble wall. This has been identified as the cave-church that Dusina mentions in his 1575 Pastoral visitations and is also considered as being associated with the *Beneficio di S. Nicolao delta Mellecha* mentioned in a 1436 document.[17]

The rock wall of this cave-church was plastered with a pinkish stucco on which murals were painted. Unfortunately, due to the flaking nature of the rock, only small traces of stucco and paint managed to survive and these are unfortunately deteriorating at a steady rate.

Paint traces can be noted in different areas of this cave-church. Traces of paint which can be clearly observed to have been applied on to the stucco are situated in the upper left hand side of the cave entrance. They consist of a red ochre line measuring 3 x 7 centimetres, which formed part of the framing band of an icon.

More significant traces of painting can be noted on the rock wall, exactly opposite the entrance to the church. From the few daubs of paint which are still visible here, it can be quite safely assumed, that these formed part of small icons of individual saints which were painted side by side and were framed in a border of dark red pigment.[18] The painted panel, measures 65cm x 50cm and above it, the border of an other panel, having the same dimensions as the previous one can just be made out.

Although this medieval settlement has not been subjected to vandalism, the deterioration of the Globigerina Limestone on which the stucco is applied is quickly destroying the few traces of plastering and paint left and these merit conservation. The most urgent task conservators have to carry out as an attempt to save the surviving remnants of paint and stucco is to consolidate the badly weathered rock face surrounding the paintings.

17. M. Buhagiar, "Medieval Cave Churches in Malta"' in *Medieval Malta*, A. Luttrell(ed.), London1975, 164.
18. M. Buhagiar, "Medieval Malta: Its Hypogea, Cave Churches and Ecclesiastical Buildings", *Architecture in Malta*, Saces, 1986, 43.

An other interesting feature in the San Niklaw cave-church flanks the left hand side of the church entrance where a rectangular incision, accompanied by a squarish ledge is present. It is very difficult to determine the utility of this feature, but its proximity to the church entrance leads me to believe that this housed the door fittings which might have blocked entrance to the cave-church.

The San Niklaw Cave-Dwelling: Separating this cave-dwelling from the adjoining cave-church is a dry-wall (fig. 2; F), a few courses of which are still present . In antiquity, this must have reached up to the roof of the cave entrance as is the case with the inner part of the dry-wall, marking the boundaries of the San Niklaw cave-church

This cave, which is of a quite considerable size has an almost rectangular form, the only exception being an apsed-like recess (fig. 2; H), towards the right hand side interior, of the church. Interesting features present in this area are roundish, rock-carved depressions, in the right hand side wall of the cave (fig. 2; I), which are very similar to lamp-holes. Seven incisions are present in all. The upper four are placed at the same height and are almost equidistant. The lower three, also having the same height, are positioned almost directly beneath the upper slots. The utility of these features is difficult to determine with certainty, but these could have functioned as rafter supports.

Rock hewing in the cave flooring, can be observed towards the middle of the cave (fig. 16; J), and consists of an almost squarish depression in the ground connected at one end to a long, narrow, rock-cut canal. A proper archaeological investigation is necessary and this would surely help in assessing the function of this rock-cut feature. Towards the right hand side of this rock-cut feature are two troughs (fig. 2; K), which are cut in a rock bench.

Marked 'M' is a rock-cut window which gives access to an adjoining cave, also used for habitational purposes. Dry-walling 'N', partitions these two caves. Marked 'O' is a rock-cut shelf, 'C', is a chamber enclosed by dry-walling. This chamber can only be accessed from the terrace and possibly gave shelter to the cattle owned by the troglodytes inhabiting these caves.

On its inner side facing the entrance, a partly natural, partly man-made platform, 1.80m high is present dividing this cave into two different levels (fig. 2; L). This upper level of the cave, although having a shallow rock roof spans into the cliff-face for c. six meters. This rock platform provides ample proof to suggest that before the troglodytes settled in this cave, the upper level was the original height of the flooring. Rock cutting, in the upper part of the cave at a later stage, divided the cave into two different levels.

Maltese troglodyte settlements cannot be studied in isolation. The cave-dwelling phenomenon, present throughout the Mediterranean region has characterised living patterns in the region until recent times.[19] The practice of adapting caves as houses or of hewing churches out of rock also gave very little scope, if any, to architectural invention and development. Rock architecture was most probably often meant to reflect the influence of above ground buildings and not vice versa.[20] This hypothesis is sustained by the fact that very often individual cave-houses were extended by the building of additional rooms in any available space immediately in front of the cave entrance. In such instances, the cave would be converted into animal pens or a store room.[21]

Even though Maltese Medieval Archaeology has now been around for more than a quarter of a century, only a few are aware of its existence and fewer still of its importance. It is very unfortunate that cave-dwelling sites are in their larger part neglected and are presently being subject to shameful acts of vandalism. The public in general, is aware of the existence of these caves, but very few are conscious of their true significance or of the important niche they occupy in Malta's medieval past. [22]

It is very fortunate that till the present, the San Niklaw settlement seems to have escaped the unfortunate faith of many other cave-dwelling settlements Our medieval troglodytic heritage is clearly deteriorating at an alarming rate and many monuments relating to the period stand in real danger of total obliteration. More research work in the field and the drawing up of a cost-effective plan are therefore necessary, as an attempt to conserve in the best way possible these rock monuments, important landmarks of Malta's national medieval troglodytic heritage.

19. A. Luttrell compares the Ghar il-Kbir settlement to the troglodyte dwellings at Matmata in Tunisia. A. Messina points out that as in Malta, Sicilian cave-dwellings are often dug sideways into the perpendicular wall of a ravine or hill. In a cave dwelling settlement at Pantalica near Syracuse, there is also the adoption of a rocky ledge, functioning as a terrace, being very similar to some Maltese counterparts.
20. M. Buhagiar in *Saces*, *op. cit.*, 44.
21. A. Luttrell in *Heritage*, *op. cit.*, 464.
22. The Latnija settlement situated in the limits of Cirkewwa has become the venue of Bar-B-Ques and campers, who unaware of the historical and archaeological importance of this settlement, are causing irreparable damage to the site. A charismatic group has recently shown renewed interest in the San Brinkaw settlement situated in the outskirts of Gharghur, and have hewn steps in the rock-face and cemented other parts of the terrace in order to ease access to this site. The cave-church facade has also been subject to irreparable damage.

Site Plan of the San Niklaw Area

Fig. 1

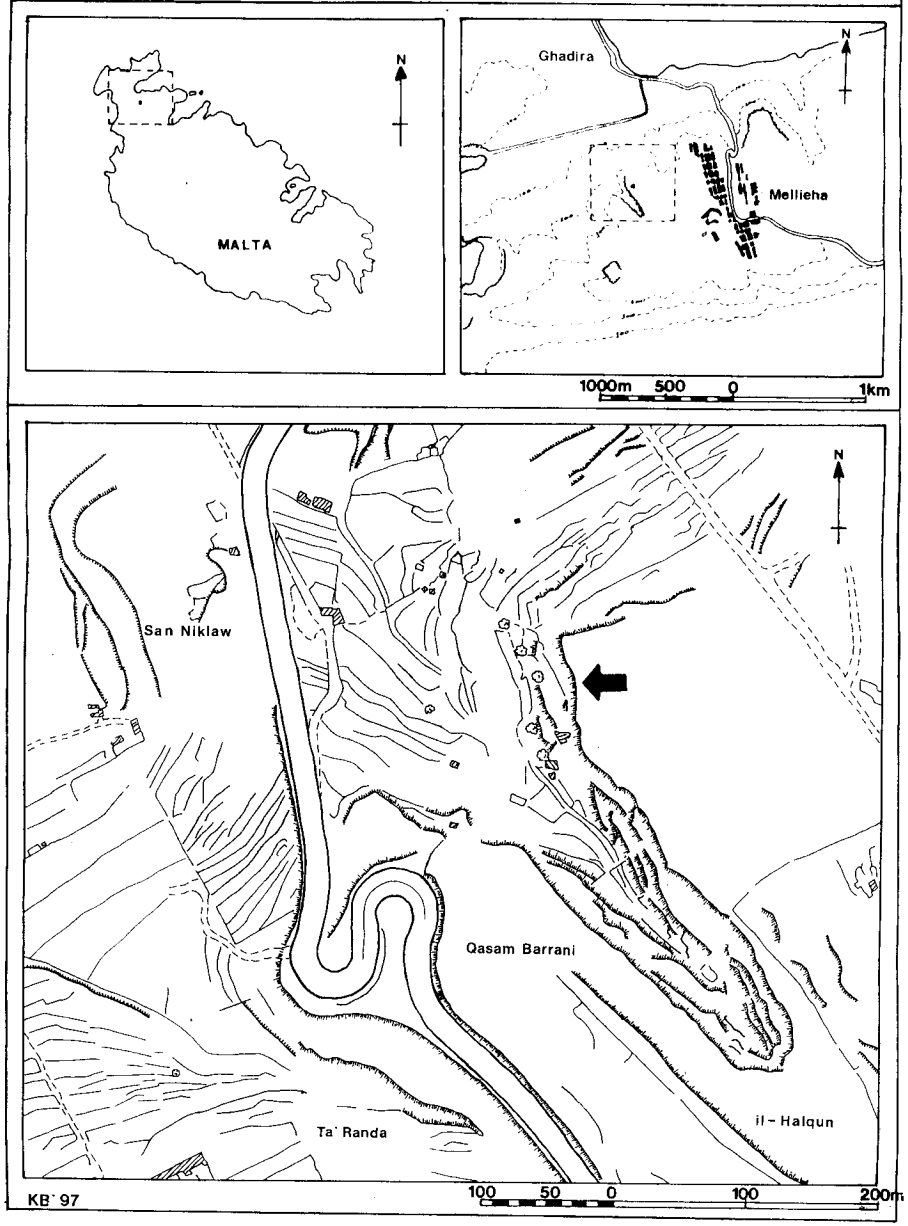

Fig. 2