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THE VERNACULAR EVIDENCE OF THE MALTESE ISLANDS: THE CASE OF THE ETHNIC *GIRNA* AND THE *HYBRID HOVEL*

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Introduction

This paper focuses on two specific examples of native architecture in Malta: the *girna* (corbelled stone hut) and the hybrid hovel. The study is divided into four sections. The first two parts focus on the spatial and temporal context in which these ethnic houses are to be studied. It is through this background that one would acquire a more comprehensive picture of the significance of Malta's vernacular legacy. The third section focuses on native architecture in Malta, with special reference to the *girna* and the hybrid hovel. The concluding part focuses on the main protagonists who occupied these abodes: the house dwellers. On the basis of the available archaeological, historical and anthropological evidence, the author throws light on the various socio-economic activities that the household members carried out on a daily basis. These abodes were not only places of human habitation (or human and animal cohabitation), but also places that brought people together for various reasons, such as praying, socializing, and entertaining relatives or strangers. The dwellers made their utmost to maximize the use of the available physical resources to protect their abodes against any potential pilferers, to organize their house contents, and to secure - despite a life of hardship - their own survival.

The Maltese islands: the spatial dimension

The Maltese islands are roughly located in the central part of the Mediterranean Sea, approximately 93 km to the south of Sicily, 354 km to the north of Tripoli, and 290 km to the east of Tunisia (fig. 1). The archipelago, with a northwest to southeast orientation, has a total surface area of approximately 316 sq km. The three principal islands are:

- **Malta:** the main and most extensive island, with a surface area of about 246 sq km. Its capital city, Valletta, is situated in the Grand Harbour area and was founded in 1566;

- **Gozo:** the second largest island, with a surface area of about 67 sq km. Its main town is Victoria, situated in the centre of the island, and

- **Comino:** the third largest island, having a surface area of about 3.5 sq km. Today, less than five permanent residents live on Comino.

The smallest other islands of the archipelago, Filfla and St. Paul's Islands, are uninhabited. The Maltese islands are characterized by several naturally protected harbours, the most significant being the Grand Harbour and Marsaxlokk Harbour. The highest point in Malta is Ta' Dmejrek in the parish of Siggiewi, with an altitude of 253 m above sea level.

The Maltese islands have a sedimentary type of rock consisting of five superimposed layers. The lowest is the Lower Coralline Limestone, the earliest rock layer that was formed between twenty-eight to twenty-three million years ago. Above this lies the porous Globigerina Limestone, which is fundamental for the local building industry. Overlying this is the Blue Clay, occurring commonly in western Malta and in different parts of Gozo. This impermeable layer gives rise to the formation of the perched aquifers, ideal for field irrigation and domestic consumption. Upon the latter sits the porous Greensands layer, occurring only in small pockets of land. The most recent layer to have been formed locally is the Upper Coralline Limestone, vital for the local grit and concrete production.

Geologically, western and northern Malta consist of a chain of parallel hills and valleys, separated from the rest of the island by an extensive natural fault spreading from Madliena to Fomm ir-Riħ. In northern Malta the escarpment is sometimes abrupt and broken by deep embayments, while western Malta is characterized by deeply incised valleys and undercliff areas. Soil erosion on the hilltops of this part of the island hampers any type of agricultural

activity, however across the hill slopes the land permits crop cultivation and animal grazing. The valleys of this part of the island, protected as they are between these hills, are extremely fertile as they are irrigated by the springs stemming from the Upper Coralline uplands¹.

The valley systems of eastern Malta descend to the central plains. A tongue of high ground known as Sciberras peninsula, on which Valletta now stands, separates Marsamxett Harbour from the Grand Harbour. The most prevalent rock type that occurs here is the Globigerina Limestone. It is, in fact, in this part of the island where the most extensive surface quarries for the building industry are located.

Gozo and Comino are geologically similar to northern Malta. Across Gozo's flat-topped hills one finds several terraced fields and a series of valleys. The most common rock types on these two islands are the Globigerina and the Upper Coralline Limestone.

The urban sprawl and industrial development that occurred in these islands since the second half of the twentieth century have been two main causes for the decline in local agriculture. Statistical data confirm that, while in the mid-twentieth century agriculture occupied approximately 55% of the total land area, by the early years of the following one this decreased to 32%. The total urban fabric of the Maltese islands amounts to about 25% of their total land area. Urban areas are spread in different parts of the islands; however, the most extensive concentration of settlements lies in the Grand Harbour district, this being the most densely populated region in Malta. Certain coastal settlements, like Marsascala and St. Paul's Bay, which initially consisted of fishing hamlets, gradually developed into prime tourist resorts with the erection of several hotels, high-rise buildings, restaurants, shops, offices and new residential areas. On a general note, one observes that since the late twentieth century all local coastal and inland settlements have experienced extensive urban growth to the extent that this led to a massive conurbation process in different areas, particularly in the Harbour district and in central Gozo. Hence, the building of new arterial roads or bypasses became essential for better vehicle traffic management and to avoid potential gridlocks in the settlement centres. Malta has one of the highest population densities in Europe, with about 1,380

¹ Bowen-Jones, Dewdney and Fisher 1962, 235-288.

inhabitants per sq km. At present the local population is estimated to be approximately 443,134 inhabitants. Almost 20% of this figure consists of foreigners officially registered locally for employment and/or residential purposes.

Statistical records also demonstrate that since the last decade of the twentieth century land devoted to industry increased from about 3% to 7%, while forested areas and wetland constitute about 1.1% of the total land area. Industrial areas, situated in various localities, encompass the manufacture of a plethora of products for local or foreign consumption, such as food products, beverages, electronics, textiles and pharmaceuticals.

The Maltese Islands have a Mediterranean type of climate, consisting of cold and rainy winters and of hot and dry summers. During the coldest months of the year (January and February) the average temperature rises to approximately 13°C, while in the hottest months (July and August) it reaches about 27°C. Normally, rain falls in winter, especially between late October and late February, with an average annual precipitation of about 600 mm.

Malta in its temporal context

Due to its particular strategic geographical position, for many centuries Malta has been exposed to various external political and cultural influences, practically from the four corners of the Mediterranean region. These are manifested not only in local art and architecture, but even in the native language, religious devotion, and cultural traditions. For instance, the Maltese language is the only semitic language in the world written in the Latin alphabet. It is derived basically from Arabic, however through time, with the occupation of these islands by successive foreign dominations, and with the presence of foreigners hailing from different parts of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, it was unavoidable for the country's ethnic language to adopt new vocabulary deriving from Latin and various European languages (such as Italian, Spanish, and French) and, since the 19th century, also from the English language.

The colonization of the Maltese islands harks back to the Prehistoric era, having been occupied by communities that followed a plethora of economic activities and characterized by different religious and socio-cultural backgrounds; it was the period which witnessed the rise and fall of the Temple Civilization, from approximately 3,600 to 2,500 BC. By the late 8th century, the

islands became a Phoenician and (later) a Carthaginian colony. In the year 218 BC they were annexed to the Roman Empire.

Malta's Medieval Period extends from the Byzantine Period (6th century AD) and the islands' occupation by the Knights Hospitallers of St. John in 1530. It is subdivided as follows:

- a) Byzantine Period 535 - 870
- b) Muslim Period 870 -1091
- c) Norman Period 1091 -1194
- d) Hohenstaufen Period 1194 - 1266
- e) Angevin Period 1266 - 1282
- f) Aragonese Period 1283 - 1530

The Knights of the Military and Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta occupied these islands for two hundred and sixty-eight years, between 1530 and 1798. It is one of the most extensive historical periods during which Malta was occupied by a foreign domination; this Order was expelled from its former territory, Rhodes, in 1523 by the Ottoman Sultan Suleyman I². The Knights' insistent petitions for support made to several European potentates of the time, with the objective of identifying a new permanent base for their *Convento*, finally prompted Emperor Charles V of Spain to donate to them the Maltese islands and the castle of Tripoli (in modern-day Libya) in perpetual fiefdom³.

The Order's members consisted of aristocratic knights who hailed from different European countries, mainly Italy, France and Spain, the three countries where the Order had most of its landed possessions⁴. The Order was organized into eight *Langues* (or branches) that represented the Knights' main nationalities⁵. These were those of Aragon, Auvergne, Castille (including León and Portugal), England (subsequently becoming the Anglo-Bavarian *Langue*), France, Italy, Germany, and Provence. The Order was governed by an elected Grand Master (*Magnus Magister*) who usually retained his office *ad vitam*. As head of government, the Prince Grand Master was assisted by a Grand Council and various departments that were responsible for specific areas or tasks⁶.

² Bonello 1970, 28, Luttrell 1999, 338.

³ Ellul 1970, 343.

⁴ Luttrell 1999, 354-355.

⁵ Freller 2010, 58.

⁶ Vassallo 2002, 8, Buttigieg 2003, 12-14.

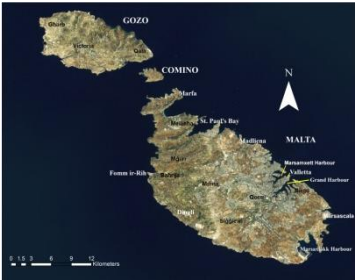


Fig. 1. Map of the Maltese islands



Fig. 2. An ethnic *girna* situated in the limits of Mgarr, Malta



Fig. 3. A typical *razzett* in the outskirts of Qala, Gozo



Fig. 4. *Apagghiara* in the area of San Gregorio, Salento (Puglia). Courtesy of L. Belmonte



Fig. 5. An example of a *giren* cluster in the limits of Bahrija, Malta



Fig. 6. A hybrid hovel with a masonry façade and a troglodyte interior in the limits of Bahrija

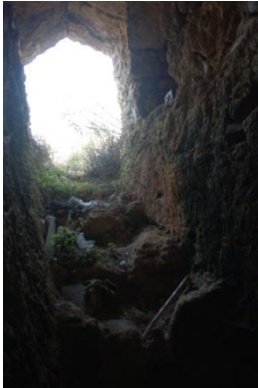


Fig. 7. A rock-cut flight of steps giving access to the interior of the same Bahrija hybrid hovel



Fig. 8. Peter Van der Aa, *An Artist's Impression of Ghar il-Kbir*, engraving, 18th century. MUŻA – The Malta National Community Art Museum, Valletta. Courtesy of Heritage Malta

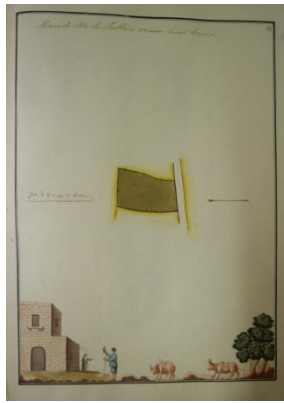


Fig. 9. An illustration from *Cabreo Treasury Series B Volume 290, folio 59*, showing an agricultural estate in the limits of Qormi. The lower half portrays a peasant farmer in a 17th century native costume leading his cattle herd. Courtesy of the National Library, Valletta, *Malta Libraries*



Fig. 10. A rural church which originally formed part of the Ħal Millieri hamlet in south-east Malta

The Order had its own Courts too, known officially as the *Magnae Curiae Castellaniae Melitensis*.

The Knights were expelled from Malta in 1798 by the French General Napoleon Bonaparte. However, French occupation in Malta lasted for only about two years, when in 1800 the archipelago became a British possession

until it gained political independence in 1964, the first time ever in its history to be a sovereign State.

In 1974, Malta became a Republic, with its first Maltese Head of State, paving the way for the elimination of all British military presence locally in 1979. In 2004 it became a Member State of the European Union, and four years later also joined the Eurozone. As a sovereign State, Malta is a member of various international organisations, such as the Council of Europe and the World Trade Organization. It also forms part of the Schengen Area (since 2007).

Ethnic architecture in Malta

The vernacular-built heritage of the Maltese islands has been under the lens of academics and experts for the last fifty years or so. It's really a pity that previously vernacular architecture in Malta and Gozo was not given its due significance to the extent that it was often neglected and left in a derelict state. The rising awareness about these ethnic structures, especially since the early years of the present century, has led to a higher degree of protection through the adoption of new, or the upgrading of current, national legislation. Vernacular buildings in the Maltese islands vary from religious structures, consisting essentially of wayside churches of various forms and sizes, to different types of habitations, such as the *razzett* (farmhouse), the *girna* (corbelled stone hut), the hybrid hovel, and the cave-dwelling. Other structures were concerned with more elaborate economic activities, such as the *mithnatar-riħ* (windmill). This paper focuses on two specific examples: the *girna* and the hybrid hovel.

The corbelled stone hut (*girna*)

The Maltese *girna* (plural *giren*) is an integral part of the local vernacular identity and forms an indelible part of the islands' natural landscape, occurring particularly in northern and western Malta. None of the native *giren* were ever discovered within an archaeological context, thus it is difficult to establish their precise age. Although there seems to have been a strong tradition of *giren* building in the 19th century⁷, the historical evidence suggests that this could have been a much more primitive structure, possibly dating back to late Medieval times (fig. 2).

⁷ Vella 2010, 214-15.

Insulae Melitae Descriptio, published in Lyons in 1536, is perhaps the earliest work about Hospitaller Malta. Authored by the French writer Jean Quintin d'Autun (1500-1561), this book covers in ample detail several key aspects: the geography of the islands, their antiquity, local archaeological monuments and artefacts, settlements, houses and people, the islands' defensive system, and Malta's economic state. Quintin also provides us with what appears to be one of the earliest maps of the Maltese islands, showing the distribution of local settlements by the time the Order of St. John had settled here.

In his descriptive account of the Maltese islands, Quintin refers to a specific type of rural dwelling, which was apparently small in size and simple in form⁸. He describes these dwellings as "*Africana magalid*" (African hovels). The author gives no further details, and such an ambiguous description can generate various interpretations. For instance, it is possible that this is simply a generic statement, intended as a broad reference to the rural farmhouses he noted in different hamlets, which were more or less of the same kind (fig. 3). Quintin was a keen traveller, and, besides Malta, he also visited countries like Syria and Palestine, where perhaps he observed similar structures. However, this description could indicate that the author witnessed something far less elaborate than the mature farmhouse (*razzett*). For example, the author could have been referring to the *girna*, which somehow resembles the mudbrick domed Berber huts of North Africa, for example those of Tataouine in Tunisia⁹. This resemblance between the native *giren* and the mudbrick domed Berber dwellings suggests that the Maltese corbelled hut could have been an inspiration from North African vernacular architecture, indicating that in the late Medieval Period there was in Malta a possible phase of lithicization of these Berber dwellings. The tradition of *giren* building could possibly have been introduced in Malta by Berber immigrants during the Middle Ages, being then consolidated by the native peasants. In the context of Mediterranean vernacular architecture, the *girna* also manifests strong similarities with the Apulian *pagghiare* in the Salento district (fig. 4).

The *giren* have a roughly circular plan and their diameter and height vary from one structure to the other. Some others have a rectangular plan in-

⁸ Quintin 1536, B2.

⁹ Hole, Grosberg and Robinson 2007, 120.

stead. The *girna* is generally speaking an introvert building, usually having a single entrance and a small window to permit some light and air ventilation. *Giren* occur as single free-standing units or in clusters, and often include features like tie-loops, sheds, mangers, recesses and double walls (fig. 5). *Giren*-complexes were usually surrounded by a dry wall precinct which served as a small paddock or a courtyard; it likewise served as a boundary that separated the inner space of the *girna* (or *giren* complex) from the outside environment. Hence, boundary walls were seemingly essential for security and shelter.

These corbelled hovels are usually associated with the storage of crops or the sheltering of animals. However, the archaeological and ethnographic evidence suggests that these could have also been places of human habitation. Such hypothesis is based on the following observations:

- a) several *giren* are usually substantially high so that a person can easily stand in an upright position;
- b) evidence of lampholes is a further clue that some *giren* were used for human habitation when it was dark or during the night;
- c) other examples are characterized by recesses which were probably utilized for the storage of personal items, hence once again for human use;
- d) certain *giren* were complemented by a rock-cut water cistern¹⁰;
- e) there is historical evidence that, until the 20th century, a few *giren* still served as a place of permanent habitation¹¹.

That *giren* clusters have features which are typically found in the native farmhouse and associated with human or animal habitation, has led scholars to retain that these could have been dwellings where animals and humans lived within the same complex, as happened elsewhere in the Mediterranean¹². On the basis of the available data, these scholars further contend that these could have possibly been the most primitive exemplars of proto-*razzett* which eventually, presumably in late Medieval times, paved the way for the evolution of the single-storey farmhouse¹³. However, our evidence does not exclude the possibility that during this period the *giren* and the earliest farmhouses could have existed concomitantly.

¹⁰ Vella 2010, 196-197.

¹¹ Fsadni 1992, 105.

¹² Buhagiar 1991, 17-18, Vella 2010, 234.

¹³ Jaccarini 2002, 6, Valentino 2006, 24, Dalli 2006, 294, Buhagiar 2007, 364; 2012, 161.

A sixteenth-century notarial contract refers to a certain tenement called *Corna hiren*, in the parish of Għarb, Gozo¹⁴. An etymological analysis of this placename suggests that this could have been a corruption of the toponym "Il-Girna ta' Ħerrin" (literally meaning the *girna* of Ħerrin). This hypothesis casts new light on the corbelled stone hut:

a) *giren* were already in existence in the 16th century, suggesting that these could have possibly been late Medieval structures¹⁵. If the *giren* were truly inspired by the Berber mudbrick houses, then it is quite likely that they could have been even older, and

b) they were also present in some localities in Gozo.

Therefore, on the basis of the above hypothesis, it is possible that the *giren* could have been synonymous with the 'African' huts mentioned by Quintin in the early 16th century.

The hybrid hovel

That simple hovels existed locally in late Medieval times is confirmed by several toponyms which include the words *gorboġ*, *għarix* and *newwiela*, all of which mean a hut or a hovel¹⁶. These names could have been an alternative to the term *girna*, or they could have simply referred to a different type of structure. For instance, these placenames and/or Quintin's *descripti* could have been a reference to a particular type of rectangular or irregularly-shaped huts, examples of which have survived in certain localities in western and northern Malta, for instance Baħrija, Mellieħa, and Mġarr. Their particular layout and building techniques likewise suggest a late Medieval date. A more precise dating for these native structures is not possible at the moment, since none of them were ever identified in an archaeological context.

The Baħrija example, characterized by a masonry exterior and a rock-cut interior, and perhaps one of the most elaborate, consists of two contiguous spaces, one of which was possibly the animals' quarters and the other served for human habitation (fig. 6). Access to this particular dwelling was through a flight of rock-cut steps (fig. 7). That this structure was probably utilized also for human habitation is supported by the presence of various features, for in-

¹⁴ Acts Ferdinando Ciappara 9-vi-1578: R185/4 f. 577v.

¹⁵ Jaccarini 2002, 6.

¹⁶ Wettinger 2000, Vella 2010, 214-215.

stance lampholes and rock-cut recesses. The former were essential to provide some sort of light, given that these structures hardly ever had a window to allow natural light to penetrate their interior spaces. On the other hand, rock-cut recesses were meant for the storage of different items, which included personal items, kitchenalia, and perhaps even foodstuffs. One can easily get an idea of this from an 18th century engraving by the Dutch artist Pieter Van Der Aa (1659-1733), which depicts the troglodyte settlement of Għar il-Kbir, in the parish of Siggiewi (fig. 8). In this *oeuvre-d'art*, the artist illustrates a real cave-dwelling which was inhabited by a peasant community for several centuries till practically the 19th century¹⁷. The significance of this engraving lies in the fact that the artist depicts not only a part of this troglodytic community, but also various component physical features of this settlement. For example, on the right-hand side one can notice a wood-burning oven as well as various rock-cut recesses of different forms and sizes¹⁸. One of these recesses has a timber door, possibly to keep its contents concealed, secured, or out-of-reach from certain members of that community. The artist based his work-of-art on a 17th century narrative authored by the Dutch Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680), who visited Malta - and specifically this cave-dwelling - in 1637¹⁹.

A similar hybrid structure, forming part of a hamlet in the parish of Mellieħa, did not include any steps, with its entrance leading immediately to a natural cave. It is interesting to observe that these native dwellings with a flat roof are similar in style to the North African mudbrick huts, examples of which still occur in places like Tamerza, in Tunisia²⁰. Like the North African counterparts, these structures appear in isolation or in small clusters.

The façade of the hybrid hovels generally consisted of a masonry (dry rubble) wall²¹. It is usually low, and its only aperture consists of a doorway that provides access to the interior spaces. It is quite likely that, originally, the doorway had a wooden door or gate, similar to what occurred in cliff-facing troglodyte dwellings²².

¹⁷ Said-Zammit 2021, 213.

¹⁸ Said-Zammit 2021, 237.

¹⁹ Kircher 1678, 119.

²⁰ Oates 1954, 91-117, Lawless 1972, 129, Bechhoefer 1977, 19-22.

²¹ Said-Zammit 2016, 84-85.

²² Buhagiar 1997, 2002, Saliba, Magro Conti and Borg 2002.

Hybrid hovels took different forms, especially when considering that their interior was usually rock-hewn. This permitted the dweller to excavate the rock face according to his exigencies and create the space required for human habitation or for animal and human cohabitation. Certain hovels have a roughly circular plan, while many others are irregularly shaped. It is possible that part of the stone material excavated from the area for the formation of the rock-hewn dwelling was subsequently utilized to erect its dry rubble façade.

The *giren*, the hovels, and their occupants

For a long time experts have studied Maltese houses through a merely architectural perspective, often excluding the main protagonists who played an integral role within their domestic spaces on a daily basis: the dwellers. Through the available present evidence, the concluding part of this study attempts to formulate a more comprehensive picture about the people who, after all, occupied these dwellings: their economic endeavours, social aspirations, relationships, and lifestyle.

The *giren* and hybrid hovels referred to in this paper are both rural structures which, for several centuries, were inhabited by peasant families whose daily life depended entirely on land cultivation and/or pastoralism, in other words on the relationship with the physical environment surrounding their abodes. They lived a primitive, simple life in houses where furniture was practically non-existent and domestic spaces were shared with their animals. Due to these structures' limited space their occupants apparently had little room for privacy unless this was somehow negotiated between them. In such houses it was inevitable that the dwellers lived in a domestic environment characterized by a lack of natural light and proper ventilation, which hence made their life even more challenging.

Despite their primitive lifestyle, these peasants still had an active economic role in the society in which they lived. Their dependence on land for cultivation and/or animal breeding was crucial not only for their own living, but also to market their products (crops, animals, and animal products) in the islands' towns and larger villages. The historical evidence suggests that many of these families were self-sustaining, however those who worked in more extensive territories of cultivable land or owned more numerous herds seemingly

had a relatively easier access to the town and village markets²³. This implied that non-subsistent peasants probably had to travel on a regular basis, perhaps daily or weekly, from their hamlets to the more thriving settlements to carry out their daily business and earn their *panem quotidianum*²⁴.

The scarcity of land suitable for land cultivation in different parts of the Maltese islands, particularly in highly exposed areas where soil occurs in low levels, therefore hampering suitable cultivation, meant that the native peasants often depended on mixed farming²⁵. Such evidence emanates not only from historical records, but also from a set of interesting illustrations, datable to the 17th and 18th centuries, included in some of the *Cabrei* (or official inventories) of the Order of St. John. Apart from the fact that they provide details about the Order's real estates in Malta and Gozo (fiefs, land parcels, and dwellings), these illustrations depict peasants in native costumes leading their animal herds (fig. 9). From this perspective, these works-of-art are vital because they give us knowledge on the peasants' daily economic activities and on the way they dressed in public²⁶. They further suggest that, during this period, cattle herds in the Maltese islands were apparently more widespread.

The houses studied in this paper cast light on the peasants' primitive lifestyle in Malta through time. Considering that their particular size permitted little room for furniture, the house dwellers made the best use of the available physical resources. For instance, in the case of hybrid hovels, like what occurred in the more elaborate troglodyte houses, spaces of different sizes and forms were hewn in the walls to create storage areas for various items, including foodstuffs. These rock-cut cupboards were often complemented by shelves to allow a better organization of the family's private items stored within them. Occasionally, some had a timber door or a curtain either to conceal their contents or to keep them under lock and key. These features are locally referred to as *armarji* (*armarju* in the singular), literally meaning cupboards.

Another significant evidence of the peasant's dependency on the immediate environment and its physical resources is the presence of rock-cut water cisterns to allow rainwater storage. In a country like Malta, characterized by an

²³ Blouet 1993, 41-42, Said-Zammit 2016, 24.

²⁴ Vella 1984, 167, Said-Zammit 2016, 33.

²⁵ Wettinger 1982, 35-38.

²⁶ Said-Zammit 2016, 72-74, 2021, 45-53.

arid climate especially in the hot summer months of the year, rainwater storage in winter was a *sine qua non*. Water cisterns (locally referred to as *bir*) varied in form and size; many of them were bell-shaped, however others could have been deeper and of a more regular shape. The restricted size of these two types of abodes hampered the possibility to excavate the water cistern within their internal spaces. Unless these houses were complemented by a precinct wall, the *bir* was excavated outside, usually within a short distance from the dwelling itself.

Similar to other native houses, the *girna* and the hybrid hovel can be defined as introvert abodes. The lack of apertures on their exterior walls were inducive to poor ventilation and minimum natural light. However, the evidence also intimates that this phenomenon could have been specifically intended for security reasons, to deter potential pilferers from gaining access to the abode's interior spaces, particularly when this had no boundary walls²⁷. In the case of hybrid hovels, our analysis has demonstrated that their masonry-built façade usually had a single door and a small window. For security and protection, the doorway of these abodes was generally fitted by a timber door or gate²⁸.

An introvert type of dwelling like the *girna*, the hybrid hovel, the *razzett* and the cave-dwelling, collectively throw light on the mentality of the typical ethnic peasant family in the Maltese islands. Based on ethnographic studies in different Mediterranean countries, such as Greece, Sicily and South Italy, the Maltese rustic family seems to have also led an inward-looking lifestyle, where contacts with the outside world were kept to a minimum and to what was essential. It was a type of family that carried out most of its daily social and economic activities within the domain of its own abode and immediate environment²⁹.

As stated above, these families led a dominantly rural subsistent life, based mainly on land cultivation, animal herding, or a mixture of both. Their houses were not only intended for human habitation, but oftentimes also for the sheltering of their animals and the storage of crops and farming gear, particularly when such abodes afforded to have a small courtyard or paddock enclosed by a boundary wall. Animal cohabitation within vernacular houses was a widespread phenomenon which spanned over a long period of time, like what

²⁷ Buhagiar 1991, 20, Jaccarini 2002, 17, Said-Zammit 2016, 86-88.

²⁸ Buhagiar 1997, 54, 2002, 84, Jaccarini 2002, 15, Said-Zammit 2021, 57.

²⁹ Cassar 1993, 471-472, 2000, 140-146; Said-Zammit 2016, 138-140.

occurred elsewhere in the Mediterranean region and the Middle East³⁰. The commonest animals that were kept for consumption purposes included chickens, rabbits, sheep and goats, through which the house dwellers would consume certain products like eggs, milk and, of course, their meat. Given the particular location of the *giren* and hybrid hovels, both being situated in areas that were distant from the sea, insinuates that the peasants' diet was largely based on the consumption of bread, macaroni, meat, and vegetables³¹.

Despite their restricted domestic spaces and destitute interior, the *giren* and hovels were still a dwelling place that permitted social interaction between the family members as well as between household members and strangers, whenever the latter were present. They were places that brought the family members together to eat, communicate, pray and enjoy their leisure time. In the absence of furniture, such as tables and chairs, and on the basis of what occurred in other Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries, it is conjectured that dining fashions were also of a primitive style, whereby family members generally sat on the floor in a squatting position round a communal dish to consume their meals. These moments also served as an occasion during which parents and children could socialize and enjoy some of their free time together³². Since in these houses it was difficult to enjoy one's privacy, it appears quite likely that during the night the household members slept together using hay mattresses. The evidence likewise suggests that, although the *giren* and hovels were examples of introvert dwellings, there was nothing to bar the family from welcoming relatives and strangers, even if on an occasional basis, either to barter goods or other social reasons.

Finally, their abodes were also a place of religious devotion and manifestation, where the family members gathered during certain parts of the day to pray independently or communally. In a country which for many centuries the Catholic Church influenced the life of the inhabitants *a cunis ad sepulcrum*, the people's beliefs in the spiritual world and the afterlife were immense³³. This is archaeologically and historically manifested by the many churches scattered all over the Maltese islands: in the urban settlements, villages, ham-

³⁰ Jaccarini 2002, 17, Sigalos 2003, 203-304, Bintliff 2012, 470, Said-Zammit 2016, 78-80.

³¹ Cassar 1988, 100, Fiorini 1993, 171, Said-Zammit 2016, 42-43.

³² Bintliff 2005, 130-131, Vionis 2008, 48-52.

³³ Ciappara 2001, 7, Said-Zammit 2016, 39.

lets, and in various remote rural areas³⁴ (fig. 10). Elaborate parish churches as well as simpler wayside chapels were all a place where the native Catholic communities gathered on a regular basis to worship God, conduct their private prayers, and manifest their religious devotion to Our Lady or a particular saint. Though today Maltese society has become more secularized, with the Church exerting less influence on the people, this sense of Catholic belonging - indeed a manifestation of Malta's unique historical past and identity - is still predominant³⁵.

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³⁴ Luttrell 1976, 20-22.

³⁵ Said-Zammit 2021, 215-220.

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**ՄԱԼԹԱՅԻ ԿՂԶԻՆԵՐԻ ԺՈՂՈՎՐԴԱԿԱՆ ՃԱՐՏԱՐԱՊԵՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ.
ԷԹՆԻԿ ԳԻՐՆԱՅԻ ԵՎ ՀԻՔՐԻԴԱՅԻՆ ԽՐԾԻԹԻ ՕՐԻՆԱԿՆԵՐԸ**

Ջորջ Ա. Սաիդ-Ջամիթ (Մալթա, Վալետա)

Ամփոփում

Միջերկրական ծովի կենտրոնական հատվածում գտնվող Մալթայի կղզիների գյուղական լանդշաֆտը բնորոշվում է եզակի ժողովրդական ժառանգությամբ, որը ներառում է տարբեր էթնիկ կառույցներ, որոնց թվում են *ռազեթը* (ագարակատուն), *միթինաթար-ոփիլը* (հողմաղաց), բազմաթիվ տրոգլոդիտային և այլ քարակերտ կացարանները, ճամփեգրի եկեղեցիները և այլն: Դիտարկվում են բնիկ կառույցների երկու օրինակ՝ *գիրնան* (կեղծ թաղով քարե կառույց) և *հիբրիդային խրճիթը*: Վերջինս բաղկացած է երկու հիմնական մասից՝ քարակերտ ճակտոնից և տրոգլոդիտային ներքնամասից: Հնագիտական վկայությունները և պատմական գրառումները ցույց են տալիս, որ ուշ միջնադարից ի վեր երկու օրինակներն էլ, ըստ երևույթին, օգտագործվել են որպես կացարաններ, որտեղ մարդիկ և կենդանիները ապրում էին միևնույն կենցաղային տարածքներում: Վերլուծությունը ցույց է տալիս, որ գիրնան և հիբրիդային խրճիթը, չնայած իրենց ներքին սահմանափակ տարածությանը, եղել են մարդկանց սոցիալ-տնտեսական աշխույժ գործունեության միջավայր:

Բանալի բառեր՝ Մալթա, ժողովրդական ճարտարապետություն, գիրնա, հիբրիդային խրճիթ, սոցիալական տարածք, տրոգլոդիտային կացարաններ, էթնիկ կառույցներ:

НАРОДНАЯ АРХИТЕКТУРА МАЛЬТИЙСКИХ ОСТРОВОВ: ОБРАЗЦЫ ЭТНИЧЕСКОЙ ГИРНЫ И ГИБРИДНОЙ ХИЖИНЫ

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Резюме

Для сельского ландшафта Мальтийских островов, расположенных в центральной части Средиземного моря, характерны различного рода этнические постройки, в частности, *razzett* (фермы), *mithnatar-riħ* (ветряная мельница), троглодитовые жилища, многочисленные каменные жилища, церкви у обочины дорог и т.д. Предметом рассмотрения являются два конкретных образца аборигеновых построек – гирны (каменные хижины с выступом) и гибридные хижины, состоящие из двух основных частей – каменного фасада и троглодитового интерьера. Археологические данные и исторические свидетельства явствуют о том, что начиная с позднего средневековья вышеназванные образцы, вероятно, использовались в качестве жилищ для людей и в том числе животных. Анализ этих архитектурных построек указывает на то, что гирны и гибридные хижины, при всей ограниченности их внутреннего пространства, служили активной средой для развития социально-экономической деятельности.

Ключевые слова – Мальта, народная архитектура, гирны, гибридные хижины, социальная среда, троглодитовые жилища, этнические постройки.

THE VERNACULAR EVIDENCE OF THE MALTESE ISLANDS: THE CASE OF THE ETHNIC GIRNA AND THE HYBRID HOVEL

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Abstract

The present paper reveals aspects of the rural landscape of the Maltese islands, situated in the central part of the Mediterranean Sea. This landscape is en-

dowed with a unique vernacular heritage which comprises a variety of ethnic structures including the *razzett* (farmhouse), the *miṭṭnatar-riḥ* (windmill), numerous troglodyte dwellings, an extensive number of masonry dwellings and wayside churches, amongst others. Two specific examples of native structures are considered: the *girna* (corbelled stone hut) and the hybrid hovel, the latter consisting of two principal parts: a masonry façade and a troglodyte interior. The archaeological evidence and historical records suggest that, since the late Middle Ages, both examples were apparently used as abodes, where humans and animals coinhabited the same domestic spaces. The analysis demonstrates that the *girna* and the hybrid hovel, despite their restricted internal spaces, were an arena of vibrant socio-economic human activity.

Key words – Malta, vernacular architecture, girna, hybrid hovel, social space, troglodyte dwellings, ethnic buildings.