

HONDOQ IR-RUMMIEN

A SACRED LANDSCAPE IN THE MALTESE ARCHIPELAGO

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ABSTRACT

Scheduling sacred landscapes is unheard of in the Maltese Archipelago even though the islands boast a concentration of sacred places and sites which are frequented by locals and foreigners. Albeit visited less than other sites, Hondoq ir-Rummien is of sacred value due to both the memory of the site and its intrinsic purpose arising from historical documents covering a significant extent of the surrounding environs. This article puts forward the case for recognising Hondoq ir-Rummien as a sacred landscape and recommends its scheduling by the national planning regulator.

INTRODUCTION

Hondoq ir-Rummien is a coastal area in the village of Qala, Gozo (Fig. 1). A Venetian portolan dating from the fifteenth century, based on an early version dated circa 1300, refers to Qala, which implies that the place name is more than seven centuries old [1]. Its mentions 'chaleta', referring to Hondoq ir-Rummien [2].

The Structure Plan identifies Hondoq ir-Rummien as a rural conservation area and an area of ecological value [3]. The Gozo and Comino Local Plan identifies it as an area of scientific importance for its ecology and geology, and of high landscape value. This article puts forward a case for scheduling Hondoq ir-Rummien as a sacred landscape [4].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article is based on the publications of the following authors: Giovanni Francesco Abela [5] and Giovanni Pietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis [6]. Other authors include Manwel Magri [7], Anton Buttigieg [8, 9], Joseph Bezzina [1, 2] and Frank Theuma [10].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The pious hermits. The geographical area of Hondoq ir-Rummien is sacred by virtue of its traditional cultural and religious significance. The landscape became revered through its association with three saintly hermits: Giacomo Romano (flourished in the late 900s), San Kerrew (in English, St Corrado; flourished in the 1400s) and Fra Antonio di San Carlo (?-1726) [8, pp. 17-18]. Their daily lives were associated with the present sanctuary dedicated to the Immaculate Conception. Information on the first two is based on oral tradition dating to 1597 [7, p. 30]. They were venerated after their death, especially San Kerrew, whose cult is about half a millennium old. According to common belief, this legendary refugee lived and died close to the sanctuary [9]. In line with his wishes, he was buried in a cave beneath the church. In a study dated over a century ago, Magri established that San Kerrew was not St Corrado of Noto [7, p. 18]; the latter flourished approximately a century earlier and his remains are in the Cathedral of Noto.

The Church of the Immaculate Conception. Devotion to San Kerrew was a reason why the Church of the Immaculate Conception, a popular place for devotion and pilgrimages, enjoys a widespread reputation as a shrine (Fig. 2). Ship graffiti on the external north-east wall of the church represent religious offerings by seafarers (Fig. 3) [10]. The Abbazia di San Antonio has significant territory running down to the coastline [11].

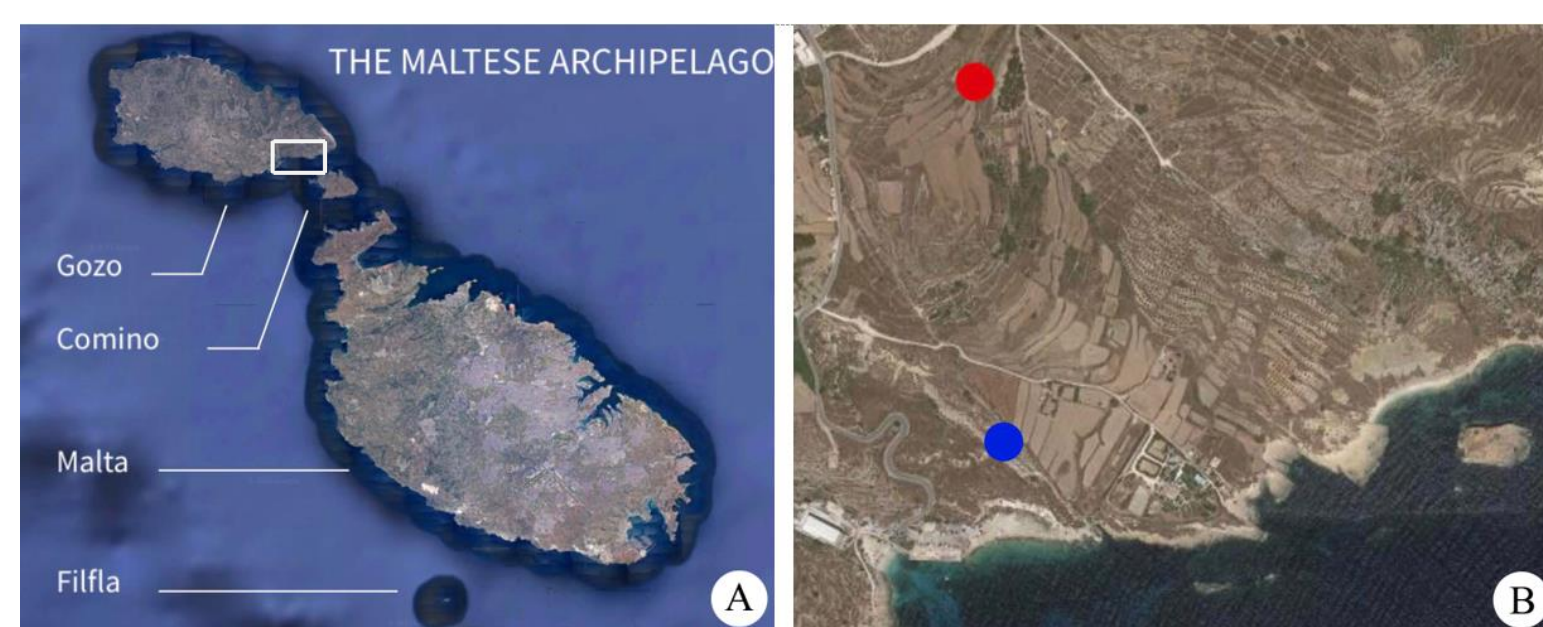


Fig. 1 – Site location: Malta and its dependencies; Hondoq ir-Rummien and the surrounding environs are outlined in white (A); the position of Sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception is indicated in red (B) (© Google Earth)

The cult of San Kerrew. There is not only evidence of continual devotion to San Kerrew among the Gozitans, but also a number of references to him in the historical literature – Abela [5, p. 386] and Agius de Soldanis [6, pp. 121-123] – and in recorded pastoral visits of bishops to Qala [8, pp. 20-21]. When embarking on a project to pave the floor of the church, human remains belonging to a male, advanced in age, buried around the fifteenth century, were found [8, p. 23; 9, p. 16]. The remains were placed in an urn, in the crypt of the church [9, p. 25], Fig. 4.

CONCLUSIONS

Sacredness has been inherently associated with Hondoq ir-Rummien. Sacred legends “help to transform certain sites and physical features ritually, and they serve to anchor collective memory in the landscape” [12]. Furthermore, “hagiographic accounts, like that about San Kerrew, serve to instil a local identity and memory, with references to landscape” [10]. Myths and legends apart, devotion to San Kerrew remains solid. The archaeological survey forming part of the EIA acknowledges that his cult “survives to this day among the locals as the constantly burning candles and visits by the faithful indicate” [4, p. 9]. If one applies Reese-Taylor’s definition of sacred landscape as “a temporal and spatial fabric spread over a geographic region, unifying all the rituals conducted at the various sacred places within a narrative framework” [13], Hondoq ir-Rummien qualifies as a sacred landscape. Although no landscape is scheduled in the Maltese Islands for its sacredness, it is recommended that the Planning Authority should consider introducing a grading scheme for sacred landscapes and, accordingly, protect Hondoq ir-Rummien in law.



Fig. 2 – The Sanctuary



Fig. 3 – Ship graffiti
(size of marker: 4 cm)



Fig. 4 – The crypt with
the urn (see arrow)

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