



# QALA

## ...our ancestors

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### The population

It is calculated that the population of Gozo from prehistoric to medieval times stood from around 1,700 to 2,000. Some might have lived in the vicinity of the Qala menhir.

The population of Gozo began growing steadily in 1127 with the beginning of the Norman rule due to a regular and constant importation of food supplies from nearby Sicily and other countries on the Mediterranean littoral. By 1530, when Malta and Gozo passed under the Knights, the population of the island had surpassed 5000. A few must have lived in farmsteads in the upper part of Qala. The population growth suffered a great setback in 1551 when thousands were dragged into slavery and it was not before one hundred and thirty years later that it once again reached the 1530 level. By that time, that is by 1680, the population was scattered throughout the island.

An important census taken by the Gozo church in 1667 indicates that, besides the Citadel and Rabat, there were twenty settlements scattered throughout Gozo and one on Comino. According to this census, there were 4,168 persons living in Gozo and Comino. Of these, 65 or 1.56% lived in fourteen households in *La Cala*; 35 were males and 30 females. The following is a list of the first known fourteen families of Qala.

- 1 Anġlu Vella, *povero*, aged 40; his wife Marija, aged 26; and their daughter Vanġiela, aged 13.
- 2 Majsi Psaila, *povero*, 56; his wife Maruzza, 40; and their son Dumink, 4.
- 3 Petruzz Portelli, *massaro*, 55; his wife Margerita, 52; and their children Menzju, 19; Tumas, 17; Pawla, 14; and Luqa, 10.
- 4 Duminkella, widow, wife of the late Pietru Sagona, 40; and her son Marju, 10.
- 5 Ġamri Xerri, *massaro*, 35; his wife Natalja, 23; and their daughters, Grezzja, 2; and Kjara, 5 months.

- 6 Dovik Portelli, *massaro*, 38; his wife Valenzja, 40; and their sons Ġamri, 15; Frangisku, 10; Bertu, 8; and Xandru, 6.
- 7 Angelka, widow, wife of the late Dumink Portelli, 54; and her son Ġanni, 20.
- 8 Dumink Cassano, *povero*, 56; his wife Duminka, 36; and their children Duminkella, 24; Barbara, 21; Ġiġa, 19; Patist, 5; Mikieli, 2.
- 9 Anġlu Mizzi, *massaro*, 35; his wife Tereza, 25; and their children Marija, 6; and Dumink, 2.
- 10 Luzju Mercica, *massaro*, 42; his wife Pawla, 29; and their children Ġamri, 19; Marija, 18; Flaminja, 16; Duminka, 12; Grezzja, 10; Marcella, 6; Ġamri, 3; Salvu, 1.
- 11 Dumink Galea, *povero*, 50; his wife Katerina, 40; and their sons Indri, 18; Salvu, 14; Ġamri, 6; Ġanni, 9 months.
- 12 Nazju Galea, *massaro*, 30; his wife Maruzza, 30; and their daughter Roza, 2.
- 13 Nazju Mizzi, *massaro*, 28; his wife Liena, 32; and their children Katerina, 10; and Quzman, 2.
- 14 Indri Conti, *povero*, 40; his wife Duminka, 25; and their children Duminka, 14; Salvu, 5; and Ġanni, 1.

There was a family of ten persons, another of seven persons, three of six persons, one of five persons, three of four persons, another three of three persons, and two of two persons. There were three Portelli families with fourteen persons making this surname the most common in Qala; the surname still survives. The next most common is Mercica (now Mercieca), with ten persons; Galea, with nine persons; and Mizzi, with eight; all surnames survive. Of the rest, Vella and Xerri survive, while Cassano, Conti, Psaila, and Sagona, have become extinct. The eldest person was Dumink Cassano, 56 years old, and the youngest, Kjara, just five months old. It is obvious that at least four men, Vella, Cassano, Mercica, and Conti, had been widowed and married a second time. Their classification as *massaro* or *povero* is explained further down.



As by the end of the eighteenth century, Qala and Nadur formed one parish, there are no separate population returns for the village for the next two hundred years. The following table lists the number of males and females as well as the total population of Qala in 1667 and in the official censuses taken since 1842.

YEAR	MALES	FEM	TOTAL	ALL GOZO
1667	35	30	65	4168
1842				14342
1851				14663
1861				15459
1871				17391
1881				17653
1891	543	556	1099	18964
1901	598	621	1219	20003
1911	687	681	1368	22695
1921	634	706	1340	22561
1931	746	855	1601	23837
1948	729	840	1569	27680
1957	757	861	1618	27505
1967	675	847	1522	25975
1985	645	724	1369	25682
1995	729	763	1492	29026

In 1891, almost twenty years after the foundation of the parish, there were 1099 persons, 553 males and 546 females, living in the village. The population continued growing steadily until the first decade of the twentieth century. In the second decade, due to the introduction of emigration to Australia and a general economic slump after the end of the first World War (1914–18), the population decreased. With the granting of self-government in 1921, the government launched several public works in Gozo; more Qalin found work on the island and the population increased. This increase continued until the second World War (1939–45).

The end of hostilities ushered in a wave of emigration to Australia, the United States of America, and Canada, a decline reflected in the 1948 figure. However, in the post war years, there was also a baby boom and, due to this fact the population of Qala reaches an all time record in 1957. Notwithstanding, with the organization of mass emigration around the same time, the population growth came to a complete halt until the mid- 1980s.

The situation began to change when a considerable number of emigrants started returning home and several foreigners settled in the village; the 1995 figure includes 43 foreigners, 19 males and 24 females. For these two reasons, notwithstanding a drastic decrease in the birth-rate, the population began increasing again.

According to the census taken on 26 November 1995, the population of Qala had grown to 1492, of which 729 males and 763 females, including the just mentioned foreigners. Divided by age groups, there were 297 between zero and fourteen years; 564 between fifteen and forty-four; 374 between forty-five and sixty-four; and 257 over sixty-five years. Of these

257, nine were more than ninety years old. The annual growth rate of Qala between 1985 and 1995 was 0.86%, slightly lower than that of the whole of Gozo that was growing at a rate of 1.22%.

In 1667, the people of Qala made up 1.56% of the population of Gozo; this increased to 5.80% in 1891, but decreased again to 5.14% in 1995. This means that percentage-wise, during the twentieth century, the village population has gone down.

## The village and its people

The first construction in the Qala area was the chapel of the Immaculate Conception on the fringe of the sector known as *il-Wilġa*, the large tract of cultivated land that stretched from Qala to Nadur. The first dwellings must have been built close to the chapel soon after 1600 when Garzes Tower rendered the place more secure.

Buildings continued to be raised on the periphery of *il-Wilġa*, that is at *Ta' Ċini*, at *Tas-Salib*, the present core of the village, and at *il-Wardija*. In the second half of the twentieth century, the steady increase in population and the quest for spacious houses led to further developments at *Ta' Grunju*, *il-Qortin*, and *ta' Kassja*.

The first Qalin were farmers who built their farms in the area to be close to their fields as much as possible. In 1667, the heads of seven of the first fourteen families were classified as *massaro*, that is an owner of at least two oxen for ploughing. Five heads were described *povero*, poor, and the two widows also fell in this category. This means that they were day labourers without a regular guaranteed income. As far as the parish priest, who carried out the census is concerned, the *massaro* had to pay tithes, the others were not obliged.

Farming remained the principal occupation of many Qalin until the beginning of the twentieth century. According to the census of 1891, there were 194 cultivators of land. So as to help them in agricultural labour, they kept 52 oxen or bullocks, 27 horses, 17 mules, and 37 donkeys. They were rearing 3 oxen and 259 swine for slaughter. For the production of milk and cheese, they had 7 milch cows, 541 sheep, and 266 goats. There were four horses used for the transport of people, probably with cabs. There were several who earned a living on the sea, by fishing or the boats plying between Gozo and the Grand Harbour.

Early in the twentieth century, an increasing number of people emigrated in search of better paid jobs — a fact proclaimed by the emblems of Australia, the United States, and Canada on the houses of returned migrants. In the meantime, the number of farmers continued to dwindle and, with the expansion of transport, more and more found work outside the village.