



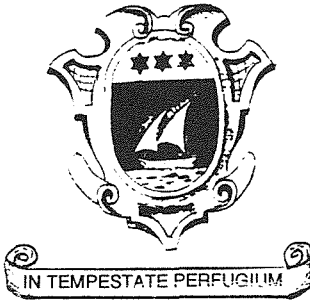
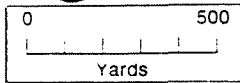
QALA

THE INVISIBLE BRIDGE

By Charles Fiott (U.S.A.)

'The site has been graced by a Christian church since times unknown'

QALA
(IL-QALA)
pop: 1312



Qala's Points of Interest

Qala Proper:

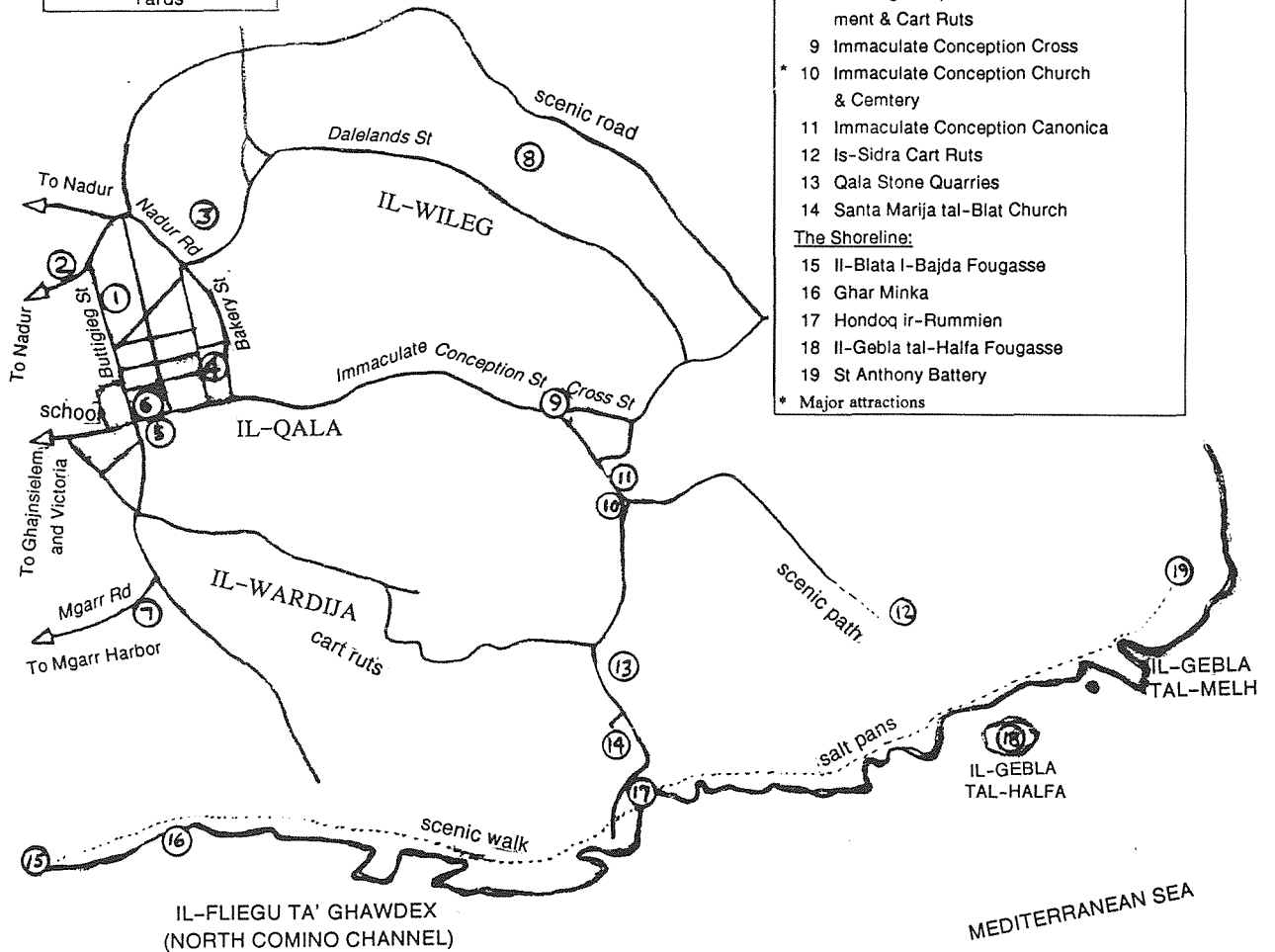
- * 1 Qala Standing Stone
- 2 Ta' Sufa Windmill Tower
- * 3 Qala Windmill
- 4 St Joseph Parish Church
- 5 House of Gozo's First Bishop
- 6 Qala Stone Cross
- 7 Qala Belvedere

Eastern Qala:

- 8 Il-Wileg Temple Period Settlement & Cart Ruts
- 9 Immaculate Conception Cross
- * 10 Immaculate Conception Church & Cemetery
- 11 Immaculate Conception Canonica
- 12 Is-Sidra Cart Ruts
- 13 Qala Stone Quarries
- 14 Santa Marija tal-Blat Church

The Shoreline:

- 15 Il-Blata l-Bajda Fougasse
- 16 Ghar Minka
- 17 Hondoq ir-Rummien
- 18 Il-Gebli tal-Halfa Fougasse
- 19 St Anthony Battery
- * Major attractions





Hondoq ir-Rummien — the inlet beach from which Qala took its name...A desalination plant can be seen at bottom right

Were a bridge to be constructed between Malta and Gozo, as is proposed from time to time, the likely end-point on the Gozitan side would be Qala.

Though Qala is the farthest village from Gozo's capital, it is the closest to the rest of the Maltese archipelago, and the rocky hillsides of Qala have an unobstructed view of the islands of Malta and Comino. Breathtaking scenes can be enjoyed, among other places, from the **Qala Belvedere** and from the small courtyard in front of the church known as **Santa Marija Tal-Blat** (Saint Mary of the Rocks). This church faces Comino and it is said that it was built so the people of that island could follow mass from across the straits when rough weather precluded a priest from going there.

Except for a few sheltered inlets, like the popular **Hondoq ir-Rummien** (Gorge of Pomegranates). Qala's coastline is a rocky trek to which nature and history both contributed a great deal. Nature's gifts include several caves, the prettiest of which is **Għar Minka**, which is accessible only by boat. Historical works are mainly defensive structures designed to deter enemy landings. Foremost among these is **St. Anthony's Battery** (1732), known locally as **It-Trunċiera**. This is one of the works of the Knights of Malta, who turned Malta from a pirate haven into a fortress.

A few years after the erection of St. Anthony, the Knights invented the **fougasse**, an assem-

bly of explosive material pressed into a hole in the ground and kept ready to fire on intruding ships. The **fougasse** was introduced to Gozo in 1743, and several were erected along the Qala shore. Reportedly, two survive, one toward **Mgarr Harbor**; at **Blata l-Bajda**, the other on **Ġebbla tal-Ħalfa**.

Another interesting feature of the Qala coastline is its salt pans, some of which are active. The process of trapping sea water in hand-dug troughs is the traditional way of producing salt in Malta, where the main ingredients – a rocky coastline and a strong sun are in abundance. Qala's salt pans are found intermittently between **Hondoq ir-Rummien** and **Ġebbla Tal-Melħ** (Salt Rock). A less traditional desalination plant at **Hondoq ir-Rummien** accomplishes the opposite – it extracts clean water and discards salt and other impurities.



St Anthony Battery (It-Trunċiera) — built by De Mondion in 1732



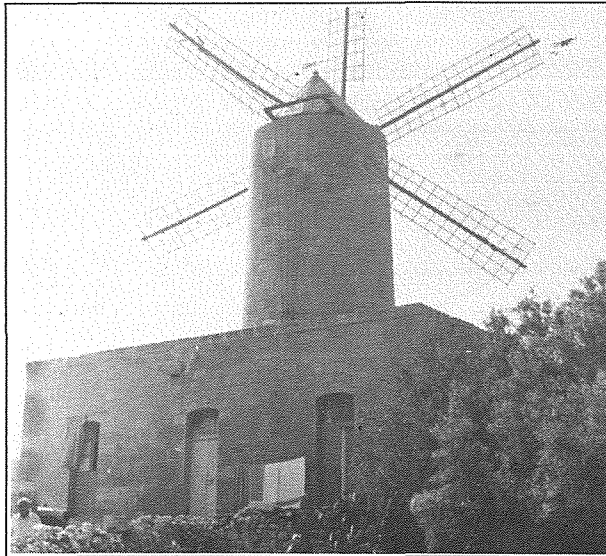
A walk along Qala's interesting coastline offers all this, plus a constant view of Comino, which seems almost close enough to touch.

Despite this proximity, Qala's contact with the other islands is practically invisible. Occupying the easternmost corner of Gozo, Qala is clearly off the beaten path. Still, hordes of tourists descend upon this traditional village of 444 families whose 19th century windmills give it a distinct appearance.

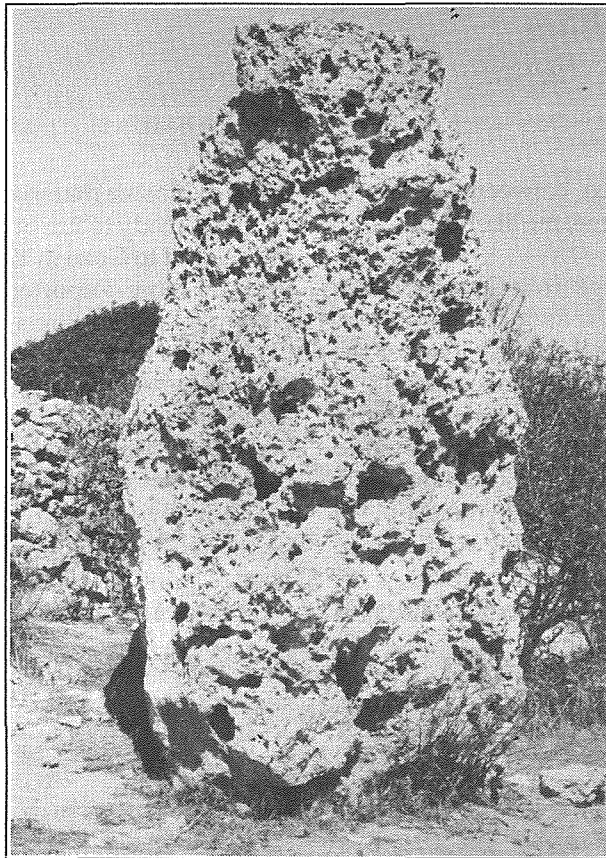
There was a time when the windmill was a common sight in the Maltese towns and villages. Until late in the 19th century there was no better way to grind wheat and barley into flour. As steam mills brought one windmill after another to a stop, only two, one in Qala and the other in Xagħra, remained in working condition. A storm recently damaged the Maltese one, at Żurrieq, leaving the Qala Windmill as the most eminent one of the country. The tower of another windmill, known as Ta' Sufa, also survives.

Qala's history goes back nearly 6000 years. Several temple period and Punico-Roman pottery has been gathered, with more still lying about. By 1989, six Qala sites were identified as temple period settlements, others as Punic structures. At least one temple site existed at Qala, its cornerstone being the famous Ġebli l-Wieqfa (Standing Rock). A rough pyramid, this is an 11 foot high megalith known in Gozitan mythology as the seat of a giantess.

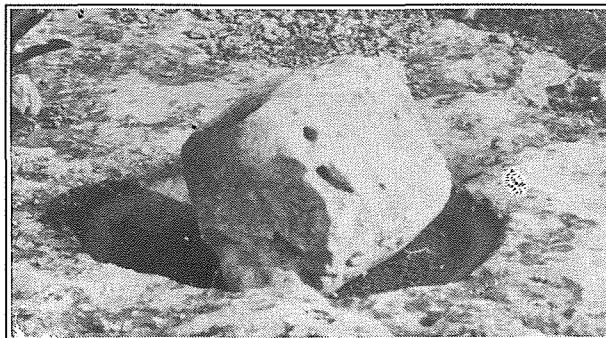
Ancient cart ruts, not very common on Gozo, are found in at least three locations at Qala. One of these is near one of two temple period settlements at Il-Wileġ, where megalithic patterns survive. The other stone age settlements are west of Qala Windmill, Qala School, south of the parish church and further south at Il-Wardija, where there is also another cart rut site.



Qala Windmill



"Ġebli l-Wieqfa"



An old "deffun" stone

But the best Qala site for cart rut viewing is definitely at Is-Sidra. Not only do the ruts extend for over two hundred feet, but the side views are equally tantalizing. North to south, they take one past an old *deffun*, a stone used to crush pottery and stone into powder for building purposes. The ruts continue amidst a forest of wild thyme and *xkattapietra*, a plant unique to Malta and named for its use as treatment for stones in the gallbladder (*xkatta break, pietra stone*). *Lithotripsia* would be an appropriate Latin name for it. Where the ruts end there is another group of megalithic structures and, of course, another great view of Comino.

According to tradition, another stone age temple stood at the site of the Qala Sanctuary, one of Gozo's most sacred churches. Lying between two Punic houses (one to the north, the other to the south), the site has been graced by a Christian church since times unknown. It is not known when the present one was started, but tradition holds that Count Roger, who is credited with liberating the Maltese from Muslim rule in the 12th century, used to pray in it. Adjacent to the church is a cemetery whose origins are likewise buried in antiquity.

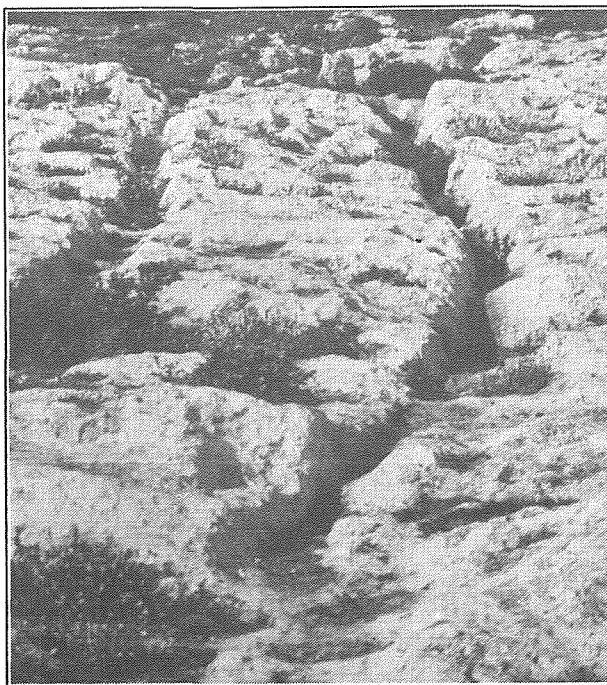
The church was then dedicated to the Assumption of Our Lady and the titular painting of the Assumption, now at St. Joseph's parish church, is one of the most revered in Gozo. But Bishop Cagliares changed the dedication to the Immaculate Conception, donating a new titular painting in 1615, by Federico Barocci.

Sometime between 1575 and 1630, the Sanctuary was enlarged. In 1688, when Bishop Cocco Palmieri decided to grant parish status to the eastern part of Gozo, it was *Santa Marija tal-Qala* that served as parish church for the people of Qala, Nadur, Ġhajnsielem, Mgarr and Comino. Upon the building of a bigger church in Nadur, the



sanctuary lost the parish seat, but that honor fell to the esteemed church once again in 1872, when, after waiting for centuries, Qala was finally awarded parish status in its own right. While Qala waited to receive this honor, its native son Mikiel Buttigieg, became the first bishop of Gozo. An inscription marks the house where Monsignor Buttigieg was born in 1793. Another inscription marks another native Buttigieg home – Dr. Anton Buttigieg second President of Malta and a noted poet.

But the sanctuary, small in size and away from the village proper, again lost the parish seat to a new church built in the heart of Qala. Started in 1882 and completed in 1889, the new parish church, dedicated to St. Joseph, is perhaps



Cart Ruts at "Is-Sidra"



Qala Sanctuary and Parish Cemetery

more beautiful on the first Sunday of August, when the gilded titular statue, an 1890 product of Marseille, is taken around the streets of the village to mark the finale of the annual *festa*. The titular painting (1899) by Giuseppe Cali is also an object of great devotion. When it was solemnly crowned in 1971, two commemorative stamps showing Cali's painting in its original colors were issued by the Maltese government. The church has many other beautiful paintings and a handsome baptismal font made from Qala stone. A recent addition to the church treasures is a small museum consisting mostly of prehistoric pottery from the many Qala sites.

Officially, Qala's parish church is not dedicated to St. Joseph alone, but also to the Immaculate Conception. One may note that all three churches of Qala are dedicated to this favored appellation of Our Lady, for even the church of Tal-Blat carries the same title. This unique curiosity emphasizes the strong bond that the village has with the Immaculate Conception. This bond was first cast in the early 17th century at the Sanctuary, where a festa is still celebrated on December 8th.

Qala is extremely religious. Processions are also held for Our Lady of Sorrows (one week before Good Friday), Corpus Christi (late May or early June), Sacred Heart of Jesus (3rd Friday in June), Our Lady of Mercy and Good Health (3rd Sunday in September), Our Lady of Rosary (1st Sunday in October), the Blessed Sacrament (last Sunday in October), and the Holy Infant (Christmas Eve).

Gozitan lore's fascination with both the spiritual and the mundane finds the perfect theme in the *White Lady*. A definite reference to the Mother of God, this earthly term conjures a vision of a friendly ghost and allows Our Lady to perform tasks that are human and miraculous at the same time. In the Qala story, workers entrusted with the construction of the Sanctuary are given the plan, the material, and the location. The job gets under way. But the following day, the fruits of their labor are found someplace else. Dumfounded, the

workers start afresh according to plan, but the same mysterious thing happens, over and over again. Eventually the inevitable report starts to circulate: the White Lady has been seen. She has visited the site of the plan and then walked to her chosen place, with the foundation stones following her! This sign from heaven is belatedly accepted. The church is built on the spot indicated by the White Lady.

Several books written between the 17th and the 20th centuries are replete with stories of divine intervention at the Sanctuary. The old *Canonica* (Parish House) played an important part in the numerous pilgrimages. A stone cross, *Is-Salib tal-Kuncizzjoni*, stands a block away to guide visi-



tors. Another stone cross near the centre of the village marks the spot where the church was intended to be built. Graffiti depicting 17th and 18th century ships can be seen on the outside wall of the old church. These are probably votive offerings from people who survived shipwrecks. Perhaps the invisible bridge brought them to safety!

Among the part-legendary, part-historic refugees of Qala is San Kerrew (St. Corrado). This holy man, who lived in the 15th century, did not need a bridge to cross to Qala. Chased away from Malta because of his strict, moral standards, Kerrew simply rolled out his mantle and crossed over the sea to Qala. Here he resumed his life as a hermit and a prophet, correctly foretelling, among other things, the coming of the Knights and the building of Valletta.

Another story, this one from Sicily, even claims that Kerrew once crossed over to that island,



Birth-place of Mgr. Bishop Buttigieg at Qala

his mantle again providing the transportation. There he is known as Saint Corrado of Noto, where a weekly recitation used to be held in front of his shrine: *Sancte Corrade, qui de Melita in Siciliam sicco vestigio pertransisti, ora pro nobis* (St. Corrado, who crossed to Sicily from Malta without wetting your feet, pray for us). But back in Gozo, San Kerrew is believed to have lived in a cave by the Sanctuary till his death at a ripe old age. Though long hidden underground, the location of this cave, once a Punic tomb, was well-known to the people of Qala. When the church was enlarged, a wall was erected right over Kerrew's grave. A cross, still visible, was incised on the wall to mark the location. In 1937, volunteers dug the site under the scrutinizing eyes of the believers of Qala. They found a skeleton of a 15th century man who died at an advanced age. The sign from heaven at the time of the construction of this church was now understood.



New Parish Church dedicated to St. Joseph



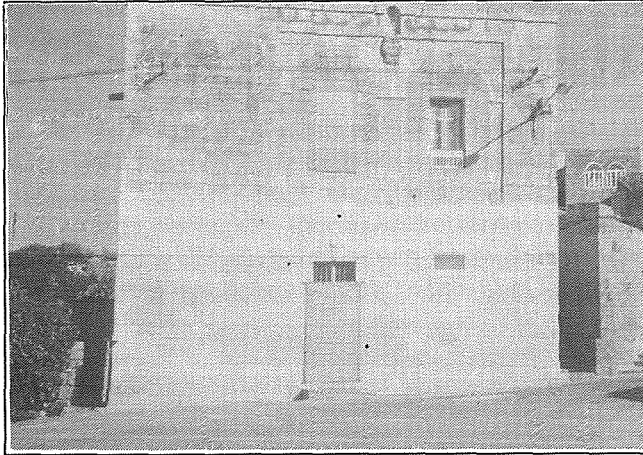
Ir-Raheb tal-Qala 'San Kerrew'



The preserved remains are now reached from within the church. Near the skeleton one can see the wear in the ground where people with special needs scooped dust from in the belief that just a fragment from, the final abode of a saintly man would answer their prayers. The people of Qala still place their hopes in their saint, and accounts of miracles are professed today as they have been for centuries.

Qala's name means 'bay' or 'harbor' probably for the nearby harbor of Mgarr. Although other versions of the name have been proposed, the harbor theme is well reflected in the village's coat of arms, a Gozo boat sailing on rough waters, and on its motto, *In Tempestate Perflugium* (Haven From Storms).

When the breakwater for Mgarr Harbor was constructed,



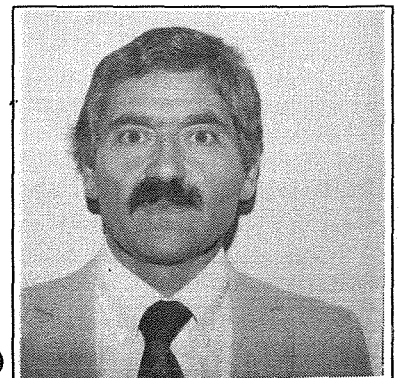
The Old Canonica

reliance was placed on the high-quality limestone quarries near Hondoq ir-Rummien. Qala is well known for its hard coralline type of stone. Examples of construction with Qala's stone also include the War Memorials in Floriana and in Victoria, the Grand Harbor's breakwater in Malta, and the base of Christ the King Cathedral in Liverpool, England. If the conceptual bridge to Malta were ever built, rock from these quarries could be very conveniently used.

But it is very doubtful whether Qala would ever have a real bridge. Until that decision is made, Qala will have to live only with the invisible one. And most *Qalin*, and Gozitans as well, are happy to keep it that way.



Limestone Quarries at Hondoq ir-Rummien — famous as the hardest in Malta



Charles Fiott (U.S.A.)