Barumbari, Giren and *Mġiebaħ* - Vernacular Gems in Oblivion

GODWIN VELLA

Introduction

Vernacular architecture is simplistically defined as buildings without architects, and is resultantly considered by many as being of inferior intrinsic value in comparison to polite architecture.[1] This erroneous assumption takes a further downgrade twist with respect to the rural realm where functionality and easily extractable raw material availability impart a definitive bearing on form, structural considerations and construction techniques. On several counts, however, vernacular architecture underscores the authentic character of its authors. It moulds the prevailing environmental scenario with man's instinctive resilience. Vernacular architecture is essentially man's adaptive response to the natural environment as it meets the needs of the end users by exploiting diligently the often limited range of resources made available by Mother Nature. Indeed, these unpretentious constructions commonly integrate seamlessly and respectfully with the environment, if not enhancing nature's pristine beauty itself, and are of fundamental relevance for a truly sound appreciation of the architectural patrimony of any culture.

Gozo, having been inhabited for some seven millennia by a countless succession of resourceful albeit mostly anonymous master masons, treasures an outstanding built-up patrimony in comparison to its restricted geographical footprint of just 67km^2. Besides the many monumental churches, impregnable strongholds and fine civil properties, the island's picturesque landscape is endowed with a wealthy corpus of vernacular constructions reminiscent of its stringent dependence on agricultural pursuits. While the economy on mainland Malta diversified and evolved *pari passu* with the exponentially flourishing maritime activity in the Grand Harbour area following the arrival of the Order of St John in 1530, Gozo remained fully reliant on the limited produce of its own soil and herds (Vella, 2012: 13-21).

As expected no square inch of arable land was spared and most of the sister island's surface area was reclaimed for crop cultivation. This necessitated the partitioning of its hilly terrain into a maze of terraced fields which, as noted by MacGill (1839:141), climb up all the way to the summit of the distinctive flat plateaus. Kilometres on end of terrace walls, wind screens and passageways became crafted in due course, while an innumerable number of field rooms, water reservoirs and irrigation channels mushroomed all over the place.

Generally speaking, most tenants engaged themselves in livestock husbandry also and wherever opportune, or more convenient, relocated part of this activity away from their farmhouses that were in turn commonly planted in the immediate environs of village cores or stood clustered in hamlets. Pigeons, for instance, could do without intensive attention and were therefore frequently reared in isolated tower-like dovecotes.

Likewise, bee keepers kept their prized but tricky winged creatures away from their abodes. Many a time, the earthenware beehives were placed in sunny and sheltered spots, but the more keen owners erected dedicated structures for the purpose. The garigue stretches that were not taken up for agricultural purposes or urban development were equally encroached upon by vernacular architecture, in particular hunters' hides and bird traps. Practically all of Gozo's surface area has been sculpted relentlessly by its peasant inhabitants since time immemorial to the extent that the entire island can, or better still should be looked at as a cultural landscape resource of note.[2]

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[1] Polite Architecture refers to buildings characterized by stylistic elements of design incorporated intentionally for aesthetic purposes which go beyond the building's functional requirements

[2] UNESCO's World Heritage Committee defines cultural landscapes as cultural properties representing the combined works of nature and man.

Aerial view of Mġarr ix-Xini Bay showing a maze of field terraces reaching all the way to the shoreline.

Unfortunately, an alarmingly increasing percentage of the small and less accessible arable plots are progressively being abandoned in view of the shrinking farming community and changing crop cultivation practices. Worst still, the necessary repair and maintenance of most retaining walls and other rural structures are not being given due attention. The character of many agricultural neighbourhoods is fading away little by little, but not all is lost. Gozo's rural landscape still preserves many vernacular constructions in a fair or salvageable state of repair.

A comprehensive highlight of each and every type of vernacular structure preserved on the sister island is not possible here in view of the prevailing length limitations. It would also entail significant repetition since the more pronounced elements like terrace walls and farmhouses featured on various occasions as subject matter of in-depth studies (Jaccarini, 1998). This paper will focus on three of the more overlooked elements, namely *barumbari* (dovecotes), *giren* (corbelled field rooms) and *mġiebaħ* (beehive shelters). It is not meant as a comprehensive study but simply a general introduction. In truth, it is highly hoped that other researchers in the field take on the arduous task to compile a definitive gazetteer of these and other vernacular gems in oblivion.

Frequent reference will be made to the placement of door and vent openings on the south-facing side of the respective constructions. Indeed, this constitutes an underlying planimetric consideration that ventures beyond vernacular architecture. The purpose of these openings is twofold, namely the provision of adequate shelter from the prevailing northern winds and the full exploitation of natural light.

Barumbari (Dovecotes)

Rock Pigeons are the world's oldest domesticated birds. Archaeological research suggests that this could have taken place as early as 10,000 years ago. Pigeons grow to a relatively large size in the nest before they are able to fly, and in this stage of their development they comprise a prized meat source ideal for soups and pies. A productive pair of pigeons can yield up to ten chicks each year and if allowed to graze in the open countryside the resultant feeding costs would turn out to be minimal. In a nutshell, pigeons equated to an abundant, convenient and economical source of meat.

When and how the local inhabitants started rearing domesticated pigeons may never be known with certainty, but the fine mosaic at the Domus Roman representing two doves perched on the lip of a bowl suggests that this practice was already well rooted in the Maltese Islands by the Roman Period.

Intricate mosaic floor centrepiece from the Domus Romana at Rabat-Malta.

Furthermore the regular occurrence of linear sets of pigeon nesting perforations in the extant late

medieval and early modern buildings within the Castello and elsewhere indicates that this activity infiltrated the urban sphere as well.

Early twentieth century snapshot of an extant early modern terraced house within the Castello (incorporated within the present Museum of Folklore) showing a series of pigeon holes placed above the door.

Back to the rural domain, pigeon holes are a recurrent feature in traditional farmhouse constructions, in particular along south-facing wall elevations overlooking first floor terraces. Occasionally, these can take enticing formations. A former detached farmhouse, datable to the nineteenth century, in Sump Street, Rabat retains a free standing screen wall consisting of five rows of around twelve pigeon holes.

Free-standing screen wall containing five rows of around twelve pigeon holes at house in Sump Street, Victoria. The asymmetrical distribution and varying shapes of the perforations suggest the recycling of the blocks from older barumbari.

Likewise, a more rustic and possibly older farmhouse at the lower end of Ta' Żejta Valley close by, preserves an arrangement of two rows of some fifteen pigeon holes at roof level besides a set of twelve corresponding burrows in the thickness of the wall underneath.

Farmhouse at Ta' Żejta Valley, Victoria showing a two-tiered screen of pigeon holes on its roof and a symmetrically laid out series of twelve corresponding nests burrowed into the wall underneath. The two smaller squarish cuts, a couple of courses further down, seem to have been intentioned as nests for sparrows, whereas the towering structure on the right hand side is a barumbara (dovecote).

Pigeon nesting facilities occur also in rather atypical properties and discreet spots like the roof of the early seventeenth century Santa Ċeċilja rural defence stronghold.

The numerous free-standing dovecotes in the precincts of sizeable properties or dispersed in the countryside comprise a more iconic testimonial to the diffusion of this farming practice. These *barumbari* (singular *barumbara*) take the form of slender tower-like structures comprising two or, occasionally, three floors with a cumulative height of up to ten metres. Their footprint rarely exceeds twenty metres square, and the resultant voids are frequently roofed over by large slabs resting over side corbels. Generally speaking their construction manifests rudimentary workmanship, but in a few instances the respective owners paid great attention to their design and finish.

An outstanding example survives intact at *Tal-Ħamrija*, limits of Xewkija. It stands next to an equally finely constructed and covered water reservoir overlooking the fertile agricultural district of *It-Taflija*. The inward inclined walls are crowned by a stringcourse that is in turn surmounted by ornate finials at each corner. A row of three evenly spaced and squarish vent openings and an underlying shelf-like projection are placed on the south facing wall. Side vents penetrate the entire thickness of the wall and link up with the inner void hosting the pigeon nests, whereas the shelf beneath is meant to act as a flying / landing platform for the same inquilines. Analogous setups occur in most instances, though some *barumbari* are accessed through a porthole

A fine barumbara at Tal-Ħamrija, Xewkija. The horizonthal projection serves as flying/landing platform for the nesting pigeons.

Hunting for wild pigeons nesting in the coastal cliffs (reproduced from *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 1879)

in the roof. As with the aforementioned pigeon holes burrowed into the exterior wall elevations of urban and rural residencies, the respective nests housed within the *barumbari* are fashioned out of the same building blocks making up the walls. Timber shelving was rarely resorted to in view of the ensuing prohibitive costs.

The locals also consumed wild pigeons and other game in great numbers. Several nineteenth century travelogues narrate how veritable daredevils climbed down the sheer cut cliffs rising majestically from the seabed with the aid of ropes to search in clefts and fissures for the chicks of wood pigeons and other nesting birds in the area (Fenech, 2010: 82-3). Significantly, one comes across the pigeon-related place names of *Għar il-Ħamiem, L-Għar tal-Ħamiem, Ħalq Ħamiem, Ħarq tal-Għar il-Ħamiem* and *Wied il-Ħamiem* along the coast of Gozo (Zammit Ciantar, 2000: 77-84). Wild pigeon shooting from boats was also widespread. In 1699, for instance, Grandmaster Ramon Perellos y Roccaful (1697-1720) sailed round Gozo in his speronara to hunt wild doves. (Agius de Soldanis)

Giren (Corbelled Field Rooms)

Giren (singular *girna*) are set apart from other field rooms in view of their characteristic roofing technique. Each course projects slightly with respect to the one underneath (corbelling) until the resultant opening is reduced to a small porthole that is in turn sealed off by one or two flattish blocks. This technique has been in use locally since prehistoric times as epitomised by the megalithic temples and was, to a lesser extent, exploited frequently in other buildings, notably the roofing of small spaces like *barumbari* with a span of up to some 2.5 metres. Corbelling has been mastered also by most Mediterranean cultures for a multitude of purposes, including the construction of storage facilities along ice-trade routes. For instance, analogues corbelled structures are commonly referred to as *neverie* and *borie* in Italy and France respectively. Also, the world-famous apulian *trulli* (singular *trullo*) follow the same roofing technique.

Neviera at Villa Vela, along Strada Statale 287, from Noto to Palzzo Acriede

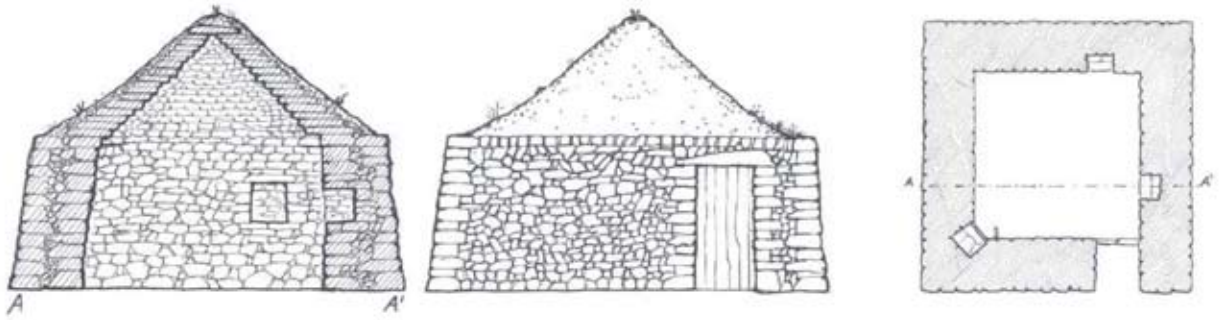
A cluster of Trulli at the World Heritage Site of Alberobello, Puglia, Italy.

Model of a Borie for the decoration of Christmas cribs in Southern France.

Traditionally, in the Maltese Islands as elsewhere, *giren* are constructed in dry-rubble. Whether squarish or circular in plan their walls comprise two skins of rough stones laid without the use of mortar. The inner layer climbs all the way up to form the corbelled ceiling, whereas the outer skin is commonly inclined slightly inwards and stops at a slightly lower level. Smallish rubble (Maltese *mazkan*) is used as infill in between said skins and to finish off the projecting tip of the corbelled structure. A compacted layer of gravel and earth is at times laid on the conical roof to enhance water proofing. The resultant corpulent walls are generally perforated only by a solitary door opening that is invariably set on the southern flank. Door headroom rarely exceeds 1.5 metres, while the average width is around 0.7 metres. While square-headed arrangements seem to have been preferred, in the absence of adequate blocks for the lintel rudimentary arch-crossings were composed. Lintels are in turn habitually reinforced by a surmounting relieving arch that could be set slightly apart to create a vent-like opening. Else a squarish window opening is sometimes placed directly above said lintels.

In the popular work *The Girna: the Maltese corbelled stone hut*, Michael Fsadni did not include the sister island in the same pioneering study, arguing that "in Gozo there are almost none at all" (Fsadni, 1998: 8). Gozo may have a lower concentration of giren per square kilometre with respect to Malta, but Fsadni and others who repeated this assertion are critically erroneous. Fsadni's flagrant slip-up is best understood on taking into consideration an accompanying and equally blatant and intrinsic oversight. Chapter 1 of the publication in question presents an overview of the geographic distribution of *giren* but fails to provide a plausible explanation for the marked concentration in northwest Malta.

Contrary to Fsadni's claim, urban sprawl is not to be blamed for the striking absence of giren in central and eastern Malta. Every site or monument has, or had, a landscape that constitutes an integral part of its essence and which is of paramount importance for its holistic appreciation. Since vernacular architecture mirrors the easily extractable natural resources abounding in the immediate environs, the decision to craft a field room in the form of a *girna* or otherwise was not spearheaded by personal aesthetic tastes. It was dictated by the prevailing building raw material at hand, which irrespective of the Maltese Islands' petite proportions varies from locality to locality in relation to the diverse geomorphologic contexts.



Section drawing, elevation and plan of a *barraca de curucull* from the Spanish Island of Majorca (Reynés & Sastre: 36)

Giren have an innate charming quality but their construction requires notable craftsmanship and presents serious size limitations. For sure the respective builders would have opted for the construction of more spacious field rooms had it been technically possible with the same raw material.

Giren are invariably erected of smallish and fairly irregular boulders, which on closer inspection manifest a denser consistency compared to the honey-coloured Globigerina limestone employed profusely in more formal constructions. As a matter of fact, Coralline limestone is generally used throughout. Being notably harder than Globigerina, the quarrying of Coralline outcrops was very often limited to the peeling off of the fractured bedrock crust and the coarse break up of the resultant large boulders. The dressing of ashlar Coralline blocks, in particular slim roofing slabs, which can span up to well over two metres when crafted out of Globigerina (Jaccarini, 1998: 37), proved to be unfeasibly demanding and technically challenging due to the raw material's hardness, and was therefore omitted altogether with respect to most vernacular constructions. Faced by such constraint the resourceful builders had no other option but to make do with the smallish and irregular blocks easily available. A lightweight structure of reeds and clayey plastering (technically referred to as wattle and daub) would have necessitated frequent routine maintenance besides lessoning thermal buffering drastically. The roofs of these field rooms planted away from Globigerina outcrops were, thereby, fashioned in the form of a false dome through corbelling.

This explains their marked presence within the footprint of the extensive Coralline caps prevailing in northwest Malta and the equally notable absence from the gently rolling Globigerina plains defining most of the central-eastern region. With respect to the latter instance, field rooms are constructed of Globigerina limestone, which being easily quarried and worked into squarish blocks offers far more flexibility in terms of design and size.

The distribution of *giren* in Gozo follows a corresponding asymmetrical pattern. Indeed, the sister island treasures a lesser concentration of *giren* per square kilometre due to its diverse geomorphology, in particular the extensive fracturing and erosion of the Upper Coralline cap. Except for the spacious mesas of Rabat, Xagħra, Nadur and Qala all extant Upper Coralline deposits are fairly restricted in size and generally separated from each other by wide-floored valleys that sink all the way down to uncover broad Globigerina strips, while most of western, central-eastern and southern Gozo consists of Globigerina plains.

Clearly, for most agricultural neighbourhoods the farming community had ample Globigerina outcrops within a reasonable distance to source Globigerina blocks from, and most field rooms are resultantly constructed out of the same workable material and roofed over with slabs. On several counts, though, on moving closer to the perched Coralline caps the transportation of Globigerina blocks all the way up from the low-lying outcrops does not seem to have been deemed viable. Close by, but difficult to dress, Coralline boulders were resorted to more often than not, thereby the frequent occurrence of *giren*. Likewise, the most populous cluster of *giren* in Gozo is located in the spacious Upper Coralline uplands of Xagħra, Nadur and Qala respectively.

Girna or partially demolished stronghold? This early nineteenth century view of Victoria shows a girna-like construction on the left-hand side, namely along present day Archbishop Pietro Pace Street. It could however represent the remnants of one of the ancient towers placed beyond Rabat's defensive enclosure.

A fine *girna* in the idyllic setting of Qala's coastline.

Geological Map of Gozo. The green patches represent the Upper Coralline Limestone mesas, while the light brown equates the Globigerina Limestone plains. Giren are found atop and / or in the immediate vicinity of the respective Coralline outcrops.

Few or no examples are to be found in the environs of the globigerina plains. Besides farmers, the workmen engaged in stone-extraction along the northeast coast of Qala used to erect protective shelters in the form of *giren* as suggested by their frequent encounter next to old quarrying sites.

Mġiebaħ (Beehive Shelters)

Besides its palatable sumptuousness, honey is of notable nutritious and medicinal relevance. It featured prominently in local cuisine.

By and large, honey bees (*Apis mellifera*) are found throughout the Mediterranean and have been supplying man with processed flowers' nectar since prehistoric times. The Maltese Islands are no exception. Numerous endemic colonies of *Apis mellifera ruttneri*[3] grazed the colourful and fragrant flower meadows since time immemorial. Writing at a time when Malta and Gozo were apparently deserted the Iraqi geographer Ibn Hauqal (? – 988) related how the islands abounded in sheep and bees and how merchants came to collect honey and hunt the sheep. Al Idrisi (1099 - 1166) equates honey, in importance, with the pastures and fruit, while honey was also rated as very commonly found in the Maltese Islands by the fifteen century chronicler Al-Himyari (Buhagiar,

Detail of Old Refectory Mural Cycle (18th century) at Archbishop's Curia showing two honeycombs in the lower left and a honey ring (Maltese: *Qagħqa tal-Għasel*)

[3] The honeybees of Malta, named after Professor Friedrich Ruttner, comprise an endemic subspecies.

2005: 46 and Dalli, 2006: 27-8). Two-centuries later the Dutchman Dapper (circa 1635 - 89) reaffirms the plentiful production of honey in Gozo (Freller, 1997: 47), but in 1745 De Soldanis (1712-70) laments about the destruction of extensive tracts of lands formerly constituting primary foraging pastures for the honey bees, thereby reducing significantly the annual yield.[4] This worrying situation seems to have somewhat abated by the turn of the nineteenth century when the then renowned honey of Gozo was said to have been surpassed by none for limpidness and richness of flavour (MacGill, 1839: 142).

Besides producing honey, bees are of fundamental importance to the agricultural cycle with respect to pollination. Indeed, the earthenware hives or *qliel* (singular *qolla*), hosting the respective colonies were often placed in the immediate vicinity of orchards to facilitate cross-pollination.

Earthenware beehives (maltese: *Qliel*)

Sheltered south-facing spots at the foot of high walls or mature trees were normally selected, and the earthenware hives were placed in a horizontal position on a shallow bench of stone. More zealous breeders constructed specialized shelters to harbour more effectively the beehives from the elements and possibly instil some form of protection against pillagers. These structures are referred to as *mġiebaħ* (singular *miġbħa*) and their occurrence in a number of localities on mainland Malta is reflected in the toponomastic patrimony.[5] As expected, analogous arrangements and structures are found in other parts of the Mediterranean including the Balearic Islands (Reynés Trias and Sastre, 2002: 111).

Casetes d'abelles as Cubells: makeshift beehives made out of hollowed tree trunks. (Reynés & Sastre: 111)

The *Revised Schedule of Protected Monuments* compiled by the then Museum authorities a few years following World War II, lists three beehive houses datable to the eighteenth century at *Wied Piskru* (or *Pisklu*), limits of San Lawrenz.[6] Since then extensive sections of the valley flanks have been eaten away by quarrying or encroached upon by mounds of debris generated by the same activity. Unfortunately, two of these *mġiebaħ* seem to have perished in the process. The third and surviving example stands along the northern flank of *Wied Pisklu*'s upper section. Planted against a shallow cliff, *Wied Pisklu*'s extant *miġbħa* comprises an elongated and shallow room accessed through a square-headed door at the eastern end. The

Interior view of *Wied Pisklu's Miġbħa.*

[4] Gian Pietro Francesco Agius De Soldanis, *Il Gozo Antico e Moderno, Sacro e Profano* (N[ational] L[ibrary] [of] M[alta], Library Manuscript 145, Maltese translation by Mgr. Joseph Farrugia, English Translation by Fr. Tony Mercieca), Bk I, Sec 3.4.
[5] Two of Malta's most picturesque valleys are named *Wied il-Għasel* and *Wied L-Imġiebaħ* respectively.
[6] National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta, Ancient Monuments Committee, 'A Report on the Present State of Ancient Monuments in Gozo which have been damaged by enemy action or otherwise', 22.02.1946, 'Monuments in the Parish of St Lawrence', No. 8.

resultant void is split into a series of six compartments standing along the south-facing wall.

These are, in turn, separated from the cliff-face at the back by a corridor running the entire breadth of the west-east axis. Each recess features three shelves designed to take up to three earthen hives each. The latter fitted into funnel shaped incisions perforating the one-skinned south-facing wall.

A block with a funnel-shaped perforation to receive an earthenware hive. (*Wied Pisklu's Miġbħa*)

Another *miġbħa* survives at *Wied is-Seqer*, limits of Rabat. Its construction is of particular interest in view of the structural interventions carried out to fit in a two-tiered series of twelve circular vents aimed at accommodating an equal number of earthenware beehives. Besides the demolition and eventual reinstatement of the southeast facing wall to replace the former lower courses by an arrangement of horizontal and neatly cut blocks to receive the beehives, the former adjoining door opening was shifted northwards. This *miġbħa* fell in disuse during the 1980s when most of the fruit trees flourishing in the then quaint agricultural neighbourhood succumbed to urban sprawl. Its survival so far is miraculous but far from guaranteed. Unless a timely intervention is enacted to salvage the more significant architectural elements it will sooner or later give way to the contemplated urbanisation of Wied is-Seqer Street.

Miġbħa at *Wied is-Seqer*, Victoria.

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Godwin Vella is Head Curatorial Affairs within Heritage Malta.