

‘Hain Selem’ - The Village that Flourished around a Spring

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Introduction

As the ferry approaches Mġarr Harbour, one is immediately enthralled by the scenic high flat hills, the Knights-era battery and the spires of churches on the skyline. Beneath these hills lies an extensive spread of land divided by a valley which meanders its way down to the sea. The spring water that flows through this valley led to the establishment of the village of Ghajnsielem together with the formation of its cultural identity.

The village name is a composite of ‘Għajn’ (spring of) and ‘Is-sliem’ (peace) with the Latin motto of the village being ‘*Ob fontem prosperitas*’ meaning ‘Flourishing because of a spring’ with the spring in the area being the magnet that attracted the first inhabitants that eventually led to the prosperity of the place.

A look back at the history of the village will help us understand the connotation that this ‘spring of peace’ has with Ghajnsielem and its Ghajnslemizi.

The Prehistoric Era

The people who first colonised Gozo probably lived in the caves in the north-west of the island. Evidence of shreds and fragments unearthed in this area are of purer pedigree than any other pottery found elsewhere in the Maltese Islands. It can safely be assumed that these inhabitants soon started to spread about in search of agricultural land and the present area of Ghajnsielem, with its bountiful springs, must have been inhabited since early times.

One of the greatest undertakings of this period was the Ġgantija Temple (circa 3600 - 3000 BC) in Xagħra - a temple that represents an important



Mġarr Harbour - 1960 (Photo courtesy of www.DelCmpe.net)

turning point in the cultural evolution of prehistoric man in both Malta and Gozo. However, an equally important temple once stood within the limits of present day Ghajnsielem at the sites known as *Tal-Qighan* and *L-Imrejzbiet*. These two sites were probably a single complex with a unique combination of a major temple, a cult center for one or more settlements. The excavation of a temple period hut around four hundred metres away from the megalithic remains in the late eighties confirms that this area was chosen as a settlement site during this period. However, it is difficult to imagine such a scene in this area today because the temples have since been disjoined and trounced by the modern Victoria - Xewkija - Qala road.

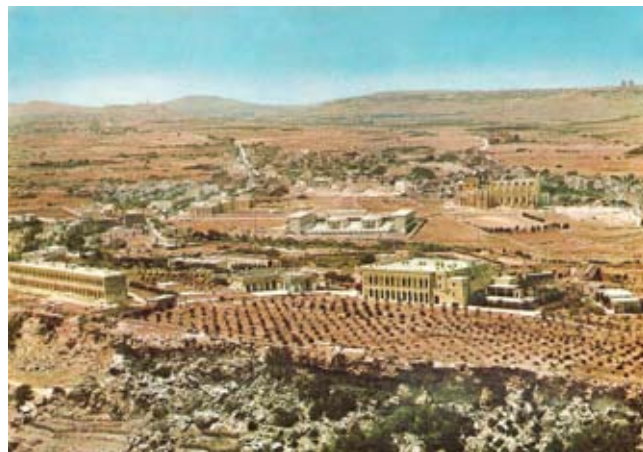
The Early Civilisations

Around 700 BC, Malta and Gozo were colonised by the Phoenicians and around 550 BC, by the Carthaginians, who remained masters until 218 BC. A Punic inscription indicates that the Carthaginians had a temple on the present Citadel hill which was partly fortified. No activity seems to have been carried out in Ghajnsielem at the time.

The Romans took over in 218 BC at the beginning of the second Punic War, making Gozo a municipium independent of Malta with a republican sort of Government that minted its own coins. The Romans turned the Citadel into their acropolis and a town developed beneath its walls.

Two hundred years later, the Arabs besieged Malta, killed most of the inhabitants, and left the archipelago in ruins. In the year 1045 a group of Saracens came over from Sicily and recolonised the island. The roots of the Maltese language were laid down by these Arab-speaking Muslims, who gave the name of Ghawdex to the island of Gozo. The toponym of Ghajnsielem must have also originated at that time.

In 1091, Count Roger the Norman established a nominal suzerainty over Malta, but the Saracens remained masters paying an annual tribute. The population – concentrated within the Citadel and Rabat – began to rise steadily. The increase of commerce between the islands must have led to the foundation of a settlement close to Mgarr Harbour. However, during the summer months, living in the area was dangerous. A constant flow of corsairs



Ghajnsielem in the 1950s.

entered the harbour to replenish their cisterns with water and to plunder. In 1418, the local government petitioned the Aragonese rulers to help them build a tower on the Island of Comino as the passage between the islands was wrought with danger due to the many corsairs seeking refuge in the caves and coves on the island. The project did not materialise due to lack of funds.

The Middle Ages and the Village Name

On the 23rd of March 1530, Emperor Charles V donated Malta and Gozo to the chivalrous religious order of the Knights of Saint John. Initially the Knights made no improvement to Gozo and in 1551, the island suffered its worst siege in history when the entire population of about 5000 were taken into slavery. Grandmaster Juan d' Homedes and his Council initially entertained the idea of abandoning Gozo. Yet sweet home soon attracted back the few hundred who had escaped from slavery and the fewer who were redeemed. The Citadel was slowly rebuilt and it flourished once again.

Until 1637, Gozitans were bound by law to spend the night within. But when this law was repealed, residents began to abandon the Citadel to more spacious houses in Rabat. The settlements started to be developed into the three-tiered pattern common to most medieval regions: a fortified city, its suburb, and the quasi-villages. The area between Rabat and Mgarr Harbour started to gain popularity. It was during this period that the Sistine Chapel (limits of Ghajnsielem) was first recorded.

The first record of the village name was registered during this period, referred to as 'Hain Selem' in a

notarial act drawn by Joannes Domenico Formosa on 17th February 1587 (National Archives, Malta MS836, 76R). The 'Spring of Peace' probably refers to a natural spring which used to supply water. This spring (situated in the end of the valley of Simirat) is connected with a legend about Nardu, a man from Xewkija, who returned to Gozo from slavery on the Barbary Coast. On his return he looked for his wife and daughter, Ursula. The latter being the sole survivor, he found her, by now a married woman, near this spring. Since then, the spring started to be called Ghajn is-Sliem, because Nardu found peace when he met his daughter.

However it is interesting to note that there is another version from where the village name could have been derived. 'Ghajn Salem', a corrupt name for Selim, a Turkish naval commander, who ordered his crew to disembark at Mġarr and replenish their water supply from this spring every time he happened to be sailing by the Maltese Islands.

The First Inhabitants in Ghajnsielem

Ghajnsielem was the last village to develop on the island, if the Mġarr harbour area is excluded. It is in fact not mentioned in a detailed census of Gozo taken in the first half of 1667. The site was dangerously close to a landing place at a time when the Mediterranean was infested with pirates. It was still the time of the Knights, when fierce corsairs from Barbary ruled the waves and people were loath to live near the coast. What was worse, the fresh water springs close to the port were known to friend and foe.

It was only from the middle of the 17th century, when Garzes Tower (a tower constructed on the promontory overlooking Mġarr harbour) and later, Fort Chambray that rendered the place safe and sound, that the first farmhouses were built close to the spring that gave its name to the village.

The Gozo-Malta channel was also rendered safer in 1618 when Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt financed the construction of Santa Marija Tower on the mid-channel island of Comino. Gradually the fear began to erode as the threat from the Berber pirates declined and peace reigned over the seas. People began to descend to the fertile land near the coast.

In 1667, there were 57 persons living in fourteen households in the Mġarr area. This small community was still part of the Citadel Parish until 1688, when it passed under the newly founded parish of Nadur. It was around this time that the first houses were raised in Ghajnsielem close to the fountain at the end of the valley of Simirat. With corsairs and pirates a thing of the past and with steadily rising commerce between the two islands, the population of Ghajnsielem continued to grow.

The Early Formation of the Village

In 1710, Grand Master Raymond Perellos, after getting the approval of his Council General, ordered the construction of an arcade around the spring at the very end of Simirat valley. Beneath the arcade six stone washing basins were constructed into which water from the spring was channelled. These facilities proved to be a boon to the increasing population of the late 18th and 19th century. Women found them especially suitable for washing laundry. For over two centuries, from dawn till dusk, throngs of chattering women would gather around the spring. The women-folk would congregate there in the mornings washing laundry in the troughs. Rare was the occasion when the spring remained idle. According to written and spoken testimonies by elderly villagers, even at night one could hear the sound of splashing water and constant vigorous scrubbing.

On 5th September 1800, the British took the Maltese islands under their protection. Malta and Gozo became a British Crown Colony in 1813.



1850 photo of the arcade built by Grand Master Raymond Perellos.

Fort Chambray was put to very good use by the British and this generated trade and jobs for many Ghajnsielmizi.

Meanwhile, the population had by then increased considerably and Ghajnsielem was in the process of becoming a parish on its own.

A New Parish is Born

The roots of the parish started when Anġlu Grech, who lived in the vicinity, used to take his sheep and goats to the spring every day. While the flock quenched its thirst, he sought shade under a carob tree (Harruba) and often knelt down in prayer. One day, he beheld a vision just across the spring. A beautiful lady dressed immaculately in white invited him to raise a statue in her honour on an area of land close by. A shrine would enhance his prayers and encourage fellow farmers to raise their minds to God. Anġlu recounted his experience to the few families which at the time lived in Ghajnsielem and told them the mysterious lady's wish. The people immediately collected money to commission a stone statue of 'Our Lady of Loreto' and built a niche to house it. After the statue was placed in the niche, people used to gather around it to recite the Rosary. A small nearby chapel was built in 1810 and blessed in 1820. Although Ghajnsielem was part of the Nadur Parish, the inhabitants were finding it difficult to go up to the Nadur parish church to hear mass and carry out their spiritual needs.

The first vicar in charge was Dun Guzepp Xerri, who was succeeded by Dun Frangisk Xkembri and in 1842 by Dun Anton Cauchi from Rabat. He managed to convince Archbishop Publios Sant to erect a new parish church. On 1st January 1854, the region became vice parish and the procedure for the establishment of a parish was set in motion. Ghajnsielem was officially established a parish in the 26th of January 1855.

The 19th and Early 20th Century

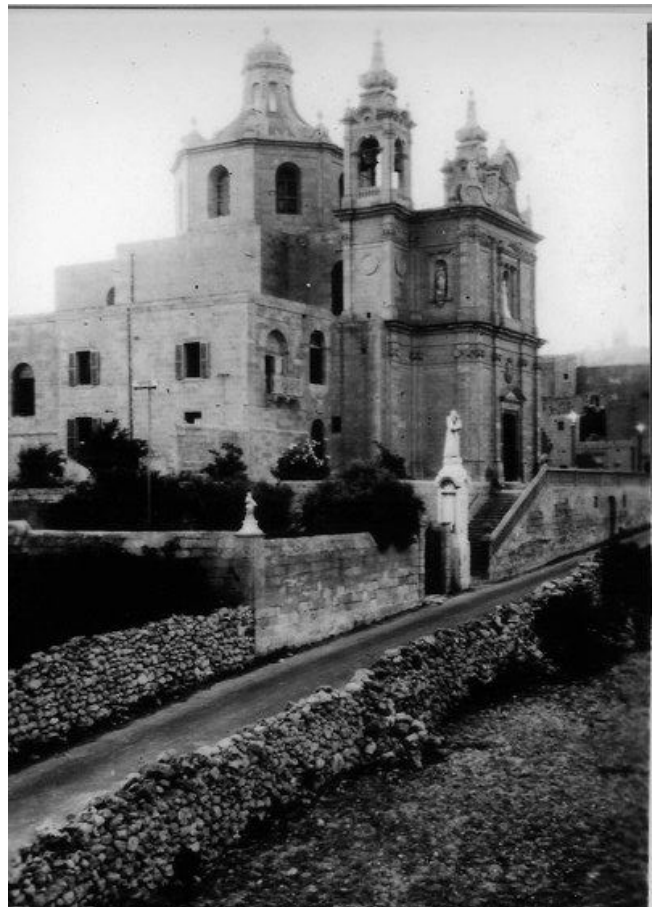
The status of the settlement was elevated from that of a *ħara* (area) to a *raħal* (village). The British had an indirect part in this development and they also played their part in the establishment of the diocese of Gozo in 1864.



1887 - A church was built after the vision beheld by Anġlu Grech.

In 1861, the people of Ghajnsielem made up 6.09% or 942 of the 15,459 Gozitans. The population reached its peak of 1,333 in 1901 but then, with the beginning of organised emigration to Australia and America, the growth came to a halt. The situation changed again after World War II with the so called baby-boom. There were many marriages and naturally more births in the immediate post-war years.

As the population increased, the village spread in all directions simultaneously: to the north along *Wied*



St. Anthony's church - Mgarr Road.

Simirat, in the area know as *Il-Ġnien*, and also *Fuq il-Għajn*; to the east towards *Il-Hamri*; and to the West towards *Il-Fawwara* and *Ta' San Mikiel* next to the new parish church.

Being close to the harbour, the majority of the villagers were engaged in sailing and farming. The church occupied special importance, especially on Sundays when the sermon used to be delivered to a full church with the congregation overflowing into the square.

The Titular Statue, St Anthony's Church and Lourdes Chapel

The present titular statue was ordered by Parish Priest Refalo after Għajnsielem was spared from Cholera in 1865. The people of Għajnsielem immediately donated over 500 scudi for the statue which was produced in less than a year. The artistic statue was manufactured by Gallard et Fils of Marseilles and arrived in Gozo on 14th October 1866 costing 420 scudi.

During this period there were apparations of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette Soubirous in the Grotto of Massabielle in Lourdes, France and Lourdes soon became a centre of pilgrimage and prayers. It was Christianity's foremost pilgrim site. This was not the exception in Gozo and in the year 1888, a chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes was built on a hill which used to be known as *tal-Qortin*, overlooking Mġarr harbour. The work was finished by the Maltese architect Caruana Galizia on a Gothic style and the benefactor of the statue was Carolina Mamo with the artist being Carlo Darmanin.

On the 22nd November 1899 Franciscan Minors, *Ta' Ġiezu* came to Gozo and settled in a house called *Ta Gliex* in St Anthony Street, Għajnsielem, which leads to the villages of Nadur and Qala. This was the first convent for the Franciscans on Gozo. A piece of land was later donated so that the Friars could build their own convent. The brains behind the construction of the convent was that of the custodian Anton (Tonin) M. Cesal who eventually, with some other friars, decided to erect a big church near the convent and dedicate it to Saint Anthony of Padova. The plans for this project were made by Fr. Joseph Diacono.

Modern Times

World War II brought profound changes to Għajnsielem. Emigration started to take place due to the lack of job opportunities on our islands. But the development of Mġarr harbour in the late sixties helped Gozo to unleash a new lease of life and a new era of prosperity for Għajnsielem.

As the population of the village increased, the need to build a new larger church was felt. The new church was to be built on a Gothic-Lombard style on the basis of a Latin cross. Work on the building of the Sanctuary was halted on several occasions, the longest of which was undoubtedly that between 1939 and 1946 - during the war years. Parish Priest Espedito Tabone gave a new impetus to the project and the building was finally completed with the blessing of the bell tower in June 1979.

During the same period, several clubs were also being formed including the St Joseph Band (founded in 1928) and Għajnsielem F.C. (founded in 1936). In the late 20th century, these two clubs built their premises adjacent to the new parish church.

Two hotels and a number of private bars and restaurants eventually opened in the vicinity. In recent times, Mġarr harbour has been turned into a modern port with berthing facilities for small boats, a waterfront park and a modern ferry terminal. Fort Chambray was turned into an upmarket residential estate thus attracting a number of foreigners to Għajnsielem



1950's - A new and larger parish church was built to meet the needs of a growing village.



Ghajnsielem today.

Village Administration

During the last century, Ghajnsielem officially has had two administrations partly responsible for the village. The first was the Gozo Civic Council, a statutory local government body having a distinct legal personality, established on 14th April 1961. The Council and the district committees functioned until 1973. The second administration was the Local Council with the first election for the Ghajnsielem Local Council taking place on Saturday, 19 March 1994. The first Mayor was Francis Cauchi.

Conclusion

Ghajnsielem grew around a spring which for many years was the meeting place of the village. And although today this veritable ‘Spring of life’ is no longer in existence (buried deep under what is now a modern square) it still lives on in the name of the thriving community which proudly bears its name.

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