

Can we go to Ta' Kaççatura?

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A reflection on the politics of space in the Maltese landscape

For many of us, the idea of a safe Sunday afternoon outing is closely bound with asphalted roads in the winter, and pink-tiled waterfronts in the summer. Those who venture further afield into country foot-paths or open garigue often come back with hair-raising accounts of close brushes with bird trappers, farmers, hunters, exhibitionists, and surprised lovers.

These stories are usually recounted over tea and cake, to be received with unanimous, unfailing indignation, before the bumper-to-bumper, twilight retreat home. The same ritual of incursion, confrontation, and retreat is re-enacted a week later, and the week after, and the week after that. These ritual frontier skirmishes have been conventionalized to a point where the different roles of self-righteous stroller and indignant tenant are acted out according to tightly prescribed rules and codes of behaviour. While these unspoken conventions have significantly reduced the chances of physically violent confrontation, they have also hardened the deadlock where the possibility of ever changing these behaviour patterns is rendered remote, perhaps even inconceivable. This short paper suggests that this need not remain so.

Contested space is at the heart of the matter. In one of the most densely populated countries in Europe, it should come as no surprise that the use of open spaces is a highly contested issue. These are not contested simply because of the sheer density of inhabitants. Various individuals and interest groups are engaged in a variety of economic and leisure activities in the landscape. In fact, the contest is often between different

The lane leading to Ta' Kaççatura

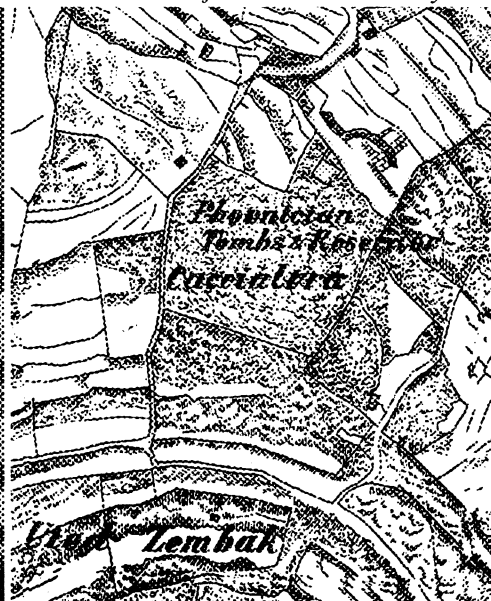


interest groups, each with its own attitudes and perceptions of the limited space available. Competition over the use of land by members of the same interest group tends to be resolved amicably and to mutual advantage. Bird-trappers ensconce themselves in their respective hides. Farmers protect each other's crops from pilfering intruders. Considering the number of hunters, disputes between them are few and far between. When, however, the casual stroller appears on the scene with his alien values and expectations, the scenario of intrusion and confrontation is set in motion. The issue, then, appears to be ultimately a contest between different cultural constructions of space.

The discovery of aesthetic value in the Maltese rural landscape is a relatively recent phenomenon. Attitudes to the countryside which became popular in nineteenth century Europe with the rise of romanticism (see Schama 1995 for a wide-ranging analysis) were introduced to Malta by foreign visitors and residents, and only slowly emulated by the native population. Until little more than a generation ago, the Maltese countryside was popularly perceived as a place which was "dangerous and uncouth" (Boissevain 1986, p.70). It is only over the last thirty-odd years that the countryside has begun to be sought out by the masses as a place to be enjoyed, in a movement which today has gathered the momentum of an exodus.

This explosion of interest in the leisure potential of the countryside did not happen in a deserted landscape. On the contrary, it burst onto a tradition of dense activity, much of which was subsistence-oriented. Relatively sheltered areas were taken up with painstakingly nursed terraced fields and walled

Extract from a 1912 survey sheet



orchards, while more exposed areas were used as hunting grounds carefully demarcated with boundary stones. Unenclosed grazing land was often left along pathways between arable fields to facilitate the herding of flocks of sheep or goats, in a system which deserves much closer study. A network of lanes and pathways developed over centuries provided access to individuals who had interests in the area. Access was regulated with a combination of physical barriers and coded messages, in the form of inscriptions declaring ownership, boundary stones, monumental gateways, and family crests. Anyone bred in the countryside would be familiar with these symbols, learning to recognize, interpret and respect them as an intrinsic element of his or her closely-knit cosmos.

The relatively sudden mass incursion of the last thirty years came as a shock to this system. It came from a direction that had never been anticipated, and it came on an unprecedented scale. An ever-increasing proportion of the population was moving into the suburban sprawl that spread further and further in a succession of building booms. Every weekend, larger and larger numbers flooded out of this conurbation into the countryside to enjoy the newly discovered pleasures of greenery and fresh air. And slowly, surely, the landscape began to change. Access strategies began to be modified and improvised to react to this invasion. Forty-five gallon drums, barbed-wire fencing, old car tyres and derelict cookers and fridges were all pressed into service to re-inforce existing field enclosures and to create new boundaries. Although the confrontation was a bloodless one, the style was that of guerrilla warfare. Many pathways and even established lanes were blocked off, and rapidly became choked with vegetation. As the need for access to more open spaces mounted, the landscape responded by becoming increasingly impenetrable.

A case study: Ta' Kaccatura

These processes may be observed across the Maltese landscape. The present concern, however, is the implications for the preservation, presentation, and enjoyment of the archaeological sites lying in the less easily accessible parts of the landscape. The Roman villa at Ta' Kaccatura is one such site.

The villa is situated on a ridge of land bound to the south-west by Wied Zembaq and to the north-east by Wied Dalam. At the extremity of the same ridge, where the two valleys meet the sea at St. George's Bay, lies the prehistoric site of Borg in-Nadur. Just across Wied Dalam from the Ta' Kaccatura site lies Ghar Dalam and its museum.

The land on which the Roman villa lies was acquired

by Government "for archaeological purposes" in a contract dated 12th December 1881 (incidentally the same year that excavations are first undertaken at the Roman house in Rabat), making it one of the earliest archaeological sites in Malta to be bought by the public authorities to ensure its long-term preservation. Some investigation of the site appears to have taken place around this date, to be resumed under the direction of Thomas Ashby (Ashby 1915). His meticulous description is still the principal source of information on this site.

The villa appears to have been developed and occupied during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The main rooms of the building are set around a square courtyard and peristyle, which was originally composed of coralline limestone fluted pillars. The existence of an upper floor is witnessed by traces of a staircase leading off the courtyard, of which Ashby could find evidence for at least ten steps rising nine inches each (1915, p.60). The various water cisterns which serviced the site are of particular interest. Beneath the central courtyard lies a squarish cistern roofed with a shallow vault made of rough stone set in mortar; regrettably, this has partially collapsed since the excavation. This cistern is in turn connected with another, possibly earlier bell-shaped cistern (1915, p.56). The most interesting water cistern on the site, however, is the one lying immediately to the south-west of the villa measuring roughly ten metres by ten in plan and some four metres in depth, with a roof supported by twelve gigantic square pillars. This is one of the most impressive structures from this period that survive in Malta. In the turn-of-the-century survey maps of the area, a protective boundary wall is already indicated enclosing this cistern. Although no precise documentation on the building of this wall is as yet forthcoming, it was presumably built shortly after the expropriation of the site in 1881, making it one of the earliest such protective measures to be taken to safeguard an archaeological site in this country. In recent years, this wall had become a rather ineffectual deterrent, as vandalism and the elements had opened a large breach along the length of its south-eastern face. This section was rebuilt by Museums Department personnel in May 1997.

Some remains of presses, rock-cut vats, channels and troughs concentrated at the western end of the villa indicate this was a focus of agricultural activity. No attempt has yet been made, however, to reconstruct the extent and nature of the territory which was managed and exploited from this villa.

It is suggested by Ashby that "...the natural way of access to it [the villa] is on the south-east side, coming up the valley from the bay of Birzebbuga." Remains of an elaborate entrance arrangement were found on this side of the villa complex (1915, p.53). One can still

scramble up to the site from the valley. However, in the land tenure arrangement that existed in the nineteenth century, the most convenient access route was through a narrow lane which appears on turn-of-the-century survey maps running straight across the ridge, from Wied Dalam, past the site, and on to Wied Zembaq, where it is connected to a network of lanes leading to Birzebbuga and even to Ghaxaq and Gudja. As a matter of fact, the area that was expropriated in 1881 lay contiguous to this lane, clearly with the intention of creating public access to the site. With the development of the fuel storage installation in Wied Dalam, however, it appears that the northern end of the lane was closed off by the installation's boundary wall.

Today, it is also impossible to approach the site through this lane from the south. The lane appears to have fallen into disuse at some point, a process which appears to have been encouraged by deliberate dumping of refuse and building material, blocking the lane at two different points. Two carobs have grown right across the lane, creating two further impassable points along its length. In fact, in order to reach the site today one is obliged to pass through private land. A private road, which is not plotted on the survey sheets published in the early 1970's, appears to have been created since, in order to provide access from the west to a cow-farm located just west of the archaeological site. This is the most convenient mode of access to the site at present, yet there does not appear to be a public right of way here. A gate at the end of this road is often found closed, and disputes are not unknown between tenacious visitors and tenants concerned about the disturbance to their cows. To sum up, one of the most remarkable Roman sites in the country, which is also Government property, is at present virtually inaccessible!

A relatively simple intervention may rectify this situation with a minimum of conflict. This may be achieved if the two-hundred metre stretch of the lane between Wied Zembaq and the site is cleared and rehabilitated. The work involved is not too daunting; clearing the lane of stones which have fallen from the dry-stone walls on either side; rebuilding these walls using the same stones and technique; cutting down the undergrowth that has taken over the pathway; a vigorous pruning of the two carobs that have grown across it; eliminating a heap of modern building blocks and another heap of refuse. The benefit to be derived from such action would be the recovery of a public right of way which may easily date back centuries, which provides a scenic, if fairly vigorous, access route to a very interesting archaeological site.

Starting from the tal-Brolli area of Birzebbuga, a wide space at the end of Wied Zembaq, which incidentally could also accommodate some parking without creating

a nuisance, leads into a lane which runs along the north-eastern side of the valley, going past the Borg in-Nadur settlement and, barely 500 metres from Birzebbuga, reaches the junction with the blocked-up lane. This adds up to a relaxed hike of only 1.5 km to Ta' Kaccatura and back, with a succession of views first of the valley, and then of Marsaxlokk Bay while mounting the ridge. The creation of a sign-posted access route from this direction to the archaeological sites at Borg in-Nadur is another exciting possibility which is under study at the Planning Directorate (Architect Alexander Borg, personal communication).

A key element in securing the success of such an intervention would be a clear understanding of the rights and duties of the different parties involved. If we are to depart from the confrontational climate described earlier, hikers and visitors as well as tenants, farmers and trappers must be educated on the values and objectives of the other parties making use of the same landscape. In practice, the consolidation of clearly defined access routes for visitors interested in hiking to an archaeological site will also benefit the more established, traditional users of the same landscape, as it will minimise the risk of, let us say, a hiker inadvertently hiking across a sown crop, or even worse, startling some unsuspecting cow into premature labour!

This short paper has no pretence of being a blue-print for action, or of solving the highly complex issues that have been referred to. What it does is to suggest that approaching these problems with more awareness of the conflicting interests involved may facilitate their resolution. Mutual education and respect between traditional and more novel uses and perceptions of the landscape are an exciting alternative to the present confrontational deadlock. A succession of relatively minor, experimental interventions, which are done with sensitivity to local resource conflicts and interest groups, may cumulatively ease these groups into a happier co-existence. The case of Ta' Kaccatura is just one of a myriad examples where we could begin to realise this possibility.

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