

# *Narrating the Mġarr landscape*

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Geography, like history, can answer many questions

*(Braudel 1972: 23)*

This paper considers some of the enduring characteristics of the landscape around Mġarr, and their influence on human activity there. Its first goal is to portray the landscape setting of the megalithic complexes of Ta' Ħaġrat and Skorba, which are the central focus of this volume. A second goal is to consider the changing relationship between landscape and human activity, in a broader chronological setting. Three inter-connected metaphors for the Mġarr micro-region will be used as pegs for the argument. These three metaphors are as inseparable as they may seem contradictory.

They are Mġarr as island, Mġarr as garden, and Mġarr as corridor.

## **Island**

Islands may be metaphorical as well as literal, and the term insularity has a multiplicity of meanings (Broodbank 2000: 16-18). Braudel has written of 'islands that the sea does not surround', regions made distinct or remote by climate and terrain rather than by sea alone (Braudel 1972: 160-165). In

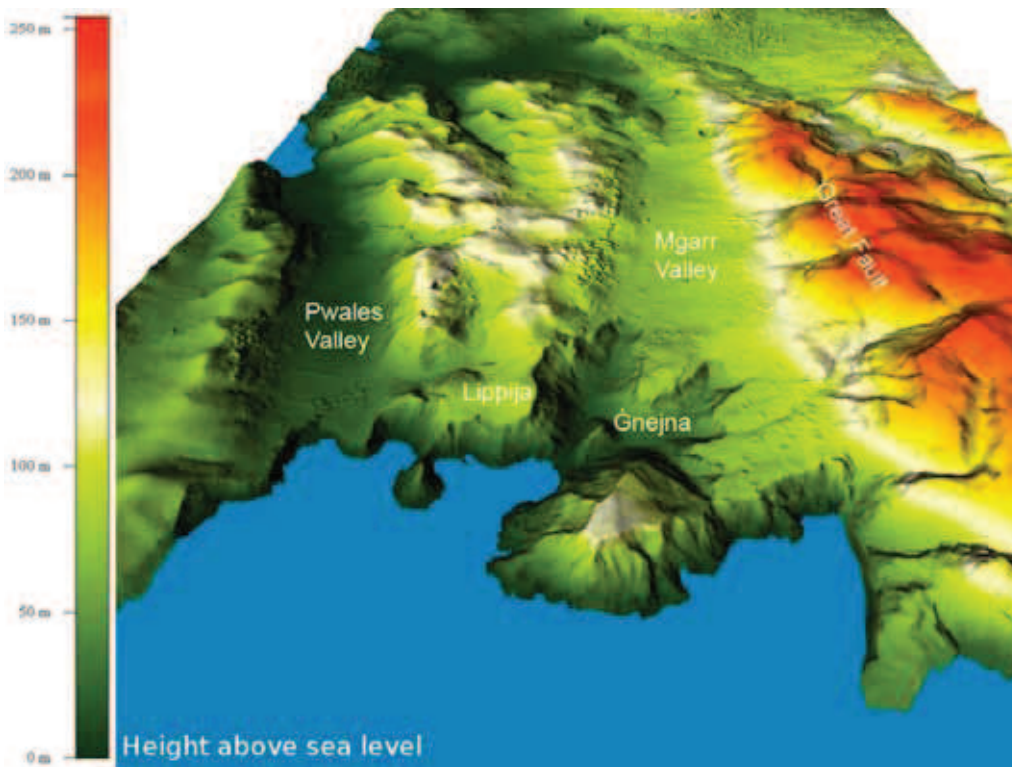


Fig. 1. Relief map of the Mġarr micro-region.

the context of true, geographical islands, cultural strategies may fragment or aggregate islands into smaller or larger organisational units (Broodbank 2000: 22-23), to create islands within islands. This holds true at different scales, and may even inform our understanding of a micro-region, and of its relationship to the wider context (Horden & Purcell 2000: 382).

The island metaphor is an apt one for the micro-region of Mġarr, for cultural as well as geographical reasons. In terms of physical relief, the most fundamental features that define the micro-region are the fault systems that divide northwest Malta into a series of parallel ridges and valleys (Pedley et al. 2002: 39). The southernmost of these valleys is that of Mġarr, known as 'il-Wied tal-Imġarr' to the local inhabitants. To the south, it is bound by the southernmost of the series of parallel faults that created the parallel ridges and valleys, referred to as the 'Great Fault' because it straddles the girth of the island from coast to coast at its widest point. The fault along the north boundary of the valley forms a less steep escarpment, on which

the present-day settlements of Mġarr and Żebbiegħ have been built. To the west, the Mġarr valley is sharply defined by the rugged coastline, while to the east, it gives way to a more deeply incised valley system (Figure 1).

Although only about five square kilometres in extent, the basin delimited by these boundaries constitutes a micro-region in its own right. Lines of sound and lines of sight are often crucial in the definition and perception of a micro-region (Horden & Purcell 2000: 124-125), and this is certainly the case here. The traveller arriving from any direction cannot fail to be struck by the sense of arriving at a place apart. On practically every road to Mġarr, over the ridge to the north as well as the south, the distinctive dome of the parish church and the surrounding settlement swings suddenly into view. The unobstructed sweep of the flat patchwork of fields forming the valley bottom can be taken in from most points around its rim, which itself presents a dramatic contrast of coastal and inland cliffs and escarpments. As one leaves the valley, it disappears from view and is left behind no less suddenly as

Fig. 2. Mġarr swings suddenly into view as one passes through Ta' Mrajža.





Fig. 3. View looking south across the Mġarr valley to the Great Fault.

one crosses the boundary of its viewshed. One is either within or without, there is no gradual unfolding to the traveller here.

The present-day traveller journeying from the conurbation of the harbour region is most likely to arrive along the main road that crosses the Great Fault through the Falka Gap. At the moment that one crosses the crest of the fault-line, one is suddenly presented with the view of the parish church overlooking the village and the valley, against the backdrop of the sea (Figure 2). The present-day inhabitants of Mġarr cherish this moment of arrival, which they compare to “walking into a painting”. The location where this visual encounter occurs, known as Ta’ Mrajža, is often referred to by the inhabitants as the place where they feel and know that they have arrived home, with words such as “*meta tasal ta’ Mrajža, tgħid għall-erwieġ, wasalt l-Imġarr*”.

Once within the valley, the views out are no less sharply defined. To the south, the looming heights of the Great Fault define the horizon (Figure 3), while to the west, the shimmering sea is visible just beyond the edge of the valley. To a viewer standing on the valley bottom, only sky is visible above the settlements of Mġarr and Żebbiegħ to the north.

Perhaps the best viewpoint to appreciate the sharp visual demarcation of the valley is the parvis of the Mġarr parish church, the heart of daily life in the village today. The church and parvis stand at the south edge of the settlement. To the south, the parvis commands uninterrupted views across the Mġarr valley, up to the rocky escarpments of the Great Fault, which define and delimit the viewer’s horizon. Through the different

seasons and at different times of day, the changing light picks out the rock-faces of the escarpments from different angles and in various colours, in a silent but perpetual display that is quietly absorbed by the villagers from the benches of their *pjazza* (village square). The creation of the *pjazza* and parvis at the edge of the present-day settlement was largely the result of the vision, planning and unstinting efforts of the extraordinary archpriest Edgar Salomone, who between 1933 and 1935 used his influence to have a cluster of buildings expropriated by Government and demolished to make way for the *pjazza*, and for the parvis to be built (Deguara 1999: 174-178). The views to the south have been jealously guarded since, by keeping the land south of the *pjazza* outside the building development zone.

The choreography of the landscape as seen from the parvis acquires greater significance when it is compared to a much more ancient, and no less iconic, viewpoint. Barely 200 metres to the southeast of the parish church lies another centre of community life, from a much more remote period. This is the monumental megalithic building known today as Ta’ Ħaġrat Temple, raised over five thousand years ago. Its visual relationship to the Mġarr valley in several ways presages that of the modern church and its parvis. In its heyday, the megalithic building would have been by far the most conspicuous structure in the surrounding landscape. Not unlike the parish church, it too was built to catch the eye from afar. Standing on the northern boundary of the Mġarr valley, its concave monumental façade has a southerly orientation. The space immediately in front of the building’s façade is believed to have functioned as a gathering

place for the prehistoric community. This space commands views across the valley to the Great Fault, in much the same way that the *pjazza* does today.

Sound is also sharply defined by the landscape. The flat valley bottom encourages sound to travel across it. The hum of a water-pump or the peals of the church bells are audible from one end of the valley to the other. Within living memory, before the noise pollution of recent decades took its toll, people chatting on the parvis on a summer evening could be heard from farmhouses on the other side of the Mġarr valley, and the sound of the sea on the beach at Ġnejna could often be heard from the village of Mġarr itself. The ridges around the valley, on the other hand, block sounds from travelling beyond the basin, creating an acoustic island as well as a visual one.

Beyond sight and sound, another variable that may play a part in the experience and construction of place is that of temperature (Fitzjohn 2007, 39). The crossing point into the Mġarr valley at Ta' Mrajža, noted above, is also marked by a subtle change in microclimate, as sea breezes reach from the coast into the inner end of the valley, but are less of an influence further inland.

Environmental characteristics such as the ones considered above militate together to create of Mġarr a place apart. At different moments during the long history of its use by people, this separateness has acquired different meanings and connotations.

During the Neolithic, it appears that the naturally-ordained boundaries of micro-regions such as the Mġarr valley were adopted as units of cultural organisation. The emergence of monumental buildings around the mid-fourth millennium BC has provided us with what is presently our most reliable indicator of the distribution and organisation of the Neolithic population. As argued in greater detail elsewhere (Grima 2005, 2008), the distribution of monumental buildings shows a preference for locations

near areas of low slope which are favourable to agriculture. The valley bottoms between the parallel ridges of northwest Malta are very attractive in this respect, and the distribution of megalithic monuments suggests that they were a focus of Neolithic agricultural exploitation, and furthermore, that they were a significant influence on the formation of units of social organisation. The fertile valley bottom of the Mġarr valley was no exception, as attested by the two megalithic monuments of Ta' Haġrat and Skorba which stand on the north flank of the valley. We will return to the question of agricultural exploitation below. The main point being made here is that the geographical boundedness of the Mġarr micro-region lent itself to the creation of a cultural unit. The physical island of Mġarr was in this sense turned into a cultural one.

In more recent periods, the natural isolation of Mġarr was reinforced by historical circumstances. Through the late medieval and early modern period, it formed the south-western corner of the '*parte disabitata*' of Malta, which lay north of the Great Fault, considered too prone to piratical incursions to be safe for a substantial settlement (Abela 1647). The natural boundary of the Great Fault was adopted as a line of defence by the military strategists of the Knights of St John, who built the Naxxar Entrenchment (Spiteri 1994: 561) and the Falka Gap Entrenchment (Spiteri 1994: 566-567). These works were subsequently consolidated by the military engineers of the British Empire, who in the 19<sup>th</sup> century developed a continuous line of defences along the entire length of the fault, from coast to coast (Spiteri 1996: 371-399).

## Garden

If Mġarr is an island, it is no less a garden. Let us start with place-names, and let us start from the coast. Along its western edge, the broad valley-bottom of the Mġarr valley ends abruptly at the edge of the Upper Coralline



Fig. 4. The edge of the Upper Coralline Limestone drops sharply into the ravines that lead down to Ġnejna.

Limestone formation on which it lies (Figure 4). The edge of the Upper Coralline Limestone formation forms an inland cliff-face that drops vertically into a series of ravines, which in turn converge on a sandy beach. The bed and slopes of these ravines are sheltered by the steep cliffs that hem it in from nearly all directions, watered by the abundant springs that flow down from the perched water table on the Blue Clay formation, and cooled by the gentle sea breezes that are drawn up from the bay. As a result, this area of barely a square kilometre has a microclimate of its own, neatly epitomised by its toponym: il-Ġnejna, or ‘the little garden’. Every square foot of the ‘little garden’ has been transformed into carefully nursed fields and orchards, usually irrigated with spring water that is managed and distributed through stone channels. *Ġnien*, or garden, occurs in other toponyms around the Mġarr valley, in areas where there is a concentration of springs, such as il-Ġnien ta’ Torri Falka, il-Ġnien ta’ Bingemma, and il-Ġnien tas-Santi.

The principal Mġarr valley presents some of the same characteristics on a grander scale. The enclosure of the valley by escarpments

to north and south has already been noted. The valley bottom is characterized by a deep accumulation of sediments eroded down from the neighbouring ridges, to form a very level area of excellent agricultural land, about five square kilometres in extent. The faulting that lifted the ridges and dropped the valley also raised the impermeable clay layer, creating a perched water table, encouraging water to flow down into the valley in the form of springs. Once again, toponyms are instructive. Most etymologists agree that Mġarr is a corruption of *mġar*, the plural of *mġra*, a spring (Zammit 1929: 5-6, Deguara 1999: 4). Variants of the toponym are also used to distinguish different areas within the valley, referred to respectively as ‘L-Imġarr ta’ Ġewwa’ (inner Mġarr) and L-Imġarr ta’ Barra (outer Mġarr) (Abela 1647: 68, Deguara 1999: 5, 9). The area immediately south of Ta’ Haġrat is known as ‘Ta’ l-Ġhajj’, and even today, there are springs in the immediate vicinity of Ta’ Haġrat as well as Skorba (Vassallo 2000).

The attraction of this fertile niche in the landscape has drawn people to live here since

the earliest known settlement of the Maltese archipelago. David Trump's excavations at Skorba have eloquently attested to the continuous use of the site from the Ghar Dalam Phase (the first known phase of human habitation in the Maltese prehistoric sequence), sometime around 5,000 BC, through to the Bronze Age more than two thousand years later (Trump, this volume). One of the most remarkable developments took place after the site had been occupied for over a thousand years. In the midst of the modest huts that the inhabitants lived in, a new type of building suddenly made an appearance. Colossal boulders were prised from the rock and dragged and levered into place to form a structure that was unprecedented in scale and monumentality. This was among the first of the megalithic buildings that we nowadays refer to as the Megalithic Temples of Malta. Over thirty such buildings are known across Malta and Gozo. Multivariate analysis of their distribution in the landscape has shown that their location is far from random. The megalithic buildings are almost invariably located in places that enjoy ready access to the shore, are close to areas of low slope that favour agriculture, and are close to a perennial source of fresh water (Grima 2005, 2007). A preference for south-facing slopes is also noticeable.

These preferences are hardly surprising. As is most eloquently attested at Skorba, many of these monumental structures were built in places that had already been used by the inhabitants for several centuries, primarily for settlement purposes. The choice of location, therefore, appears to have been dictated by the considerations that are foremost in any agricultural settlement, namely proximity to land suitable for agriculture, and a reliable supply of fresh water. The megalithic buildings at Skorba and Ta' Ħaġrat are in this respect typical of the general pattern that may be witnessed across the archipelago. What is particular

about the case of Skorba and Ta' Ħaġrat is the persistence of the influence of environmental factors on human demography, which has resulted in an apparent recurrence in certain patterns of settlement.

Although there is evidence that the Mġarr valley continued to be exploited throughout the Phoenician, Roman and Byzantine periods, it does not yet permit a detailed discussion of demography. From the late medieval period onwards, however, written records shed some light on the matter.

From the end of the thirteenth century, the territory of Ghajn Tuffieħa is recorded as a highly-prized estate (Dalli 2006: 152), and it appears that the Mġarr valley itself was also intensively exploited during this period. The havoc wrought by visitations of the plague from the mid-fourteenth century onwards led to a decline in population, which was exacerbated by the great Moorish invasion of 1429, when up to a third of the Maltese population was dragged into slavery (Dalli 2006: 212). The picture during the fifteenth century is one of progressive depopulation of the north of Malta. The villages recorded in the vicinity of the Mġarr region in the fifteenth century were either located south of the Great Fault, or in the Wardija area, which was a little less vulnerable than the Mġarr valley to raids from the sea. By 1500, most of these villages appear to have been completely depopulated (Wettinger 1975: 185-192).

In spite of the persisting threat of corsair raids, several small hamlets are recorded around the Mġarr valley from the sixteenth century, which marks the beginning of a demographic recovery across the Maltese islands. Several of these hamlets, such as tal-Abatija, tas-Santi, and Bingemma, were huddled at the foot of the Great Fault, which offered the possibility of a quick retreat to safety when necessary. The hamlets of Mġarr and Żebbiegħ, on the other hand, stood on the north flank of the valley, and enjoyed no such security. Following the decline of the threat of piracy in the eighteenth century, the

hamlets at the foot of the Great Fault appear to have stopped growing, and eventually went into decline, with a high proportion of the residents emigrating abroad during the 1960s. The hamlets on the north flank, on the other hand, appear to have boomed during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to become the thriving settlements of the present day. Part of the explanation for this shift may be that the demography of the valley had been skewed by the extraneous factor of the fear of piracy. As this threat receded, the preference for the more attractive south-facing slopes could once again come to the fore. The attractiveness of the new village at Mġarr of course continued to be reinforced with the creation of the new parish church, the diversion of springs to provide a more abundant water supply, and the building of a school and municipal hall.

The curious fact is that the village of Mġarr is adjacent to the Neolithic monument of Ta' Ħaġrat, while Żebbiegħ is no less close to the site of Skorba. Once again, on reflection this fact is less curious than it may at first appear. Although separated by five millennia, the decision to adopt these locations for the early modern agricultural settlements were heavily influenced by the same considerations as the Neolithic settlements had been; a preference for south-facing slopes that afforded more sunlight hours and better shelter from the more prevalent northerly winds, located near a concentration of springs, and overlooking the fertile valley bottom.

We may speculate on one further possible instance of history being prompted by the local cultural geography to repeat itself over such a long span of time. When the communities of Mġarr and Żebbiegħ together became a separate parish in 1898, a debate began on the location of a new church for the parish. Village lore has it that some jockeying ensued between the two hamlets, as each vied to have the church located in their midst. It is said that a location midway between the two hamlets was considered at

one point, but Mġarr won the day in the end, and the first stone of the new parish church was laid there in 1912. The new church was raised on the same location as the much smaller church that had served the Mġarr community until then (Deguara 1999: 95-139). The story continues, however, that two generations later, the residents of Żebbiegħ finally redressed the balance when they started building a new church for the local community. Intriguingly enough, the latter is located a stone's throw from the site of Skorba, while the parish church of Mġarr is about the same distance from Ta' Ħaġrat. Without trying to read too much into these co-incidences (the hyphen is deliberate), the density of competitive interactions in this micro-region during the recent past is a useful heuristic device to help us imagine some of the possible interactions that may have inspired the building and positioning of monuments in the same micro-region during the Neolithic.

### Corridor

Island and garden perhaps, but certainly no isolated Garden of Eden. However sharply demarcated and tightly circumscribed, the Mġarr region is also connected to neighbouring areas and to the sea by a number of gateways, which have played a crucial role in its destiny. Each of these gateways, and the resulting networks of interaction and connectivity, deserves some attention in turn.

Let us start with access to, and from, the sea. The coast that defines the western boundary of the Mġarr region is characterised by a rocky and precipitous coastline, punctuated by three sandy beaches. In order to understand the role of these beaches in context, it is essential to bear in mind that practically the entire western coast of Malta is formed of vertiginous cliffs rising directly from the sea. Access points along this coastline are very few and far between,

and are generally far from ideal to beach or disembark from sea-craft of any description. The three sandy beaches of the Mġarr region are by far the most attractive embarkation and disembarkation points along the entire thirty kilometres of Malta's western coast. They are effectively a doorway between land and sea, and they have had momentous consequences for the destiny of the micro-region.

The importance of these bays in shaping human decisions about the use of the landscape is already evident in the Neolithic. As already noted above, the location of megalithic buildings across the archipelago appears to have been influenced by a preference for locations that had ready access to the shore. The concentration of megalithic buildings in the Mġarr micro-region, for instance, is in sharp contrast to the apparent absence of similar structures across the rather larger expanse of the Rabat-Dingli uplands to its south. One significant difference between these two microregions is that the Rabat-Dingli uplands, although adjacent to Malta's west coast, have a coastline formed of precipitous cliffs that barely afford any

embarkation points. During the Neolithic, therefore, it appears that activities requiring access to the sea formed an integral part of the islanders' taskscape of everyday life. Transport and communication within different parts of the archipelago, as well as with the world beyond, were no doubt at least as important a motive as exploitation of the sea for subsistence.

The specific location of megalithic buildings within the Mġarr microregion is also telling in this respect. Ta' Haġrat and Skorba are both arguably positioned near convenient routes that lead to the bays at Ġhajn Tuffieha as well as the one at Ġnejna. The megalithic site on Ras il-Pellegrin overlooks the point where the gradients down into the Ġnejna basin are at their most gentle, probably providing one of the easiest access points in prehistory (Figure 5). The megalithic building at il-Kuncizzjoni, in turn, overlooks a gorge that permits a person approaching from the direction of Ras il-Pellegrin and Ġnejna to scramble up and across the Great Fault, to proceed to the southern half of the island. The position

Fig. 5. Ras il-Pellegrin (left of picture) commands the easiest access route from the Mġarr Valley down to Ġnejna.





of the megalithic remains at Ta' Lippija, overlooking Ġnejna Bay, suggests that in this case, visual contact with the sea was at least as important a consideration as physical access to it. It is striking how the same headland appears to be used again and again as a point that visually commanded the bay and this part of the coast. Together with Ġhajj Tuffieħa, it is mentioned as one of the lookout points where a watch was maintained during the early fifteenth century (Dalli 2006: 216). Today, the watchtower built there by Grand Master Lascaris in the early seventeenth century still stands, a stone's throw away from the megalithic site.

The tower is a reminder that in certain periods, the sea has been perceived as a source of deadly danger. The history of Mġarr is replete with incidents when the accessibility of Mġarr from the sea exposed it to such danger. Perhaps the most momentous took place in May, 1565. On the morning of 18 May, a colossal armada of some two hundred vessels appeared over the horizon. This was the force sent by the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, with orders to

lay siege to and destroy the Christian forces on Malta. Although the armada approached from an easterly direction, it sailed round the south end of the island, unexpectedly bypassing the large and poorly defended harbour of Marsaxlokk, to sail up along the west coast. By dusk, the fleet lay off Mġarr. By dawn on 19 May, the entire region was swarming with enemy forces, who chose Mġarr to make their first landings (Figure 6). The first skirmish between the invaders and the defending Christian forces took place in the same area. (Spiteri 2005: 38-39).

The landing of the Christian relief force that eventually led to the lifting of the siege was planned to take place at Ġnejna and Ġhajj Tuffieħa (Spiteri 2005: 501). The landings actually took place in the bays along the Comino channel, from where the Christian forces marched to Mdina across the Mġarr valley and through the Falka Gap (Spiteri 2005: 501-515). One of the final battles with the retreating Turkish forces may have taken place around Torri Falka (Spiteri 2005: 513) (Figure 7).



Fig. 6. The Turkish armada landing the first invading troops at Mġarr in 1565. Detail from fresco cycle by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio in the palace of the President, Valletta (Photo by Daniel Cilia, by kind permission of the Office of the President).

Fig. 7. The retreat of the Turkish army. Torri Falka appears in the lower left, surrounded by Christian troops. Detail from fresco cycle by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio in the palace of the President, Valletta (Photo by Daniel Cilia, by kind permission of the Office of the President).



The events of 1565 cast a long shadow over popular memories and perceptions of the landscape. At the local level, the Turkish landings at Mġarr must have deeply impressed the inhabitants with the vulnerability of the region to attack by the sea, as well as demonstrating its attractiveness as a natural corridor from the easy anchorages in the northern part of Malta to the centre and south of the island. In spite of the apparent isolation of Mġarr, it is connected to neighbouring micro-regions by a series of passes, which deserve some more attention here.

As already noted, a series of parallel ridges divide northwest Malta into a succession of fertile valley bottoms. The ridges themselves are relatively bare, windswept, and prone to erosion. The sides of the ridges are often steep and abrupt, forming an inland cliff-face that is only occasionally interrupted by a gap in the faultline or a water-worn ravine. Such gaps and ravines became passes for human movement across the ridges, and gateways from one valley bottom to the next. The ridge forming the south flank of the Mġarr valley, for instance, has three such passes. From

west to east, these are the passes at tas-Santi, Bingemma Gap, and the Falka Gap. Each of these has served as a node of human activity and connectivity across long periods of time.

The pass at tas-Santi is formed by a small valley on the west flank of Fort Bingemma. Immediately beneath the pass, at the ecotone where the ridge gives way to the valley bottom, stands the hamlet of is-Santi, exploiting the optimal balance between access to the agricultural land of the valley, the presence of springs fed from the perched aquifer below the ridge, and the convenience offered by the pass. Until the eighteenth century, this pass also represented the security of a rapid escape route into the safer *parte abitata* of the island. A chapel and cemetery were recorded at tas-Santi in 1615 (Deguara 1999: 75). The core of the hamlet is formed by three substantial buildings which carry the armorial bearings of successive Grand Masters of the Order of St John. The large storage spaces and mangers in this establishment suggest that one of its main purposes was to serve as a staging post for communication with and surveillance of the north of the island.

The central pass from the uplands south of the Great Fault down into the Mġarr valley is the Bingemma Gap. Once again, a hamlet is present at the foot of the pass, exploiting the same ecotonal and strategic opportunities that have been noted at Tas-Santi. Here too, a substantial building that may have served as a store and stables carries the armorial bearings of a Grand Master, Cotoner in this case. The repetitive deployment of such establishments at watering-holes along passes, also mirrored in the Ghajn Tuffieha pass north of the Mġarr Valley, suggests a deliberate strategy to create an infrastructure to support a network of communication, transport and defence across the more vulnerable part of the island.

Bingemma Gap is dense with evidence of earlier human activity. During the Roman period, a series of burial chambers were hewn into the north flank of the ravine that forms the pass. On its south flank, a small catacomb was hewn into the rock just below the brow of the ridge. The choice of this location for such a concentration of burial activity is only partially explained by the favourable topography and geology, because equally

favourable rock escarpments abound all along the Great Fault. The choice of the pass as a site of burial may well have had added significance. Located immediately outside the agricultural territory of the Mġarr valley, it is positioned at a liminal point in the landscape, along the most direct route to the capital Melite, on the site of present day Rabat and Mdina. The choice of such a liminal location is in keeping with burial practices in the ancient world, adapted and interpreted in the local landscape.

The funerary use and symbolic elaboration of the Bingemma Gap continued in modern times. In 1636, a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Hodegetria, with an adjacent burial ground, was recorded in the same area (Deguara 1999: 77). The dedication of the chapel refers to an iconographic type very popular in Byzantine painting, reputedly inspired by an icon of the Virgin traditionally attributed to St Luke, venerated for centuries in the Hodegon Monastery in Constantinople (Albani 1994: 62-65, Papadopoulou 1994: 84-87). An image following this iconographic type was recorded in the chapel at Bingemma



Fig. 8. The chapel of the Virgin Hodegetria, perched over the Falka Gap. The wall on the right forms part of the Victoria Lines.



Fig. 9. The view north from the ridge overlooking the Falka Gap.

in 1636 (Deguara 1999: 77). In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the chapel at Bingemma was rebuilt in its present location, perched on the south lip of the ravine, directly over the catacomb referred to earlier (Deguara 1999: 80-81) (Figure 8).

Moving east again, the third pass is the Falka Gap, which provides the most direct route from Mgarr to the central plain, the harbour area, and the south of the island. Here there is even more evidence of the importance given to the pass across long periods of time. In 1927, cave deposits in the ridge overlooking the gap yielded evidence of use during the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (Evans 1971: 39). This strategic position not only overlooks the pass itself, but commands views of the entire Mgarr Valley and the sea beyond, as well as the northeast coast and the Mosta-Naxxar-Gharghur

ridge (Figure 9). As a result, the site not only controls the Falka Gap, but permits surveillance of most approaches from the northern part of the island. This is evidently one of the most critical vantage points from which to monitor the boundary formed by the Great Fault.

The strategic value of this location appears to have been recognized and exploited during successive stages in the island's history. Near the place that yielded evidence of prehistoric use, on the overlying outcrop known as Ġnien ta' Torri Falka, a substantial structure appears to have existed at least from the Roman period. The evidence of paved floors and massive architecture suggest a building of some importance. By the late Middle Ages the same site, and probably the very same building, appears to have been adapted into the tower that gives the area its name, the

Fig. 10. Torri Falka is clearly labelled as an important feature of the sixteenth-century landscape in this representation of Malta. Detail from fresco cycle by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio in the palace of the President, Valletta (Photo by Daniel Cilia, by kind permission of the Office of the President).



position of which is marked on several early modern maps and paintings (Figure 10), and which was still standing until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Spiteri 2005: 505). Abela reports that ‘Torre Falca’ took its name from the surname of a family that was already extinct in his day, and that the surrounding territory was administered by the Fondazione Paola (1647: 70). The role played by the Falka Gap during the siege of 1565 has already been noted above.

Today, the principal access road to Mġarr runs through the Falka Gap. The 18<sup>th</sup> century Falka Gap Entrenchment crosses this road precisely at Ta’ Mrajġa, the point where, as noted earlier, a person approaching Mġarr on this road enters the viewscape of the Mġarr valley (Figure 11). Until the twentieth century, the breach in the entrenchment formed by the road was flanked by two pillars surmounted by armorial bearings (Figures 12, 13, 14 and 15). The arrangement of ornate pillars flanking a breach in a defensive line follows a formula that is known from other fortifications in Malta as well as the military treatises of the period (Spiteri 2008: 256). Although heavily eroded, the armorial bearings at Ta’ Mrajġa



appear to represent the quartered arms of a Grand Master of the Order. In a meeting of military, practical and aesthetic considerations, the point ordained by topography as the place where one entered the Mġarr viewscape was further monumentalized by these markers. Here was the gateway where one left the security of the *parte abitata* for the hazards of the *parte disabitata*. It was at this point that

Fig. 11. Plan showing the entrenchment designed to plug the Falka Gap from the steep escarpments of Xifer il-Kief (bottom) to Dwejra heights (top). The escutcheons mounted on pillars stood on either side of the road at the point where it interrupts the entrenchment. The annotation ‘Terreno della Fondazione’ refers to Fondazione Paola. The position of Falka Tower is clearly indicated, and coincides with the position of the Roman structure. ‘Grotte’ records the presence of caves nearby, which have yielded evidence of prehistoric use. (Photo by Dr Stephen Spiteri, by kind permission of the Director, National Library of Malta).



Fig. 12. Photograph dated 29 March 1933, taken from the north, of the pillars carrying armorial bearings that flanked the road through Ta’ Mrajġa at the point where it crossed the Falka Gap entrenchment.

Fig. 13. Photograph dated 29 March 1933, showing the armorial bearings on the east side of road.



Fig. 14. Detail from Survey Sheet 48, showing the position of the pillars at ta' Mrajža. Office of Public Works, 1902.



one left behind the comforting view of the fortified citadel of Mdina towering over the rolling central plain, to be replaced by views of the Mġarr valley and the sea beyond, a constant source of danger. In every sense, here was a liminal point in the landscape, where one entered a place apart.

To the north of the Mġarr valley, the boundary formed by the Wardija Ridge once

again restricts movement into three passes, each formed by ravines that interrupt the steep escarpments formed by the north face of the ridge. Moving from west to east, these are the Ghajn Tuffieħa route, tal-Palma, and San Martin. As in the case of the passes noted along the southern boundary of the Mġarr valley, a modern road runs through each of these routes today. There is also evidence of use of the same routes over long periods of time. The Neolithic site of Skorba, in use from the earliest known period of human occupation of the islands, lies at the point where the three routes converge. A possible dolmen that may date from the Bronze Age stands on the crest of the eastern flank of the tal-Palma route. Below it, a series of caves, known as l-Gherien ta' Ximmu, overlook the pass. Although they still await systematic investigation, they show evidence of prolonged and intensive use for agricultural and domestic purposes. The Roman bath complex and the early modern hamlet along the Ghajn Tuffieħa route are well known. Along the San Martin route, the Qala ta' San Martin may have served as a Bronze Age

stronghold, while a troglodytic chapel along the pass is still in use today.

The microregion of Mġarr evidently served as a node of connectivity with the northern part of the island. Passes provided a link between the agricultural communities that inhabited the neighbouring valleys in different periods, as well as a corridor for forces that came from far beyond the micro-region.

### Limitations

The portrait of the landscape drawn here is a poor sketch at best, which does not do justice to the dense tapestry of human encounters and webs of significance that have been woven over this landscape across the millennia. The narrative presented here has glossed over many gaps in the evidence. In particular, many questions about the chronology of continuities and discontinuities in human responses to this environment have been left unanswered. The story told here needs to continue to be enriched by contributions such as those in the present volume, with a research agenda to broaden and deepen our knowledge of the archaeological, archival, and palaeoenvironmental evidence at the scale of the micro-region.

### Conclusions

Three main conclusions may be drawn. The first is that this account, however sketchy, demonstrates, if any demonstration was needed, how inseparable human activity is from its landscape setting, and that the way we narrate the story of this activity is richer when we take it into account. The three strands that have been followed here are effectively inseparable. The fertility of Mġarr as garden has drawn people to exploit it, even in periods when this part of the island was relatively unsafe. The geographic distinctness

of Mġarr as island led to its becoming an organisational unit, during the Neolithic perhaps no less than today. The networks of connectivity that join Mġarr as corridor to the surrounding world have helped define the shifting demographic patterns at the micro-scale of the valley. Considered together, the three strands have shown how people responded to the constraints and opportunities presented by the micro-region in different periods.

The second conclusion concerns the scale of analysis. The micro-region is evidently a useful scale of analysis in order to grasp such interactions. The local case of Mġarr is in many ways a microcosm of processes taking place all across Malta. Yet it is through thick description of individual instances at the local scale that the lived experience of landscape is most faithfully portrayed.

The third conclusion concerns continuity and change over time. The diachronic treatment used here has underlined how enduring features of the landscape have repeatedly conditioned human behaviour across long periods of time. A long-term approach that cuts across traditional chronological boundaries is useful to understand slow shifts in human responses to changes in the environment that were more gradual still.

### Acknowledgements

*We are indebted to Joanne Mallia and MariaElena Zammit for their meticulous and supportive editing. Joanne Mallia provided invaluable help with all matters GIS. We are grateful to Dr Stephen Spiteri for his invaluable advice on the Falga Gap entrenchment, and for permission to use the photograph reproduced as Fig. 11, and to Daniel Cilia for permission to use the photographs reproduced as Figs. 6, 7 and 10. We are also grateful to Fr John Sammut and Ġanni Bonnici for supplying much of the information about the pillars at Ta' Mrajġa.*

Opposite  
Fig. 15. A copy of Grand Master Vilhena's armorial bearings, cast in concrete, presently in the grounds of the Targa Gap School of Arts & Crafts. In 1948, the sculptor Ġanni Bonnici, then a student at the School of Art in Valletta, was commissioned to produce this copy and one of the matching coat-of-arms representing the cross of the Religion, to replace the deteriorated stone originals. The copies remained at Ta' Mrajġa, facing each other across the road, until a road widening project in the 1970s (Ġanni Bonnici, personal communication, March 2009).

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