

## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE DISTRIBUTION OF XAGHRA PLACE-NAMES IN MALTA

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ONE of the most characteristic features of the Maltese landscape is the man-made field. Numerous writers have commented on the topic including Boisgelin<sup>1</sup> who described the processes involved in the construction of the fields as follows:

'Necessity, the parent of industry, has taught the Maltese to make a sort of artificial land in the barren parts of the island. They begin by levelling the rock which, however, they allow to incline a little, that all superabundant water may run off. They then heap together some stones broken into small pieces of an irregular form, which they place about a foot high, and cover with a bed of the same stones nearly reduced to powder. On this, they first place a bed of earth, brought either from other parts of the island or taken out of clefts of the rocks; then a bed of dung and afterwards a second bed of earth ...' Over large areas of the Maltese islands the arable land has been built-up in just this manner. The process has presumably been operative for thousands of years and there is documentary evidence of its scope and form during the last four centuries.

In general, during the last four hundred years, the Maltese islands have experienced rapid population growth and increasing dependence upon outside sources for foodstuffs. In these conditions the rulers of the islands have been anxious to increase food production by enlarging the cultivated area. Now clearly all the easily cultivable land would be farmed and any extension of the arable area had to take place onto land which was frequently little better than bare rock. In Maltese bare rocky areas are usually referred to as xaghra; if the area is thinly and unevenly covered with soil then the term used is moxa.<sup>2</sup> In the normal course of events such land is improved very slowly. The thin patches of soil in the moxa are occasionally exploited; after a while bunds may be built to help retain and collect the soil and possibly in time a group of fields will be created. Similarly, established farmers would take in small patches of rocky ground lying close to the land they were already cultivating. Approached in this way the extension of the cultivated area proceeded slowly but successfully.

<sup>1</sup> Louis de Boisgelin, *Ancient and Modern Malta*, 2 vols, London, 1805, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> W.A. Charlton, *Trends in the Economic Geography of Malta Since 1800*, Ph.D. thesis, Durham, 1960, p. 113.

There have been periods when the authorities have attempted to promote a more rapid rate of expansion by offering inducements to farmers to encourage them to bring rocky ground into cultivation. Normally inducements took the form of land grants on perpetual or very long leases at nominal rents. Under this system of emphyteusis the lessee was obliged to bring the land to cultivation and in the case of a non-perpetual agreement, at the end of the contract the land and all the improvements, reverted to the lessor.

In 1627<sup>3</sup> the Università of Mdina petitioned the Order of St. John that it might be granted large areas of rocky ground, usually referred to in contemporary documents as *spazio publico*, in order that the land would eventually be brought into cultivation. The Order assented to this petition and similar grants of land were also made to the Università of the Three Cities<sup>4</sup> and Gozo.<sup>5</sup> These were outright gifts of land and the various Università then acted as development agents, leasing and letting the land to farmers. At the same time as the Order was making land grants to the Università it was making gifts of small parcels of land to individuals.

There was no shortage of peasants willing to colonise the land made available and whilst many attempted developments were unsuccessful during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the cultivated area was undoubtedly extended. Abela<sup>6</sup> states that the district of Xwieki, which lies to the north of Birkirkara, had been reclaimed 'by the industry of the peasants' and planted with trees and vines. By the end of the eighteenth century the effects of field-building were quite noticeable and Ciantar<sup>7</sup> records that the productivity of the Island had been greatly increased as a result of many *spazi pubblici* having been brought into cultivation.

At one period in the seventeenth century something approaching a land fever seems to have developed with peasants busily collecting earth for new fields from open spaces, the roads and even the fortifications and their ditches.<sup>8</sup> In 1664 the collecting of earth in Floriana was forbidden<sup>9</sup> and in the following year it was prohibited all over the island unless a licence was obtained.<sup>10</sup> This bando was reissued on a number of occasions during the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> A bando, issued early in the eight-

<sup>3</sup> Royal Malta Library (hereafter R.M.L.) 670, f. 57.

<sup>4</sup> G.F. Abela, *Descrizione di Malta*, Malta, 1647, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> R.M.L. 670, ff. 71v-72v.

<sup>6</sup> Abela, op. cit. 1647, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> G.A. Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata*, 1772, p. 406

<sup>8</sup> R.M.L. 641, 1697, f. 232..

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, f. 143.

<sup>10</sup> R.M.L. 1216, f. 461.

<sup>11</sup> R.M.L. 429, 1722-36 and R.M.L. 420, 1765-72.

<sup>12</sup> R.M.L. 429, 1722-1736.

eenth century, suggests that there may have been a tendency for unauthorised enclosure of the xaghra to take place for it restrained the population from erecting walls without a licence.<sup>12</sup>

Many peasants failed to bring the land they had leased or been given, to cultivation. There were a number of factors involved in this. Many individuals no doubt gave up the 'land' when other opportunities for employment came along. Marginal areas, being developed by poor families lacking in capital, were very liable to succumb in times of recession, plague or famine. There are a number of documentary references to failures of this type.

We know that there was still plenty of poor quality land waiting to be improved at the end of the order's rule, for in 1802 Ball, the British civil commissioner, reported that 'one third part of the Island is still uncultivated, and that the greatest part is the property of Government and susceptible of considerable improvement.'<sup>13</sup> Ball was apparently unaware that attempts had been made to cultivate some of this land earlier.

During the first half of the nineteenth century there was a great deal of discussion as to the feasibility of improving the crown lands. However, it was not until the middle of the century that anything positive was done but when the work was started it was undertaken on a large scale, particularly in the north and west. Villages (e.g. Mellieha and Mgarr), roads and tracks were laid out and a large number of farmers given long term, usually 99 year, emphyteutical leases. Again the colonisation was not a complete success, and many farmers failed to bring their land into cultivation.

The accompanying figure is an attempt to indicate the areas of Malta most affected by field-building and the extent to which the present landscape has been influenced by the process.

The map was constructed in the following manner. As many place-names as possible indicating karstland or xaghra were collected from documents and the six inches to one mile map of the Island. The most common karst names are xaghra, gebel, qortin and moxa. The names were then placed on the map and the area to which they were attached examined for present day land-use. Aerial photographs were used for this purpose. The names were then differentiated under four headings. Firstly, all xaghra place-names associated at present with agricultural land. Secondly, all such names associated with agricultural land of marginal quality. Thirdly, xaghra names associated with karstland. Fourthly, a number of defunct xaghra place-names were found in seventeenth and eighteenth century documents and the land to which they formerly referred is today

<sup>13</sup> P.R.O., 10. 158. 3, f. 226.

arable. It is clear from the map that in a number of areas arable land has been created on what was formerly karst.

Such an analysis of place-name evidence is of course non-specific in time for we are unable to decide whether the arable land was created under the British, the Order or at earlier periods. The analysis also fails to take account of former areas of karst where the names indicative of this state have disappeared completely. However the place-name evidence cited above is a useful indicator of the extent of a process which has been of great importance in Maltese agricultural history.

