

*The Tal-Callus and Simblija estates at  
Wied ir-Rum and Wied Ħażrun (Malta):  
An enigma resolved*

**Abstract**

The fertile nature of the agricultural territories of Wied ir-Rum and Wied Ħażrun is due to the availability of a series of man-excavated perennial spring sources and the employment of terraced cultivation irrigated by gravity-fed water systems. This agricultural framework probably dates to either the twelfth or the thirteenth centuries AD and seemingly formed part of a centrally coordinated effort, aimed at increasing the agricultural output of specifically designated countryside areas. This paper evaluates the validity of previously published data on the Late Medieval agricultural estates of Tal-Callus and Simblija located at Wied ir-Rum and the adjoining Wied Ħażrun respectively. Furthermore, it also presents formerly unpublished documentation, an analysis of which led to the secure identification of the Tal-Callus estate. Prior to this study, this estate's location was uncertain.

**Introduction: Location and Geology**

Wied ir-Rum in north-west Malta, together with the close-by Wied Ħażrun is one of the most fertile districts of the island, well known for its water sources and the quality of its cultivated crops (Fig. 1). The valley

is composed of a number of adjoining *giardini*.<sup>1</sup> In 1647, G. F. Abela listed these as *La Kattara, Tal Callus, Ta' Scieref, Di Baldu* and *Di S. Giacomo* (Fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> Abela's description of Wied ir-Rum – “*Valle de' Christiani Greci, amena, e piena di giardini d'ambe le parti, che rapresentano all'occhio una bellissima veduta, e somministrano al gusto buonissima frutta*”,<sup>3</sup> and its environs, gives the impression of a series of long established orchards, dependent on reliable water sources. Field research has demonstrated that these *giardini* were not only provided with a series of perched aquifer springs originating from man-excavated galleries (Fig. 1), but most, originally contained rock-excavated dwellings.<sup>4</sup>

Both Wied ir-Rum and Wied Ħażrun are river valleys, carved out of an Upper Coralline Limestone outcrop due to rain water action. Four subdivisions of Upper Coralline Limestone have been identified in Malta, but only two of these are visibly evident at Wied ir-Rum: the Tal-Pitkal Member and the Mtarfa Member.<sup>5</sup> The Tal-Pitkal Member is a hard, compact deposit consisting of pale-grey coarse grained wackstones and packstones containing a diversity of fauna inclusions.<sup>6</sup> Mtarfa Member is composed of friable carbonate mudstone and wackstones<sup>7</sup> and can be cut with relative ease. Underlying Mtarfa Member is a Blue Clay deposit.<sup>8</sup> Until the discovery of the mean-sea-level aquifer,<sup>9</sup> Blue Clay was the most important of all Maltese geological deposits. It is because of the presence of a Blue Clay deposit, that a perched aquifer exists at Wied ir-Rum and its neighbouring regions. Apart from field observations and other documentary sources of evidence, the association of both valley

1 Possible modern equivalents to *giardino* (pl. *giardini*) include orchards, plantations, garden, market gardens and even possibly small-holdings. For the purpose of this study, any reference to *giardino* or *giardini*-type properties will be given in its original form.

2 Gian Francesco Abela 1647, p. 65. The modern equivalents of these toponyms are Il-Qattara; Simblija; Tax-Xieref; Ta' Baldu; and Ta' San Ġakbu.

3 Abela describes Wied ir-Rum as, “The valley of the Greek Christians which abounds with horticultural gardens and which presents the visitor with a beautiful view and good tasting fruit”. See Gian Francesco Abela 1647, p. 65.

4 On the widespread nature of troglodytism in north and north-west Malta as well as perched aquifer gallery water capture systems see Keith Buhagiar 2007; Keith Buhagiar 2012.

5 Pedley 1993, Sheet 1.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 It was only from 1856 onwards, that attempts to tap a mean-sea-level aquiferous source were made. See Morris 1952, p. 4.

systems with the Late Medieval period,<sup>10</sup> is strongly hinted at by a 1551 cartographic representation of Malta by Antonio Lafreri.<sup>11</sup> This depicts the islands of Malta, Comino and Cominotto and a small section of the south-facing Gozitan coast. The map reproduces fifty-one toponyms, a rather extensive road network and several water-related features. On the other hand, the principal significance of the map lies in the fact that it represents a well-defined valley system, located on the west coast of Malta, wedged in-between the settlements of *Tartarni* and *Migiario* (Fig. 3). The latter place-name probably demarcates the location of the present-day Mġarr settlement. Marked as *vallone giardini*, the spatial location of the only marked valley in this section of Malta corresponds to that of Wied ir-Rum and Wied Hażrun.<sup>12</sup> Depicted on the map is what appears to be a watercourse passing through the valley bed and trees are shown bordering the southern valley side. Wied ir-Rum is not mentioned by name, but the valley shape and location leave little doubt as to its identity.

## Hydrological resources

Apart from a seasonal water course flowing through the basin of both valleys, the life source of Wied ir-Rum and Wied Hażrun consists of a series of rock-excavated galleries which capture water from the perched aquifer (Fig. 1).<sup>13</sup> The volume of collected water varies from gallery to gallery, but most still supply the *giardini* in which they are located with a perennial water supply sufficient to allow crop cultivation during the arid summer months. Perched aquifer galleries are difficult to date, but considering the landscape context within which they are placed, as well as key documentary sources of evidence, a number of these can

10 As the terminology employed in this chapter lacks standardisation, an explanation of it, within the context of the Maltese medieval historical framework, is necessary. 'Early Medieval' encompasses the mid-sixth to the tenth centuries AD and includes the Byzantine and the early Muslim periods. 'High Medieval' encompasses the late tenth till the early thirteenth centuries AD and, in a local chronological framework, involved the late Muslim and Norman periods. 'Late Medieval' encompasses the late thirteenth century until the arrival of the Hospitaller Knights of the Order of St John in Malta in 1530. 'Early Modern' refers to the post-1530 period and ends in 1798 with the capitulation of Malta by the Hospitaller Knights to the French forces.

11 Agius-Vadalà - Ganado 1986, p. 6.

12 Agius-Vadalà and Ganado associate the *Vallone Giardini* location with the neighbouring Mtaħleb *giardino*. See Agius-Vadalà - Ganado 1994, p. 8.

13 A total of twenty-four galleries have been recorded from Wied ir-Rum alone.

be directly linked with the Late Medieval period.<sup>14</sup> It is through the implementation of this perched aquifer gallery infrastructure that the agricultural yield of many *giardini* in north and north-west Malta was amplified, thus enabling the cultivation of a third crop during the arid summer season.

### The agricultural estates

**Simblija:** The government-owned tenement at Simblija consists of garigue and agricultural land at the point of intersection between Wied ir-Rum and Wied Ħażrun. Located at map reference 42904 69895, the Simblija nucleus of habitation, an adjoining *centimolo* compound, its water management systems and arable land are a fine example of an excellently preserved Late Medieval agrarian *giardino* framework (Figs. 4, 5 & 6). Owing its preservation to the remote location in which it is placed, the Simblija estate also conserves traces of a series of rock-excavated units.<sup>15</sup> Simblija first became the focus of scholarly interest and study in 1995 when a rural structure built to rest against a near vertical rock-ledge, was, due to its architectural idiosyncrasies, identified as a probable Late Medieval rural church.<sup>16</sup> This construction has three built elevations and is covered by means of a stone roof carried on three diaphragm arches (Fig. 5). Its interior has intimate proportions, but should it have been utilised for the purpose of cultic worship, it could have easily accommodated a congregation of ca. fifteen to twenty individuals. Together with a subterranean *centimolo* or animal operated wheat-grinding mill (Fig. 5), and an adjoining kitchen unit, the presumed church structure occupied the focal node of the Simblija estate and was fronted by a man-made terrace or *misraħ* (Fig. 4).<sup>17</sup>

14 For detailed data on Maltese perched aquifer galleries and their tentative dating see Keith Buhagiar 2014.

15 The Simblija place-name never appeared in the seventeenth to nineteenth Government documentation for property in Wied ir-Rum and Wied Ħażrun. See Saliba *et al.* 2002, p. 20.

16 The archaeological and historical relevance of the Simblija estate was first recognised by Prof. Alain Blondy, formerly of the University of Paris (Paris IV), Sorbonne. See Mario Buhagiar 2002a, p. XV; Mario Buhagiar 2005, pp. 51-54.

17 Dr Stephen C. Spiteri tentatively identifies the wall demarcating the eastern boundary of the *misraħ* at Simblija as a 'ridge defence' structure possibly constructed towards the beginning of the twentieth century. See Saliba *et al.* 2002, pp. 37-38.

More historical coverage on the Simblija estate can be obtained from *cabreo* documentation.<sup>18</sup> The first Maltese *cabrei* manuscripts were commissioned in the opening decades of the seventeenth century.<sup>19</sup> These belong to the time-period when the Knights of the Order of St John recognised the need to employ the use of this mode of documentation, probably in a bid to record and catalogue the extent of Maltese and Gozitan possessions acquired with their takeover of Malta.<sup>20</sup> The emerging scenario indicates that between 1530 and the first half of the seventeenth century, rural government territories received scant attention by the Order's administrative entities, thus making it likely that the agricultural framework and infrastructure discussed within betrays a pre-1530 situation.<sup>21</sup> More detailed descriptions of government owned properties were included in subsequent *cabreo* editions compiled in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>22</sup>

*Cabreo* documentation frequently provides the earliest known historical coverage for a number of government-owned agricultural estates. Simblija is a case in point and a description of it was included in the *Cabreo Antico della Procura delle Distribuzioni* dating to 1621. Apart from detailing the various tree species growing within this estate, the *Cabreo Antico della Procura* also describes the partly rock-excavated, partly masonry-built structures in the *misraħ* area of the estate. It also makes mention of a series of water-related features: (i) a *cisterna rutta* located in the *misraħ* area close to the presumed church entrance; (ii) a *grotta con acqua bona*; and (iii) a fountain located alongside a public road (Figs. 2 & 7).<sup>23</sup> It also mentions a deconsecrated church located within Wied Hażrun.

- 18 A *cabreo* (pl. *cabrei*) manuscript is a collection of maps, plans of buildings and landscape views representing public or privately owned property. These are normally bound together in a single volume in which there is also a descriptive text section which corresponds to the illustrations presented. See Ginori Lisci 1978, p. 20; Zammit Lupi 2002, p. 59. Zammit Lupi derived most of her information from the text by Ginori Lisci, a copy of which was passed on to the author of this chapter by Dr N. C. Vella of the Department of Classics and Archaeology at the University of Malta.
- 19 The earliest documentary evidence for the Simblija estate comes from the *Cabreo Antico della Procura delle Distribuzioni* dating to 1621. See NLM. Treas. A. 74.
- 20 Blouet 1963, p. 72. See also Vella - Spiteri 2008, p. 22.
- 21 Keith Buhagiar 2014, pp. 158-61.
- 22 Of particular interest for the eighteenth century are NLM. Treas. B. 290, 291 and 292. In many instances these detail further the data given in *cabreo* 289. The Descriptive Plans of the Crown Property *cabrei* compiled between 1861 and 1867 are a valuable nineteenth-century source of evidence. See NAM. Descriptive Plans of the Crown Property, 1861, 1862, 1866 and 1867.
- 23 NLM. Treas. A. 74, f. 136. The Simblija place-name never appeared in the seventeenth to nineteenth-century Government documentation for property in Wied ir-Rum and Wied Hażrun. See Saliba *et al.* 2002, p. 20.

The *Cabreo Antico della Procura* lacks a site plan indicating the location of the aforementioned features. Nevertheless, the available textual description is sufficiently detailed as to allow an identification of most of these features. The *grotta con acqua bona* reference, probably corresponds to that of a perched aquifer gallery located in Wied Hāzrun at map reference 42970 69795. This consists of a roughly circular-shaped man-excavated water collection basin which receives a perennial water source captured by means of an adjoining perched aquifer gallery tunnelling into an Mtarfa Member outcrop. An exposed underlying Blue Clay deposit provides the adjoining basin with excellent water retention capabilities. Access to the water gallery is unfortunately hindered by unstable rock deposits, making the investigation of its interior a hazardous ordeal.<sup>24</sup> In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *cabreo* documentation for Simblija, this same water source is indicated as a *fontana* or water fountain.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the investigation of the *cisterna rutta* in the *misraħ* area of Simblija is still a *desideratum*. Its future scientific examination might yield items of cultural interest which will in turn increase our knowledge on the Simblija estate and the dating of the cultural landscape it forms part of.

**Tal-Callus:** The tenement of Tal-Callus belonged to the physician and popular hero Josephus Callus, who was convicted of high treason and condemned to death in 1561 for reasons which need not be specified in this chapter.<sup>26</sup> According to the 1575 Visitation Report compiled by Pietro Dusina, a church present in the Tal-Callus *giardino* was dedicated to St Nicholas.<sup>27</sup> Evidence for a church in the Callus property is further corroborated by notarial deeds.<sup>28</sup> Confusion concerning the identity of the church may have arisen from the fact that in one of these deeds, it

24 Farming folk identify this perched aquifer gallery as Id-Demus. See Saliba *et al.* 2002, p. 35.

25 NLM, Treas. B. 292, ff. 27, 106, 108; NAM, Descriptive Plans of the Crown Property, 1867, f. 496.

26 Buhagiar - Fiorini 1996, p. 502.

27 Dusina's description of the church of St Nicholas reads as follows: "*Visitavit Ecclesiam ruralem Sancti Nicolai constructam intus viridarium, quod fuit quondam Josephi Callus, et modo Jllustrissimi Domini Magni Magistri, sitam in dicto loco Guedrum alias in dicta Ecclesia celebrabatur officium in die festivitatis suæ, et alebant pauperes; Bene esset, etiam hoc ad memoriam eiusdem Jllustrissimi et Reverendissimi Domini Magni Magistri reducere, qui pro sua devotione potius augebit quam quicumque diminuat de huiusmodi obligatione mandabitque illi satisfieri*". See Aquilina - Fiorini, 2001, pp. 169-70.

28 A notarial deed dating to 1514 makes mention of a newly built church in the Callus property. See Fiorini 2003, p. 24.

is listed as Ta' Santa Marija – a title by which the church continued to be referred to until its deconsecration in 1646.<sup>29</sup>

It appears that the Tal-Callus tenement at Wied ir-Rum was already in the ownership of the Callus family in 1467.<sup>30</sup> A deed drawn up by Notary Bonello in September 1467 documents the transfer of property between Antonius Busalib and Antonius Callus, both residents of the Civitas. Busalib renounced in favour of Callus all the rights over a field and a meadow at Wied ir-Rum. Callus, on the other hand, renounced his rights over half the water-yield of a *fonte aquarum* called Il-Fawwara ta' Wied ir-Rum.<sup>31</sup> Notarial deeds for the Tal-Callus property dating to the sixteenth century also give an insight into land use practices adopted during this period. There is documentation to show that on various occasions, Josephus Callus leased out the Tal-Callus *giardino* to third parties, but reserved for his own personal use access to the church, house, the collection of brushwood from the southernmost section of the property, and the right of access to three peach trees.<sup>32</sup> In a will dating to 1548, it emerges that it was customary for this property to be divided into a number of separate portions. These consisted of the already mentioned church and house, a small *giardino*, and another stretch of land.<sup>33</sup> As evidenced by the Dusina visitation report, it appears that in 1575 the Callus property had already been confiscated and come to form part of the Grand Master's estates.<sup>34</sup>

In a past publication concerning the study of the landscape and irrigation systems at Simblija,<sup>35</sup> the Tal-Callus *giardino* was tentatively associated with the Simblija estate.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, when writing on the Tal-Callus estate in 2003, Stanley Fiorini maintained that Simblija

29 Fiorini 2003, p. 24. Nineteenth-century documentation states that this *giardino* was located close to a church dedicated to S. *Andrea*. See NLM, Treas. B. 291, f. 15. It is unclear to which church of S. *Andrea* this *cabreo* entry is referring to. In the *Rurales Civitatis Veter* section of the Pietro Dusina 1575 report, there is no church listed as having such a dedication. See Aquilina - Fiorini 2001, pp. 166-73.

30 Fiorini 2003, p. 24. According to 1867 *cabreo* documentation, the section of the Wied ir-Rum valley within which the Tal-Callus estate is located is called *Wiet Zaifi*. See NAM, Descriptive Plans of the Crown Property, 1867, f. 606.

31 Fiorini 2005, pp. 26-27.

32 Fiorini 2003, p. 23.

33 *Ibid.*, 2003, p. 24.

34 Aquilina - Fiorini 2001, pp. 169-70.

35 Saliba *et al.* 2002.

36 This area was erroneously marked as *Is-Simblu* on the 1973 (SS 4269) and 1993 (SS 4269) editions of the Malta Survey Sheets having a scale of 1:2,500. The 1922 and 1959 Survey Sheets 85, however, clearly indicate the place-name of this area as *Is-Simblija*.

and Tal-Callus where two distinct properties.<sup>37</sup> Confusion on this matter probably stemmed from the fact that both Tal-Callus and Simblija adjoin another *giardino*-type estate known as Il-Qattara.<sup>38</sup>

Fiorini's observations were based on a notarial deed dated to 11 October 1514 which described the easternmost section of the Tal-Callus estate as bordering with the Il-Qattara territory.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the 1514 deed stated that the southernmost boundary of the Tal-Callus *giardino* was marked by a ravine. Working on this evidence, Fiorini concluded that the Tal-Callus property was located in the shelter of Wied ir-Rum, at the approximate map reference of 42500 70000,<sup>40</sup> and not as formerly stated, on the nearby headland of Is-Simblija.<sup>41</sup> The investigation and analysis of archival data in the form of *cabreo* documentation confirmed that a section of this estate lies within a stretch of Wied ir-Rum valley that Fiorini had already proposed as belonging to the Tal-Callus *giardino*.<sup>42</sup> More importantly, this study enabled the author of this chapter to accurately determine the exact field-boundaries and the footprint covered by the entire Tal-Callus estate (Figs. 8 & 9).

An entry in the *cabreo del Magistero* 289 describing Tal-Callus lists the properties which adjoin this tenement, hence facilitating the identification of the estate in question. The *cabreo* description specifically stated that Tal-Callus could be accessed through a public road, which from the San Ġakbu area in the northern part of Wied ir-Rum leads down to the valley bed and the Il-Qattara area on the opposite side of the valley.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, this early seventeenth-century description of the Tal-Callus *giardino* was not accompanied by a plan of the property, thus signifying that the estate's location could not be identified with certainty. This shortcoming was fortunately offset by the availability of three different plans for the Tal-Callus territory which the present

37 Fiorini 2003, pp. 23-26.

38 The Il-Qattara territory touches the eastern flank of the Tal-Callus property and the western boundary of the Simblija estate.

39 Fiorini 2003, pp. 24-25. See also NLM, Univ. 12, f. 92 (11.x.1514).

40 Fiorini 2003, p. 25.

41 Saliba *et al.* 2002, pp. 17-20.

42 Fiorini 2003, p. 25. Mr N. Ciantar has similarly concluded that the Tal-Callus property cannot be associated with Simblija but failed to propose an alternative location for it. See <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20120603/life-features/Rendering-justice-to-u-eppi-Callus.422598>.

43 "[...] *da tramontana, confina con il detto uiolo che uiene dal detto Casal dingli, et dalla chiesa di San Giacomo; quale da entrata all'istesso giardino di gued iron, et alle terre del detto Maro Cassar [...]*". See NLM, Treas. B. 289, f. 84.



author managed to locate in two other *cabrei* manuscripts produced in the opening decades of the eighteenth century: the *Cabreo del Magistero vol. 1*,<sup>44</sup> and the *Cabreo del Magistero "Secrezia"*.<sup>45</sup> The plan included in *cabreo 290* is entitled *Giardino ta Callus o ta Wied Ferin in Casal Dingli*. The inclusion of access routes and property boundaries, all clearly indicated in this plan, enabled the undertaking of a comparative study of the field boundaries using both the plan in question and early twentieth-century Malta Survey Sheets for Wied ir-Rum.<sup>46</sup> A tract of land on the 1903 Survey Sheet 84, located to the immediate west of the Il-Qattara tenement, was found to correspond to the property illustrated on f. 77 of *cabreo 290*.

Delimiting the southernmost extent of the Tal-Callus *giardino* is a ravine on top of which is a public country lane giving access to the Il-Qaws and the Tax-Xierief areas. Branching from this road (map reference 42356 69943) is a narrow and tortuous footpath which descends to the southernmost flank of the Tal-Callus property. The other point of access is through a much wider country lane (map reference 42582 699984), which from next to the San Ġakbu settlement on the north side of Wied ir-Rum meanders down towards the Tal-Callus and the Il-Qattara *giardini*. The plan on f. 77 of *cabreo 290*, besides giving the dimensions of the various portions of land forming part of this *giardino*, also indicates the presence of two single-celled masonry-built structures. These flank the main access point of the Tal-Callus *giardino* which connects to both the Il-Qattara and the San Ġakbu sides of Wied ir-Rum. Field-terracing and areas containing tree plantations in the Tal-Callus property are also depicted through the use of different greenish-brown coloured brush strokes.

The two other plans for the Tal-Callus property form part of the *cabreo 291* manuscript.<sup>47</sup> It is the author's view that these plans are contemporaneous with the one on f. 77 of *cabreo 290*, and these might in essence be the draft versions on which the more artistically elaborate *cabreo 290* drawing was based. The uncaptioned plan on f. 87 (*cabreo 291*) is a simple line drawing.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, the outline shape of the

44 NLM, Treas. B. 290, f. 77.

45 NLM, Treas. B. 291, ff. 86-87.

46 Survey Sheets 84 and 85, Scale 1:25,000, issued by the School of Military Engineering, Chatham, in 1903 and 1922 respectively, cover most of the Wied ir-Rum territory.

47 NLM, Treas. B. 291, ff. 86-87.

48 In the lower left-hand section of this manuscript page there appears to be an illegible vertical line of text written in red pigment.

tenement, the passageways giving access to the *giardino*, and the two single-celled structures adjoining the roadside in the northern section of the plan, leave no doubt that the tenement in question represents the Tal-Callus property. The plan on f. 86 (*cabreo* 291) is likewise an outline scale drawing of the same property, but is more informative than the former (Fig. 10). It is accompanied by a handwritten caption, the legible sections of which read: “*Il terreno e Giardino detto tal Callus et il [...] sotto la chiesa di S. Giacomo ed [...]*”.<sup>49</sup> Of significance is the fact that the easternmost room contains a cross marking in a red pigment, hinting that this was utilised as the church which was either dedicated to St Nicholas or Santa Marija (Fig. 11). Another cross depicted on one side of the same country lane, in very close proximity to the former, was apparently placed there by mistake and was haphazardly erased (Fig. 11).

*Cabreo* data on Tal-Callus also gives an insight on the hydrological resources of this estate. In the *Cabreo del Magistero* 289 manuscript these are described as follows: “*In detto Giardino ui sono due fontane la’ grande sotto il balzo dalla parte di mezzo giorno, doue la sua’ gebia per dentro la’ rocca, l’altra dalla parte di ponente doue ui é ancora la gebietta*”.<sup>50</sup> This is a clear reference to the presence of at least one perched aquifer water gallery, at the entrance of which was a rock-cut subterranean water reservoir.

The same two *fontane* or springs are indicated on the eighteenth-century *cabreo* 291 plan version of the Tal-Callus *giardino*.<sup>51</sup> One of the springs is here shown to be located on the northern side of a country path, close to the north-western boundary of the property. This water-related feature is marked by a square-shaped box which contains the legend ‘*fontana*’. The second *fontana* flanks the southernmost extent of the property, and an almost circular chamber which appears to be fronted by a rectangular shaped reservoir clearly indicates that in this particular instance, we are dealing with a rock-cut water-related feature (Fig. 12).

Nineteenth-century *cabreo* documentation again mentions an: “[...] *altra piu piccola Fontana con vasca della capacita circa di 1900 palmi cubi, e somministra circa palmi cubi 400 al giorno munita pure di un lungo canale d’irrigazione*”. The other

49 NLM, Treas. B. 291, f. 86. A finely cut, rectangular-shaped cave in the northern side of Wied ir-Rum and which overlooks the Tal-Callus *giardino* area has been tentatively identified by the author of this chapter as the church of St James. See Keith Buhagiar 2013.

50 NLM, Treas. B. 289, f. 84.

51 NLM, Treas. B. 291, ff. 86-87.

water source also available on this property is described as an “*altra Fontana con canale o vasca della capacita circa di plami 1540, e somministro palmi cubi 200 per giorno[...]*”.<sup>52</sup>

The approximate location of both spring sources is also indicated on the accompanying plan of the Tal-Callus estate.

Access to the Tal-Callus property is largely restricted. In recent years, entry to the country lane passing through the Wied ir-Rum valley bed at map reference 42582 69984 has been partly fenced off. A lack of interaction with the current tenants of this agricultural estate has so far hindered the author’s access to the central and northern parts of the Tal-Callus *giardino*. On the other hand, access to the footpath adjoining the Tal-Qaws road at map reference 42356 69943 remains unhindered, enabling the investigation of this section of the property. This undertaking was also an opportunity for testing the reliability and accuracy of the data provided in the *cabreo* 291 plans.

The first feature encountered on accessing Tal-Callus via the Il-Qaws footpath is a circular-shaped cave (map reference 42356 69943). This rock-cut feature was also distinctly marked on the *cabreo* 291 plans for this property. The cave is excavated into the brittle Mtarfa Member deposit, has rather intimate proportions and was probably either used as an animal pen or as a storage space for agricultural produce. The *fontana* was also located in the section of the Tal-Callus property indicated by the plans in *cabreo* 291 and the British period *cabreo* manuscript dating to 1867 (Figs. 13 & 14). Field research confirmed that this water spring originates from an artificial subterranean gallery, the exterior section of which was modified and remodelled into a rock-cut subterranean water reservoir. That this spring dates to at least the opening decades of the seventeenth century is demonstrated by the fact that its current setup perfectly corresponds with the description found in *cabreo* 289. 1867 plan data indicate that a network of canals gravity-fed this spring water to easternmost extent of the Tal-Callus *giardino*.

Due to access restrictions to the northern section of the Tal-Callus *giardino*, the second *fontana* could not be traced and investigated. Nonetheless, the scrutiny of the northern perimeter wall of the Tal-Callus property led to the identification of another two perched aquifer

52 See NAM, Descriptive Plans of the Crown Property, 1867, f. 606.

galleries at map references 42456 70020 and 42524 70004 respectively.<sup>53</sup> Both tunnel below the northern section of the Tal-Callus property and a shaft well piercing the ceiling of one of these subterranean water systems, possibly supplied this *fontana* with a perennial water source. In the 1867 *cabreo* plan data, this same water feature is indicated by means of what appears to be a small uncovered water reservoir.

It was similarly impossible to gain access to the small hamlet located at map reference 42505 69996. The closely-knit cluster of structures which since the eighteenth century have been constructed in this part of the Tal-Callus *giardino* were nonetheless visually inspected from the overlying garigue plains of Il-Qattara and Ta' San Ġakbu located on the southern and northern flanks of Wied ir-Rum respectively. Furthermore, the masonry-built structures at Tal-Callus were also visually investigated from the nearby country lane at map reference 42536 70097 and the footpath which borders the Tal-Callus tenement at map reference 42522 70000. The close scrutiny of these structures, as well as the use of the *cabreo* 291 plans, made it possible for some preliminary conclusions to be reached. This notwithstanding, it is important to note that the data presented below will probably have to be revised once access is gained into this section of the Tal-Callus *giardino*.

The two single-celled structures indicated in the *cabreo* 291 plans still exist. Both appear to survive in different degrees of structural integrity, but have been abutted by later period buildings. The larger structure appears to conform to a rectangular-shaped room, the visible exterior walls of which betray a wet-rubble type of construction. This room appears to be capped by a flat roof structure from which water spouts drained off any excess rain water.

At a distance of c. 12m to its east are the surviving remains of the single-celled structure which in the *cabreo* 291 plans is marked by means of a cross (Fig. 11). Its visible exterior walls once more betray a wet-rubble type of construction technique, but the original structure only appears to survive in part (Fig. 15). Apart from suffering a partial roof collapse, its western section was abutted by another rural construction, the walls of which were shaped out of ashlar

53 It was through the kind assistance of Mr Dean Galea, whose family owns agricultural property adjacent to the northern boundary of the Tal-Callus estate, that the partial investigation of one of these two perched aquifer water capture systems was possible.

masonry blocks. Quite interestingly, what appears to have survived of the original fabric betrays the presence of a gabled ceiling, and a narrow slit-like window is located high up in the north façade of the structure (Fig. 16). Both features are reminiscent of Late Medieval church architecture,<sup>54</sup> making it likely that these are the surviving remains of the long lost church which was either dedicated to St Nicholas or Santa Marija.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, it is only by gaining access to the interior of this room that such conjectures can be verified.

## Conclusions

Archival and field research sessions carried out at the National Library and Wied ir-Rum respectively have resulted in: (a) the identification of the Tal-Callus estate; (b) its perennial hydrological resources, both of which originate from two separate man-excavated perched aquifer galleries; and (c) the remains of a single-celled structure on the estate formerly known as Tal-Callus, and which this study tentatively associates with the Late Medieval church dedicated to either St Nicholas or Santa Marija.

Both the Simblija and Tal-Callus *giardini* date back to at least the Late Medieval period and probably formed part of a post-1127 land transformation process which sought to amplify the hydrological and agricultural output of a select number of districts of the Maltese archipelago.<sup>56</sup> Whilst determining that Simblija and Tal-Callus are two distinctly separate agricultural estates, the results presented in this study by no means detract from the archaeological and historical value of the Simblija estate. Simblija's rock-excavated and masonry-built features, its water management systems and well-preserved *giardino* framework make this estate a unique Late Medieval agrarian-related cultural asset worthy of the highest degree of protection and preservation. Even though the finely built rectangular-shaped structure in the *misraħ* area at Simblija can no longer be associated with neither the church of St Nicholas, nor that of Ta' Santa Marija, its architectural idiosyncrasies are evocative of a

54 Mario Buhagiar 1975, pp. 163-80; Mario Buhagiar 2005, pp. 83-99.

55 Aquilina - Fiorini 2001, 169-70; Fiorini 2003, 24.

56 Keith Buhagiar 2014, pp. 276-80.

Late Medieval countryside church construction. As a matter of fact it is possible that future archival research might enable the association of this construction with one of the other churches known to have existed at Wied ir-Rum prior to 1575.

As both Simblija and Tal-Callus are important landmarks showcasing Malta's medieval heritage, they should feature prominently on itineraries promoting the archipelago's rural cultural assets pertaining to this relatively unknown period of Maltese history. Conservation efforts should not only concentrate on the preservation of both of these estates for future posterity, but also at ensuring unhindered public access. During the past decade and a half, Simblija had already been subjected to this process. Following its initial identification in 1995, conservation measures and upgrading were consequently undertaken and Simblija was presented to the public in 2003.<sup>57</sup> The site's management was entrusted to a non-governmental organisation and the general public reacted positively to the prospect of visiting and interacting with this unique site. Even though the tenants of the Simblija Government-owned estate were adequately compensated for any lost agricultural-related storage space that this modification in site usage and function entailed, they still felt aggrieved by centralised interference and the disruption of an age-old agricultural-related routine.

It was probably this distress which eventually led to an organised restriction of visitor access. Shortly after the inauguration of the Simblija restoration project, the approach to Simblija from the Wied Ħażrun side was closed off and signage indicating the site's whereabouts removed. Since 2008 the level of hostility towards visitors to this rural estate has been significantly upgraded. In at least one instance, attempts in gaining access to the site resulted in court action being taken against the alleged perpetrators.<sup>58</sup> More recently, access to the presumed church

57 For a report outlining the conservation measures undertaken at Simblija see Saliba *et al.* 2002, pp. 17-20.

58 A number of court arraignments have taken place over access rights to Simblija. In December of 2010, a team of cyclists from a local cycling club were arraigned in court over complaints by Mr N. Ciantar after cycling through the stretch of country lane which from Simblija gives access to Wied Ħażrun. Refer to the court sitting chaired by Magistrate Dr Consuelo Scerri Herrera dating to 27 July 2011. The case against the cyclists was dropped on the premise that no clear signage was affixed by Mr Ciantar.

structure adjoining the Simblija *misrah* was denied to the author of this study and one of the tenants also objected to photographs of the site being taken. Similarly, an on-site lecture at Simblija for University of Malta students reading for the Medieval Archaeology study-unit had to be cancelled due to the uncooperative attitude of its tenants.

To date, the Tal-Callus estate remains under Government ownership, but is currently on lease to fourteen individuals, each one of whom manages different portions of this property. Of interest is the fact that over the past two centuries the Tal-Callus estate experienced at least three place-name changes. According to nineteenth-century documentation this estate was also identified as *Wiet Ferin*.<sup>59</sup> Tal-Callus is presently known as Ta' Katisu or Ta' Djiegu, the latter being the name of a certain Djiegu Gauci who lived on the estate during the course of World War II.<sup>60</sup> That the tenants of this property are aware of the archaeological and historical importance of the Tal-Callus estate is intimated by the fact that they very reluctantly allow access to visitors. This is primarily due to an ongoing concern that portions of the site might be subjected to a fate similar to that experienced by the tenants of the Simblija estate.<sup>61</sup>

It is in the interest of knowledge and the preservation of Malta's fast disappearing rural medieval heritage, that in the forthcoming future, the Tal-Callus estate should be subjected to a detailed archaeological and historical investigation. This will allow the drafting of a comprehensive action plan ensuring the site's preservation and upkeep. Regarding Simblija, it is hoped that all pending issues relating to visitor access are resolved without further delay.

59 NAM, Descriptive Plans of the Crown Property, 1867, f. 606.

60 Personal communication by Mr D. M. Galea, an archaeology graduate from the University of Malta. Mr Galea's family owns agricultural land in close proximity to the Tal-Callus estate.

61 Personal communication by Mr Dean Galea.





KEITH BUHAGIAR

*THE TAL-CALLUS AND SIMBLIJA ESTATES AT  
WIED IR-RUM AND WIED HAŻRUN (MALTA):  
AN ENIGMA RESOLVED*

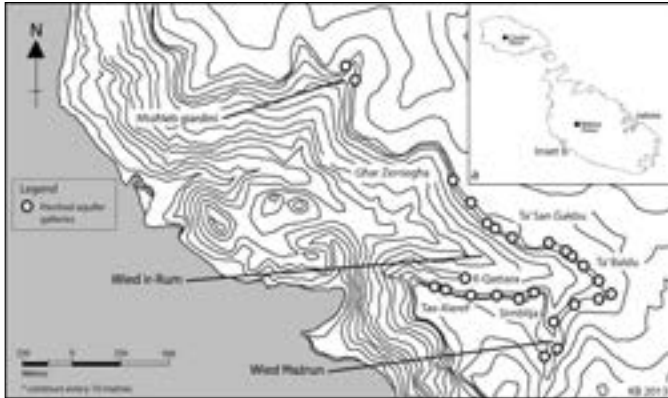


Fig. 1: Map of the Maltese islands (a), with inset (b) showing the location of Wied ir-Rum and Wied Hażrun as well as the perched aquifer galleries contained within (Base map data: MEPA)



Fig. 2: Map of Wied ir-Rum and Wied Hażrun showing the location of the Il-Qattara; Simblija; Tax-Xieref; Ta' Baldu; and Ta' San Ġakbu giardini. 'A' is the water cistern at Simblija, whilst 'B' and 'C' indicate the location of the perched aquifer gallery and water fountain located alongside the public road. All are features mentioned in the *Cabreo Antico della Procura delle Distribuzioni* dating to 1621 (Topographical map image adapted from MEPA map server)



Fig. 3: Detail from the Antonio Lafreri map of Malta of 1551. The well-defined valley on the west coast of Malta is tentatively associated with Wied ir-Rum (Source: Agius-Vadalà and Ganado)



Fig. 4: The focal node of the Simblija settlement in the territory of Rabat (Malta) in which the presumed church structure and the rock-excavated *centimolo* are located (Source: the author)



Fig. 5: The Simblija *misrah* area. Interior view of the presumed church structure at Simblija (Source: the author)



Fig. 6: The Simblija *misrah* area. View of the rock-excavated space which housed the *centimolo* machinery (Source: the author)



Fig. 7: Interior view of a perched aquifer gallery at Wied Ħażrun. In the *Cabreo Antico della Procura delle Distribuzioni* of 1621, this is indicated as a *fontana* or fountain (Source: the author)



Fig. 8: Plan showing the Government landholdings of Tal-Callus and Simblija at Wied ir-Rum and the adjoining Wied Ħażrun. Sources: NLM. Treas. B. 290, f. 77; NLM. Treas. B. 291, ff. 86-87; Survey Sheet 84, Scale 1:2,500, School of Military Engineering, Chatham, 1903; Survey Sheet 85, Scale 1:2,500, School of Military Engineering, Chatham, 1922



Fig. 9: The Tal-Callus estate at Wied ir-Rum in the territory of Rabat (Malta). The shaded parts indicate the area of land encompassed by this estate (Source: the author)



Fig. 10: NLM, Treas. B. 291, f. 86. Plan of the Tal-Callus *giardino*. This is a more detailed version of the plan of the Tal-Callus estate (RA39) on which that included in NLM, Treas. B. 290, f. 77 was produced. Clearly indicated is the location of two *fontane* first mentioned in NLM. Treas. B. 289, f. 84. The transverse triangulations included in the plan suggest that this was probably drawn on site



Fig. 11: Detail of NLM, Treas. B. 291, f. 86 showing two single-celled units flanking the northernmost extent of the Tal-Callus estate at Wied ir-Rum, one of which can be probably identified with the church dedicated to either St Nicholas or Santa Marija

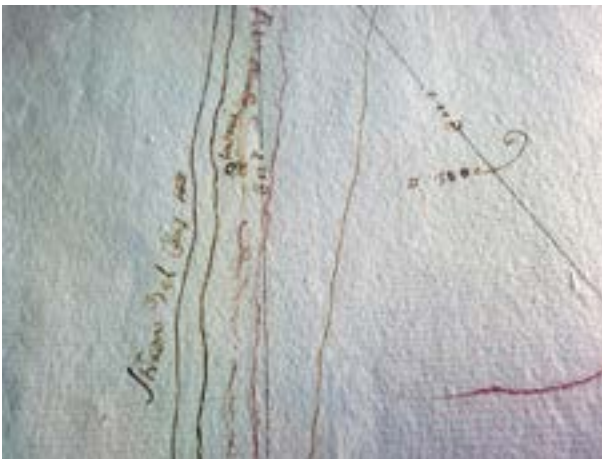


Fig. 12: Detail of NLM, Treas. B. 291, f. 86 showing a *fontana* (spring) originating from within a rock-cut chamber on the southern side of the Tal-Callus estate at Wied ir-Rum. Field-research has shown this source to originate from inside a rock-excavated perched aquifer gallery



Fig. 13: The exterior of the *fontana* mentioned in NLM, Treas. B. 289, f. 84. Its location is indicated on a plan of the Tal-Callus estate in NLM, Treas. B. 291, f. 86. This water source originates from a perched aquifer gallery which is fronted by a subterranean water storage reservoir. A series of steps to the right of the water sump facilitates access to the reservoir interior. (Source: the author)



Fig. 14: Interior view of the *fontana* mentioned in NLM, Treas. B. 289, f. 84, the location of which is indicated on a plan of the Tal-Callus estate in NLM, Treas. B. 291, f. 86. This water source originates from a series of galleries, a number of which were walled up at an unknown date. The extracted water is stored in a fronting subterranean reservoir (Source: the author)



Fig. 15: The Tal-Callus estate hamlet at Wied ir-Rum. Exterior view of the back façade of the structure which this study tentatively identifies with the Late Medieval church dedicated to either St Nicholas or Santa Marija (Source: the author)



Fig. 16: The Tal-Callus estate hamlet at Wied ir-Rum. Exterior view of the probable Late Medieval church dedicated to either St Nicholas or Santa Marija. What appears to have survived of the original church fabric betrays the presence of a gabled ceiling, and a narrow slit-like window is located high up in the north façade of the structure (Source: the author)