

# Manoel Island: An Island with a Fort . . . and a Future

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## The Maltese Islands: Their Location and Size

The Maltese Islands are located in the central Mediterranean, about 93km due south of Sicily and 290km east of Tunisia. The islands lie at the exact centre of the Mediterranean, with a 19 degree distance from the eastern and western ends of the Mediterranean, and a longitudinal distance of seven and nine degrees respectively from the northern and southern limits of the Mediterranean shores. This geographical location throws light on, and partially accounts for, the socio-economic and cultural influences experienced by the islands. As a result of the central location, the islands were occupied by successive military powers that were dominant or influential in Mediterranean affairs. This long series of political occupants left their mark on coastal land use and conditioned the strong economic and cultural links with Europe, which accounts for 80 per cent of the islands' trade and from where 90 per cent of tourism originates. Semitic links with North Africa are evident in the language<sup>1</sup>.

With an area of approximately 320km<sup>2</sup>, the archipelago consists of three main islands: Malta (245km<sup>2</sup>), Gozo (68km<sup>2</sup>) and Comino, together with a number of other smaller islands and rocks: it has a total length of about 45km, trending north-west to south-east. The islands lie on the submarine ridge that divides the Mediterranean into two halves. Like all other small island states the Maltese Islands possess a small area per kilometre of coastline and they are more dependent on their coastal resources than larger states.

Studies on land use for the Maltese Islands have largely concentrated on descriptive accounts focused primarily on agricultural activity,

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1. On this issue, see R. Mifsud Bonnici, *Dizzjunarju bijo-bibliografiku nazzjonali* (Malta: Department of Information, 1960); E. Serracino Inglott, *Il-Miklem Malti* (Malta: Klabb Kotba Maltin, 1981); G. Wettinger, *Place Names of the Maltese Islands, ca. 1300-1800* (Malta: PEG Ltd., 2000).

residential buildings and industrial development. Carmel Duca and Nadia Zammit were the first to attempt to relate all elements within a spatially coherent whole when they outlined the areal distribution of the main land uses of the individual islands and for the archipelago as a whole<sup>2</sup>. However five sources do give a detailed account of the geography of the islands with an indication of land use history, and all treat the geography of Malta in sufficient detail to make a pattern and process account of land use possible<sup>3</sup>. Further data can be derived from the maps and charts for the Maltese Islands, notably those produced in 1895 (Vassallo *et al.*), British Petroleum Exploration Company Limited (1957), Public Works Department (1983a, 1983b, 1983c), and the Planning Authority (1992)<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, Gorg Cilia reviewed the land use situation in the light of projections of population growth and of the land areas identified for urban expansion within each of the local council boundaries, and produced a spatial estimate of the extent of the land use envisaged<sup>5</sup>. Edward Mallia outlined the present land use situation, linking it to energy use and the production of solid and liquid waste<sup>6</sup>. Patrick Schembri and Edwin Lanfranco dealt with the encroachment of the urban land on the local natural environment<sup>7</sup>.

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2. C. Duca and N. Zammit, *A phytogeographical study of Malta* Unpublished B.Ed. (Hons) dissertation (Malta: University of Malta, 1989).
  3. See H. Bowen-Jones, J. C. Dewdney and W. B. Fisher, *Malta: Background for Development* (Durham: University of Durham, Department of Geography, 1961); M.W. Bruce, *Malta: A geographical monograph* (Malta: Progress Press, 1965); Neville Ransley, *A Geography of the Maltese Islands*, 3rd edn (Malta: St Aloysius College, 1985); Brian Blouet, *The Story of Malta* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992); and Anton Azzopardi, *A New Geography of the Maltese Islands* (Malta: Progress Press, 1995).
  4. Planning Authority, *Manoel Island / Tigne Point Development Brief* (Malta, Planning Authority, 1992).
  5. G. Cilia, *Sustainable Development: land use in Malta* (Malta, Friends of the Earth Malta, 1995).
  6. E. Mallia, *The Environment: Prospects for the Millennium* (in C. Vella ed., *The Maltese Islands on the Move: a mosaic of contributions marking Malta's entry into the 21st century*, Malta, National Statistics Office, Malta, 2000).
  7. P. J. Schembri and E. Lanfranco, *Development and the natural environment in the Maltese Islands* (in D.G. Lockhart, D. Drakakis-Smith and J. Schembri eds., *The development process in small island states* London, Routledge, 1993).

## Historic Sites

In Malta, historic sites are now very important elements in the development of all land use projects, as educational media and tourist attractions. In addition, many a time they form a continuous unit with the urban fabric. The sites comprise a rather wide range of fortifications, varying in scale from the massive defensive walls and bastions of the Harbours to the coastal watch towers. Archaeological sites located in the coastal zone are also included within this category of land uses.

The high priority of coastal defences is demonstrated by their presence along most of the littoral. Only in areas where the sea-to-land accessibility is poor are coastal fortifications absent. Small watch towers built by the Knights and pill boxes built by the British in the defence of the Islands during the Second World War are not being considered here because the area they cover is very small. As a general trend, coastal fortifications built by the Knights protected mainly the highly accessible areas, whilst the British built theirs in areas where sea/land accessibility was difficult.

The historical sites linked to coastal defence have a unique spatial distribution that largely repeats itself in most of the inlets and larger bays along the coast of Malta. Their distribution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries followed a pattern of having watch towers built on the tips of peninsulas enclosing bays, with fortifications and firepower located in the inner areas of the same bay. The latter included redoubts, batteries and also the occasional *fougasse*, a circular man-made hole in the rock filled with explosives and shrapnel, which would be ignited on the approach of the enemy<sup>8</sup>. In areas where accessibility was difficult, the system of watch towers was the only means of defence utilized, as in the coastal area from Wied iz-Zurrieq to Marfa, on the western part of Malta. In areas where the littoral was mainly one with a predominantly linear coastal pattern and few inlets of note, but also highly accessible from the seaward side, entrenchments and low defensive walls were constructed, such as along the coast to the north, between Marfa and il-Ponta ta' l-Ahrax. During the British period the geography of coastal defences was concentrated on the building of large forts, such as at Delimara, Benghisa,

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8. Q. Hughes, *Malta: A guide to the fortifications* (Valletta: Said Publications, Malta, 1993).

Madliena and San Leonardo. In the Second World War, in addition to the pill boxes, rows of barbed wire and iron stakes screened the whole coast.

### **The History of Coastal Land Use**

Reviewing the history of coastal land use from a chronological perspective, one can identify the main land use elements left by former occupiers of the islands on the basis of three main periods:

- a. The historical heritage of the Islands dates back 7,000 years, with some of the surviving artefacts located in the coastal areas.
- b. The history of the coastal defensive network is part and parcel of the military, political and strategic situation of the Islands and is a reflection of the broader Mediterranean and global geo-political situation over four centuries, from the sixteenth to the twentieth. It is also important for an understanding of the coastal character, as defensive works are part of the architectural heritage.
- c. Contemporary land use and development sites overlap or have even displaced this historical heritage. In some cases land use is conditioned by the presence of historical remains. The coastal historical heritage is a particular form of land use that occupies a limited amount of land sites, but its presence adds chronological and temporal depth to patterns of human interaction with the coast.

### **The Period of the Knights of St John**

The general picture of the settlement pattern of the Islands *vis-à-vis* the coast is one that highlights the fact that, prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, settlement was largely away from the coast. The Knights changed the settlement pattern of Malta by establishing themselves around the Grand Harbour and moving the administrative capital of the island from an inland location (Mdina) to a coastal one (Vittoriosa and, later, Valletta). The building of a large number of coastal defences, especially around the Grand Harbour, and also the building of Valletta itself and its subsequent elevation to being the capital and administrative city, made the Harbour region an attractive area for residential purposes. This situation also partly arose due to the establishment of the Harbour as the main focus of

shipbuilding and repair. The Knights also changed the spatial distribution of traditional land use; introduced new land use elements within the coastal area and in the hinterland, prominent among which were country houses, hunting lodges, aqueducts and fortifications; and, above all, laid the pattern for the present-day residential conurbation around the Harbour. Thus from an island looking inwards and drawing its living from the limited space available, Malta sought to optimise its maritime character by utilising the resources provided by its ports and harbours. It was this political situation that led to the development of the coast. In contrast, Gozo retained patterns of medieval land use well into the twentieth century.

Maritime activity in Malta has a long history and it took on a new dimension with the arrival of the Knights of St John to Malta and the building of Valletta and the fortifications around Grand Harbour. This new security led to changes in the geographical location of population settlement, from the spread around the inland areas to a movement towards the Harbour area. This depleted the population of a number of villages and caused the abandonment of some (Wettinger, 1979)<sup>9</sup>. It also changed job prospects from those relating to a totally agriculturally oriented economy to jobs associated with coastal and port activities. The construction of a number of coastal defensive structures all around the coast of the Islands, especially in areas that were considered vulnerable (watch towers, forts, defensive walls, redoubts and batteries), further enhanced the security of the island. The strategic location of Malta, together with the availability of secure all-weather and deep water ports, turned the island into a centre for trade in the Mediterranean (Schembri, 2003)<sup>10</sup>.

## **Manoel Island**

Manoel Island is located within Marsamxett Harbour (Figure 1) on the eastern seaboard of the largest island of the Maltese archipelago. It has

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9. G. Wettinger, 'The Militia Roster of watch duties of 1417'. *The Armed Forces of Malta Journal*, 32 (1979): 25–35.
  10. J. A. Schembri, *Coastal land use in the Maltese Islands: a description and appraisal*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. Department of Geography, University of Durham, (2003).

a land area of 30.5 ha, about 0.3km<sup>2</sup>, or about 0.09 per cent of the total area of the Maltese Islands. Although small in size it commands a strategic place within the harbours in that it occupies more than one half of the area of Marsamxett Harbour and its tip faces the eastern opening of the Harbour. Creeks also make up substantial parts of the local harbours and Manoel Island is flanked by Sliema and Lazzaretto Creeks. Access to the island is through a man-made bridge from Gzira. The island is very low as its highest point is only 27m above sea level when compared to the 253m of the highest point in Malta.

The main buildings of historical importance on the island are Fort Manoel, in which a church dedicated to St Anthony of Padova and the Royal Malta Yacht Club are housed; Lazzaretto Hospital, which was a quarantine hospital; a cattle quarantine building; a customs house; and a cemetery chapel.

### **Land Use**

The land use development of the island can be examined through Figure 2, which gives an overview of the contemporary situation limiting the spatial distribution of the different land use patterns, with the greater part of the historical land use occupied by Fort Manoel on the eastern tip and Lazzaretto Hospital facing south, strategically placed to get the most of the sunlight available, especially in the winter months. Figure 3 provides a more detailed profile of current land use. It is clear that a large number of activities, ranging from sports, light industry and yachting, to oil bunkering services and related offices and buildings, are present on the island, giving rise to conflicts in relation to harmonised land use. For example the presence of industry associated with the oil bunkering industry conflicts with the aesthetics of the island, situated in one of the major tourist areas of Malta. The storage facilities lead to pollution of the waters around the island and within the harbour, and occupy valuable space that can be utilised for other purposes. In addition, a 'ducks' village' where hundreds of ducks are allowed to live and breed, forms part of the foreshore area. This provides yet another eyesore to sightseers and people walking along the promenade.

Future land use planning options can be seen in Figure 4, with development linked to larger development at Tigné Point, lying to the

east of the island. The facilities identified, which are linked to the objectives of rehabilitation and creating an upmarket, include:

- malls and commercial development
- low-rise residential development
- community facilities
- underground car park
- a lido
- a breakwater
- a marina
- a yacht repair yard
- a new access bridge<sup>11</sup>

### **Issues and conclusions**

As with all development, the issues that arise normally present points in favour or against the main proposal. The first controversial issue is the protection of the heritage sites. Care has to be exercised with the architectural heritage of the buildings built by the Knights of St John. These have to be conserved and repaired for future generations to enjoy. In addition the low, sloping foreshore has a multitude of features evocative of previous human interaction with the environment, including designated boat mooring and access facilities, interesting graffiti, equine bathing areas and angling points. It is important not to obliterate these features under concrete, which would erase part of the island's history.

Public access to gated communities is another issue. When developments like those on Manoel Island are finalised and property sells for a value well above the average price for such housing units, the tendency to protect and close off the whole area where the property lies becomes very high. In this context the geography of Manoel Island presents a unique opportunity for locking up the whole island from the access bridge to the mainland, or for the development of small gated communities. It is imperative that public access is kept throughout the whole island.

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11. Planning Authority, *Manoel Island / Tigne Point Development Brief* (Malta, Planning Authority, 1992).

The pollution arising from marina activities is another issue. If extreme caution is not exercised in controlling solid, liquid and gas pollutants from spilling on to the environment, the health and aesthetic hazards might increase and conflict with the image of the project that the developers would like to portray.

One final issue involves afforestation. The present appearance of Manoel Island as seen from Sliema Creek presents a pleasant prospect of trees lining the backshore area. Efforts must be made to retain the qualities of this small wooded area. With the new proposals in place the land use conflicts mentioned here should be minimised for the benefit of the future residents on the island and all other users.



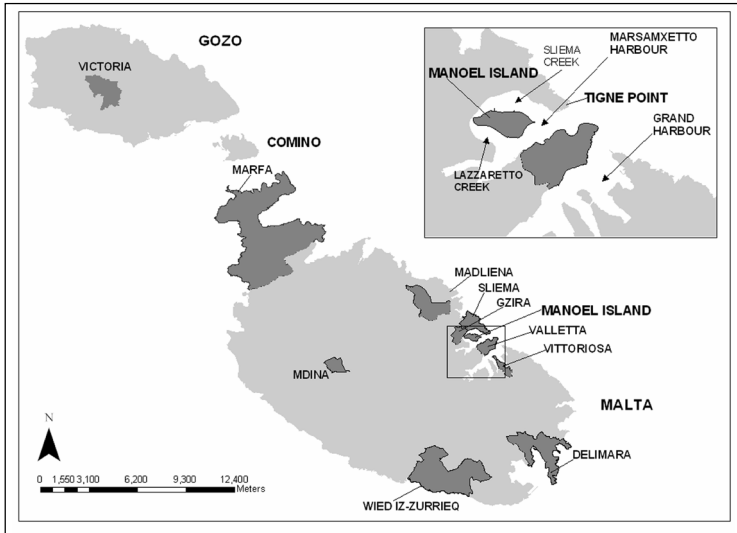


Fig. 1. Map of Malta. Drawn by authors.

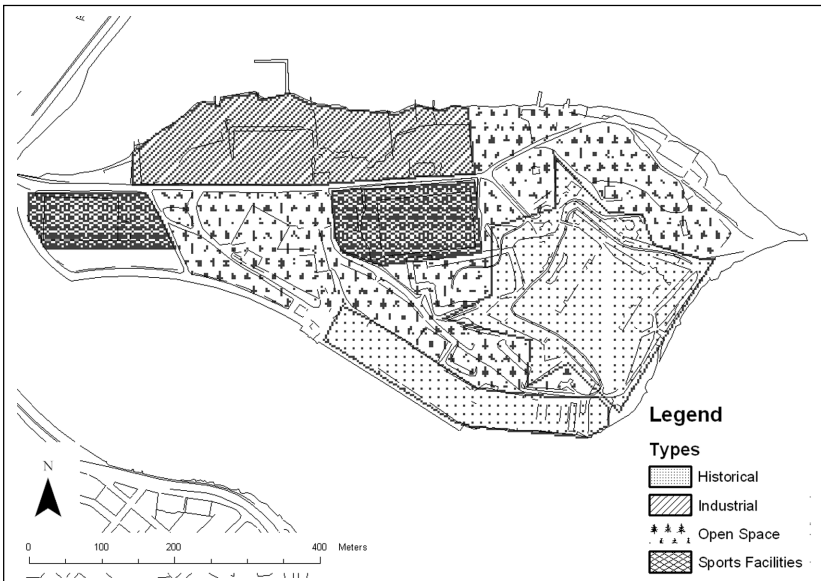


Fig. 2. Overview of the spatial land cover in Manoel Island. Drawn by the authors

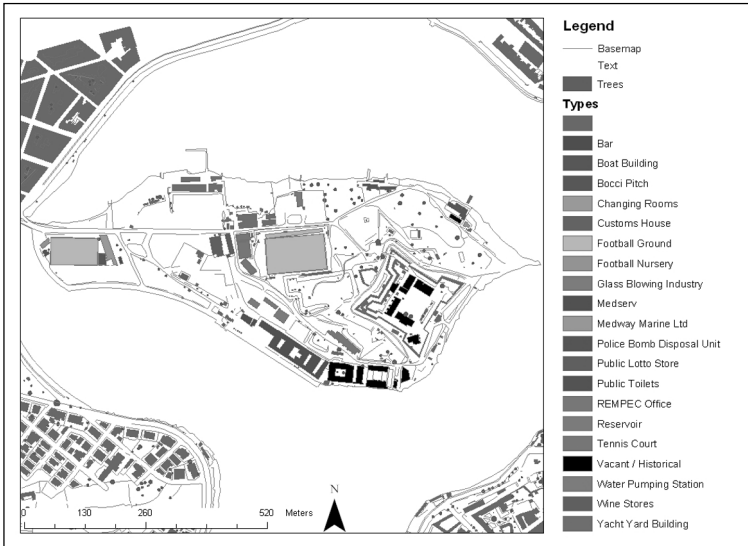


Fig. 3. Current Land Uses in Manoel Island. Drawn by the authors.

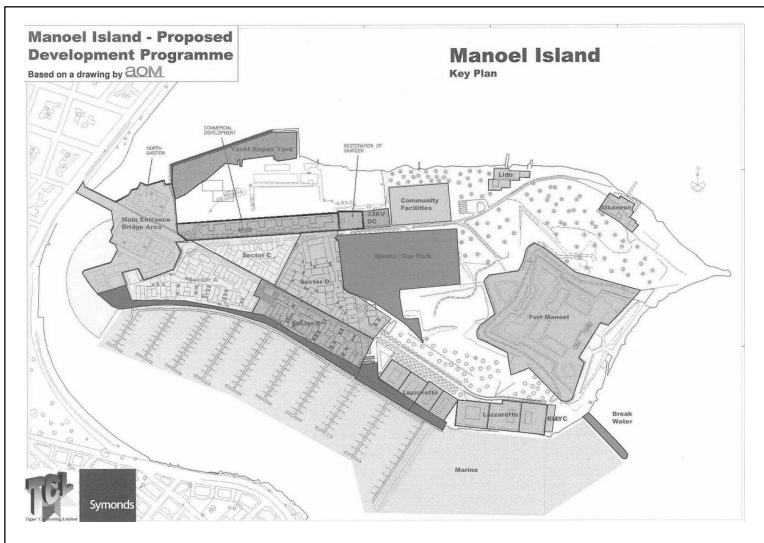


Fig. 4. Proposed land uses in Manoel Island.