

Bahrija - land of the speculator



The dumping of building debris further downhill at Bahrija

The story of Bahrija is a turbulent one, made of sporadic coup de scènes. The last one dates back to 1996. There is a long sequence of dubious land speculation, reminiscent of the Godfather-style mobster days we thought we had long archived.

Baron Francesco Palermo Navarra owned the whole Bahrija environs as a fief land dating back hundreds of years. Immediately before the advent of the Structure Plan in 1990, the properties at Bahrija suddenly mushroomed. After that the baron sold part of his original property. For many there was the cold awakening that the fields around the normally tranquil village were being committed to plush constructions.

In 1996, the three ecologically important valleys around Bahrija - Wied Rini, Wied Gerzuma, were scheduled by MEPA (then the PA) as areas of ecological importance. At the end of 1995, a local property-dealing company bought the remaining mammoth land parcel of 1,600 tumoli from Baron Palermo Navarra for the ludicrous sum of Lm1.25 million, effectively ending all vestiges of the latter's land ownership in Bahrija.

The physical extent of the property was such that it encompassed the entire area from further upstream Bahrija church right down to the sea and sprawled over the three scheduled valleys, farmed fields as well as tumoli of garigue. To suffuse the whole story with even more drama, one of the new landowners even claimed in 1997 on a local radio station that he was interested in developing the upper part of his land near the Church of the Immaculate Conception into a golf course - ominously, he also quipped that he "never gives up".

Local media were asked to intervene and to highlight the plight of the 150 local farmers, particularly between 1998 and 2000. Since then, a curtain of silence has again fallen over the whole matter. Is this the lull before the storm which is yet to come?

Behind the headlines

Few of the sordid details behind the newspaper headlines were ever reported.

Still excited by their cheaply acquired large property, the new owners at the start of 1996 embarked on a campaign to coerce local farmers (since it is illegal to evict farmers from land they are actively working), who regularly paid their rent to the baron's representative in Malta, into leaving their land.

Some of these can even exhibit rent books dating back to pre-Second World War times. The same farmers had repeatedly asked to buy the property themselves as soon as news that the baron wanted to sell had spread like wildfire.

However, the latter chose otherwise - the more outspoken claim that he had debts to settle and this conditioned greatly his choice. The new owners repudiate the paying of rent by the farmers who, to this very day, continue to fulfil their financial duties and deposit the money they owe in rent in court, despite being shunned by the new owners.

Stories circulate of farmers being threatened of being bulldozed out if they did not accept a meagre financial settlement to give up their land (which they did in fear), of protected carob trees being doused with petrol, burnt or cut down, and even of offering the land farmers still believed they owned to hunters and trappers from outside the area.

The delivery of mail by post to the spokesman for the Bahrija farmers was stopped for a day. Farmers' dogs, as well as watering tanks, were poisoned (a farmer lost an entire year's onion harvest in one case). Their access to freshwater springs was barred and much more.

The new owners even used legislative measures, by bringing in the police to put spokes in the wheels of the farmers working the Bahrija fields by barring access to their fields and requesting everyone to identify himself and showing title to the land prior to entry. Beekeepers found themselves barred by protracted court action from tending to their bees on garigue that they believed was rented to them.

Many of these cases have already been documented in local newspapers over the last few years and some farmers have even taken affidavits in court over their recounting of the events. In another show of cheek, the new owners also claimed that they were simply there to prevent illegal hunting and trapping on their land, while bringing in their own cohorts of hunters.

The reed bed of protected Wied Rini was set alight in the spring of last year. This also bears the hallmarks of having also been sprayed with some form of chemical growth retarder as recovery is too modest, whereas reed growth after burning is normally prolific, to say the least. The same valley is home to a rare freshwater crab species.

While the protected valleys are endowed with rare vegetation, such as remnants of a white poplar (luq) wood and dense maquis, the garigue immediately above it is certainly not to be discarded in terms of its biodiversity. There are rare orchid species (such as the endemic Maltese spider orchid and the endemic Maltese pyramidal orchid, both of which were recorded on site in the last five years) as well as dense growths of wild thyme (Saghtar - vital for summertime honey production), wild garlic (kurrat), rock roses (Cistu) and Mediterranean heath (Erika).

The more seaside garigue areas are replete with sea squill (Ghansar) and endemic hemispherical Maltese spurge shrubs (Tenghud tax-Xaghri). The area is also rich in archaeological remains, such as cart ruts and Punic tombs, which honeycomb the area. This should be no surprise as Ras ir-Roheb, the site of megalithic temples and subsequent Punic temple dedicated to Melkart, is adjacent to the area. In recent years this Ras ir-Roheb has been reported as having been bulldozed flat.

All these misdemeanours are aimed at one precise goal: to coerce farmers to sell their farms (which in the main they were built after due notice was given to and permission obtained from the previous owner and, consequently, unlike the land on which they are built, belongs to them) at derisory prices, such as at Lm8,000, which was offered in one case.

These farms are then resold at highly lucrative prices or else converted into plush dwellings in this vicious money-spinning speculation game.

Action to be taken

The authorities have gained volumes of foresight from what has already been lost at Bahrija. We are only now waking up to concepts, such as urban conservation. Old, quaint farm buildings have been pulled down and replaced by esoteric constructions with no thought spared for the architectural legacy being lost.

The old baron's dwelling itself, splotched with a rustic red ochre, is dismally surrounded by profane buildings, certainly not of its grandiose mettle. Defoliated spectres now lie where regal carob trees once stood, the result of burning, uprooting and pesticide spraying.

While the scheduling of the three valleys around Bahrija is to be commended, this did not comprise the garigue immediately abutting on such watercourses. Acting both as a catchment area and also as a buffer zone for the valleys, they give rapacious land owners leeway for land speculation.

Only the coastal garigue verging on the cliffs is protected as part of the western cliff promontory of the Maltese Islands running from Birzebbuga to Mellieha, also scheduled in 1996.

I join the chorus of voices clamouring for the same conservation goal at Bahrija and urge MEPA to schedule the garigue around the already scheduled valleys immediately. This scheduling should be a MEPA priority to seal off effectively any development avenues, such as the recent multitude of ODZ cases witnessed in the whole of the islands, for the area.

Only then can MEPA claim to be one step ahead of developers' scheming. With the area having such a high incidence of bee culturing and archaeological remains, it should also be earmarked as an ecotourism and educational hotspot, rather than doing away with the tradition of beekeeping as has happened with the rampant development at Xemxija.

Property owners in the area seem to have shelved for the moment plans for a golf course. However, the intimidation and the endeavours towards more and more land speculation and development are still going on. The case should not die a natural death but be brought up from time to time since a lull in public concern about the area would certainly strengthen developers' hands.

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