

# MALTESE FORTIFICATIONS

One of the reasons why the Maltese Islands have always drawn the interest of the great European and Mediterranean powers, is their strategic position. When ships had to rely on slaves and wind to reach their destination, the Maltese Islands provided good harbours for a respite. Even when modern technology produced steam engines and aircraft, it was still felt that the Maltese Islands' position is providential. An example of this, was the Second World War, when against all odds, Britain kept fighting to safeguard its hold on the Maltese Islands.

It is therefore quite understandable, that throughout the Islands' history a number of fortifications were built. While some localities have retained their importance throughout the Islands' history, as ideas and strategies changed, so did fortifications and therefore new localities were chosen, and old sites left to die a natural death.

This chronological presentation of the evolution of the fortifications of Malta, starts with the earliest times right up to the British period.

Although the first man to settle in the Maltese Islands came around the year 4500 B.C., it was only during the last phase of the prehistoric period that the first fortifications were built on the Maltese Islands. For some reason or other the first two phases of the Islands' prehistory were peaceful enough and the inhabitants did not find the need to defend themselves. But the social life in the Mediterranean Sea was changing and like other peoples, the Bronze Age people living on the Maltese Islands thought of building some kind of defence for their villages.

There have been at least six sites identified with Bronze Age fortified settlements. These are Borg In-Nadur, limits of Birżebbuġa; il-Wardija ta' San Ġorġ, limits of Siggiewi; Ras il-Ġebel, limits of Mgarr; Baħrija, limits of Rabat; il-Qortin, limits of St. Paul's Bay and another site in Gozo, that of in-Nuffara, limits of Rabat. Out of these only that of Borg in-Nadur is in a fair state of preservation.

A characteristic of these settlements is that they are

The Bronze Age fortified settlement at Borg in-Nadur, limits of Birżebbuġa





built on promontories, and usually having three sides of the locality naturally defended. The settlement would only be defended from the single side where an attack could be expected.

The Borg in-Nadur defence wall possesses all of the qualities just mentioned. It is found on a hill overlooking St. George's Bay. On two sides of this settlement there are two valleys, which provide natural defence as the sides are quite steep. The slope that leads from the bay to the settlement is somewhat steep, but it is thought that in antiquity this bay reached further inland, and therefore that side would have been better protected than it is today. There only remained one part in which an attacker could creep onto the village, and that was from the stretch of land that lay in front of the settlement. And it is here that the defence wall is to be found.

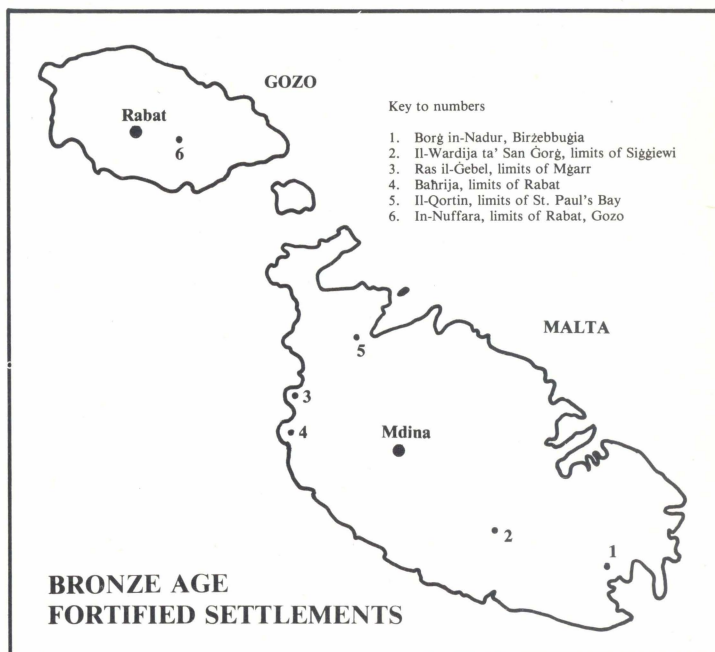
Built in c1450 B.C. this wall uses the system that was commonly used by the people of that era all around the Mediterranean. It is known as cyclopean and we see examples of this type of building in the Balearic Islands, Sardinia, Corsica and elsewhere. In this type of building large and irregular stones are put together without using any mortar. An interesting point is that though the stones used would be irregular, on looking at the finished work these stones would be closely fitted. The Borg in-Nadur wall which can still be admired, stretches for some 80 metres, attaining the height of 4 metres in some places and it is about 1.5 metres thick in average. In fact it is quite impressive.

As regards other sites where remains thought to have been Bronze Age defended settlements were found, it is impossible to have a clear idea of how large they were and if the building style was the same, as the remains are very scant indeed.

## THE PHOENICIANS

With the coming of the Phoenician trading galleys, the Maltese Islands were occupied for the first time by a great maritime power. It is thought that our Islands only served as a port of call for the galleys travelling from Phoenicia (modern Lebanon) towards the distant Phoenician colonies along the coast of North Africa and even Spain. But with the passing of time the Phoenicians established colonies on our Islands. Since it was customary for them to surround their main towns by walls, it has been supposed that the main centres on Malta and Gozo were likewise surrounded.

The main town in Malta was situated in the Rabat and Mdina area. While that of Gozo was where today there is Rabat and possibly the Citadel. Both of these towns were fortified and it is also interesting to note that both of these centres were situated away from the harbours, where there would have been activity.



It is therefore quite possible that a further smaller town would have been situated in the Grand Harbour area, where the warehouses and workshops connected with Phoenician trading might have been situated.

Although no remains have been found of these fortifications, they must have existed. The sites chosen would have been continually in use over the ages, and therefore any remains would be either lost for ever, or else buried deep below many different layers. The evidence of the location of these towns comes from a different subject altogether – tombs. There has been found a great number of rock-cut tombs around the Rabat/Mdina area, and even on the eastern side of Grand Harbour. The same can be said regarding the Phoenician tombs in Gozo, where they have been found mostly in the Rabat/Citadel area. These tombs indirectly lead to the conclusion that the main settlements could be in the vicinity, as naturally they would not be found far away from the towns.

However as regards further information about the fortifications built by the Phoenicians on the Maltese Islands, one is uncertain of ever finding any remains. Till now only tombs and their contents have given us an insight into Phoenician life in the Maltese Islands. The rest has been gathered by comparing other well-documented Phoenician colonies with our Islands.

## THE CARTHAGINIANS

One of the main Phoenician colonies on the North African coast, was the city of Carthage, founded between 813–814 B.C. With the passing of a few



years this city soon began to establish its own colonies, and in time took control of the western part of the Phoenician colonies. The Maltese Islands passed under the control of the Carthaginians as well.

Being also connected with trading, the Carthaginians continued making use of our natural well-sheltered harbours. At the same time they were more concerned with keeping an eye on the Greeks, with whom they were fighting for the control of Sicily. It is not known in what capacity the Maltese Islands were made use of by the Carthaginians in their struggle against the Greeks. Probably the Phoenician towns continued being important centres on the Islands, and consequently all existing fortifications on the Islands must have been kept in good condition.

But the people that were to take the Maltese Islands from the Carthaginians were not the Greeks but the Romans. Between these two powers, three wars were fought. They are known as the Punic Wars and because of these wars the Maltese Islands were involved in the first two. During the First Punic War, in 257 B.C. our Islands were attacked by a Roman army. It seems, though, that the Romans had only thought of a punitive raid on the Islands, because soon after the Carthaginians were again in command.

It was during the Second Punic War, in 218 B.C., that our Islands were truly invaded by the Romans. The Roman Consul, Titus Sempronius Longus, after taking the city of Syracuse, crossed over to Malta and the Carthaginian garrison surrendered. It is not known for certain whether Hamilcar bin Gisco, the Carthaginian commander, surrendered immediately to the Romans, or after defending the islands. But what is most interesting is that Hamilcar bin Gisco had a garrison amounting to nearly 2000 soldiers. When compared with the number of soldiers stationed in the "castrum maris" (present-day Fort St. Angelo) during the Aragonese period, when only 150 soldiers were stationed there, this number seems to be quite high. The probability therefore is that a Carthaginian force was being gathered in Malta, so that they could sail to help their Syracusan allies. But the Romans arrived before any help could be sent. It could also be that after the fall of Syracuse a great number of soldiers loyal to their Carthaginian masters, could have escaped to Malta. That could have been why there was such a great number of soldiers in Malta.

Regarding other defences that might have been built by the Carthaginians there is no information at all, neither through documentation nor through archaeological remains. It is not known therefore if they had built any coastal defences, or any other outworks to help the principal fortified towns.

#### A SKETCH SHOWING THE LIMITS OF MELITA, THE ROMAN FORTIFIED CITY



1. St. Paul's Church and Grotto
  2. Roman Villa Museum
  3. Gheriexem Valley
  4. Saqqaja
- The old limits of the walls of Melita,  
the Roman capital town.

#### THE ROMANS

Throughout the Roman period, the Maltese Islands generally fared well. The inhabitants were well-treated, and some Maltese became men of influence. Being also in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea which was bordered by territories occupied by the Romans, the Maltese Islands did not retain their previous military importance. This does not mean that the defence of the Islands was neglected. It should be remembered that it was a custom in those times that main towns should be fortified. Take for example the city of Rome, the centre of the Roman Empire. Although it was so far away from any enemy-held territory, it was fortified. Therefore the fortified towns that the Romans found on these Islands, must have been appreciated.

In fact, one may say, that they would have been rebuilt in the Roman style. As already noted, the main towns of Malta and Gozo which were surrounded by a wall, were not the cities that we



know today. The main town in Malta was Melita. Besides including Mdina of today, its walls used to follow the road to Saqqajja, meandering to where St. Paul's Parish church is today, then continued on their way to the Gheriexem valley, along the ridge until they connected with the present-day Mdina. It is interesting to note that the Museum of Roman Antiquities, where the remains of a town house were found, was situated within the city walls.

The same may be said of the main town of Gozo, known as Gaulos. The town consisted of the present-day Citadel, and a good part of the town of Rabat within its precincts. In fact finds dating to Roman times have been found in Vajringa Street which are thought to have been part of the town walls.

What other fortifications could there have been during the Roman period? The Greek writer, Ptolemy, who lived in the second century A.D., wrote that there was more than one city in Malta. He also mentions that there was a city in the Grand Harbour area. One immediately remembers that even the Phoenicians could have had a town of some importance in that area and therefore it was quite possible that the Romans utilized the same town to suit their own purposes. Although a Phoenician city would have been surrounded by walls, the Roman one could have been only a minor one, and therefore need not have been fortified. In any case, this town could have also had at least a small fort to defend Grand Harbour.

Besides all this, during the Roman period there was also a number of fortifications built independently of the main ones. Remains have been found in both islands. Although the remains found in Malta are very informative, those found in Gozo are not.

In Malta six individual sites have been confirmed as bearing the remains of round Roman towers. These are Ta' Wilga, limits of Mqabba; ta' Ġawhar, limits of Safi; tal-Baqqari, limits of Żurrieq; ta' Ċieda, limits of Msieraħ; Tas-Santi and Ġhajn Klieb, limits of Rabat. The best preserved of all these remains is that of Ta' Ġawhar. Like all the others, this round tower was possibly built during the third century. It has been suggested that the reason for these towers was the incursions of the Heruli people into the Mediterranean from the Black Sea. Ta' Ġawhar tower has an average thickness (of the walls) of 2.5 metres, while at some parts the remains reach up to 5 metres. It was built only for watch duty purposes, because it would not have been possible to resist an invader from such a tower.

If one was to consider the sites of these six towers it becomes quite clear that they were built so that they could give the alarm of an approaching enemy to the garrison in Melita. While three of these towers guarded the southern approach to the city, the others guarded the northern and eastern part.

In Gozo some archaeological finds are thought to indicate the ruins of Roman towers. From the scanty remains it is very difficult that certain details could be known and therefore it is not possible to know if these remains correspond with the Maltese round towers.

The end of the Roman era was probably in the 5th century, when the Vandals began their attacks on Sicily and southern Italy. It is thought that during this time the Maltese Islands were also occupied by the Vandals. Then when the Vandal territory passed onto the Ostrogoths, there was another change in the rulers of these Islands. During this period nothing of importance was built or done. The Islands probably continued with their routine and only felt the changing of powers.

## THE BYZANTINES

The Ostrogoth rule was not a long one. Possibly by the year 535 the Maltese Islands were under the rule of the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire.

Regarding this period no documents and no archaeological remains have been found and therefore although this era covers more than three hundred years, it is not possible to know the state of the Islands then. Our only information regarding the defences is derived from a Byzantine coin found in our Islands.

Inscribed on this coin there are two words "droungarios" and "archon" which can give us an indication of the military state of the Islands. This coin has been dated between the years 750 and 850 and therefore any information derived would only be indicative of what the state of the Islands was during the last hundred years of Byzantine rule. Scholars do not agree as to what these two words mean. It is probable however that the word "droungarios" means a battalion commander, while the word "archon" means a governor. Therefore it could be concluded that in Malta there was a military commander with a battalion of between 1000 and 3000 men, who also occupied the seat of governor of the Islands. This same situation also occurred during the British period in Malta.

The Byzantines would have also continued using the main fortified towns of the two Islands and possibly even those round towers. Regarding new fortifications, the only indications are of some crude ones at Tas-Silg near Marsaxlokk. These were greatly utilized during the last years of the Byzantine rule in Malta, against the marauding Arabs. Byzantine rule ended in Malta either in 869 or in 870 A.D.

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*(to be continued)*