

# Comments on Qrendi's History

by Dr. A.N. Welsh

The last Ice Age reached its peak at about 20,000 BC, and at that time the world was a very cold and dry place - dry because an enormous amount of the world's water lay frozen at the Poles, a layer of ice up to two or three miles thick in places. This layer of ice extended down to the north of Italy, but not to Malta. People like ourselves were living where it was possible, in small bands, hunting what animals they could find, and foraging for edible plants and fruit. This meant covering large areas and so these 'hunter-gatherers' were nomads; they had no permanent settlement. From analysis of skeletons found they seem to have been undernourished, suffering periods of hunger, reaching about five feet in height and living to fifty if they were lucky - of course, some places would have been better to live in than others.

As so much of the Earth's water was locked up, sea levels were lower, perhaps by 3-500 feet; this means that much of the shallow seas around Malta, the so-called Continental Shelf, would have been above ground. We could have been joined to Sicily, and only a short distance from Tunisia. Malta, and most of the countries in the world would have been much bigger.

When the last Ice Age reached its maximum, there was a more or less stable period of about 5000 years, but then came a major change. The North Pole, which had been located above Hudson's Bay in Canada started to shift eastwards to where it is now, above Scandinavia and Siberia. The ice in Canada started to melt, the temperatures started to rise, a sort of global warming, reaching a short period of warmth similar to now from approximately 12,700 BC to 10,800 BC.

A great mass of meltwater broke out from Canada and flooded into the Atlantic, causing all sorts of changes, including a short return to colder temperatures. Eventually the old ice cap thawed, gradually raising sea levels to what they are now. The last major change was in about 5400 BC when the Mediterranean burst into the Black Sea, changing it into a saltwater sea. You can imagine the strains on the earth's surface caused by the changes in weight of the sea - some are still happening, for example Scandinavia is still rising in level. There are lateral cracks or 'faults' across Malta and Gozo, of which closest to us is Wied Babu. One will remember that Graham Island which rose above the sea in 1831 and

then subsided, started to rise again last year. In about 1500 BC 86 square kilometres of the Greek Island of Santorini, an area larger than Gozo, disappeared for ever in a volcano eruption.

We do not know exactly what happened here, knowledge which awaits underwater archaeology and geological techniques, but we are running into the Temple Period, when we know that people were farming in Malta (c.5400 BC) and as there are the foundations of a wall dating to that time we can assume that there was some building going on. You will appreciate that Malta and Gozo are small parts of higher ground which became isolated as the level of the Mediterranean rose.

Malta would have been endowed with forests of oaks (ballut) and other small trees, and probably as now much garigue or bare rock, which would have made earlier occupation difficult; but as the sea rose, where else could people go! The foundations of round huts have been found, with stone footings, and mudbrick sides, and then of course, the Temples were built. Mnajdra dates from about 3800 BC, and it would appear that before that less substantial temples were erected, of which little trace remains.

After the last 'blip' in the climate chart there was a period of balmy weather, warm and stable conditions (and clear nights) which favoured the growth of population; that and the reduction of the landmass led to the introduction of farming - the breeding and domestication of animals, and the planting and harvesting of crops. This seems to have spread from the Middle East, from say 10,000 BC, and resulted in a major change in the way Man lived. If you farm you need to have pens for your animals and stores for your seeds and crops, and tools. You clear and develop fields, which become 'yours' and so the concepts of property, and of living in one place are introduced. Towns or villages are known in Turkey, and Iraq from about 8000 BC - and of course as soon as you have agricultural surpluses, then you can afford to have people doing other things than farming, armies, political organization, traders, a professional priesthood and so on.

We are talking now of 'Neolithic' people - people without the use of metals. They were highly capable in many ways, but tended to exhaust the soil round

their villages, and in the absence of modern drainage and waste disposal arrangements their dwellings eventually became unusable. Most early settlements elsewhere appear to have had a limited life.

In Qrendi we have two major neolithic temples, Mnajdra and Hagar Qim, and other temple age remains, such as the Misqa Tanks, and stone foundations in many places. To 'man' the temples would have required priests, acolytes, maintenance and domestic staff. The congregations must have lived close by - and where was that? Pretty obviously some were in Qrendi - the good agricultural land surrounding us alone would have guaranteed that. Remains of their houses are buried under our houses or lost through the



*Hagar Qim is unique among the Maltese temples because globigerina limestone was used throughout its construction.*

4500 years that have since passed.

Around 2500 BC the Temple culture seems to have disappeared - we don't know why. There was a three year drought about that time so maybe their crops failed (we don't seem to have found much in the way of Temple Age wells or irrigation systems), but it could have been for other reasons, and as there is no record we will probably never know. They kept goats, so maybe the land was eaten off! There are the legends of Atlantis, and some have identified Malta with this fabled lost civilization - according to Plato, the Greek philosopher, it had a disastrous war with Greece and Egypt, and then was largely swallowed up by the sea as a result of a massive earthquake. Malta certainly had a civilization which has been lost, but at the present time there is insufficient evidence to firmly link it with Plato's description of Atlantis, even if there ever was an actual Atlantis.

Next came Bronze Age people, some of whom would be ancestors of the present Maltese. We assume they came from Sicily - and unlike their forbears they had the use of metals, and they were warlike. Their settlements, like Borg in Nadur and Fawwara have thick walls as protection, but they did not appear to

have prospered too much and when Phoenician traders arrived in about 800BC they seem to have accepted them not only as traders but also as settlers. The Phoenicians, who came from Biblical Tyre and Sidon brought a much more advanced culture with them.

That the Phoenicians came to Qrendi cannot be doubted for twelve of their tombs have been recorded in the parish (compared with nine in Zurrieq and five in Mqabba). Many of these tombs are in the San Niklaw area, which some think had been the Capital of South Malta previously. The Phoenician town plan comprised an open space with a temple, from which ran radially, like the spokes of a wheel, the streets. San Salvatur Square would fit this description, but perhaps this is only wishful thinking on my part!

The Phoenicians built cities at Mdina and above Xemxija, and at Victoria in Gozo. They used the harbour area, and had a major temple there and at Tas Silg above Marsaxlokk. The Phoenicians moved their base of operations to Carthage after being overcome by Nebuchadnessar, but were later defeated by the Romans, their big rivals in the Mediterranean; Malta became part of the Roman Empire in 218 BC, but the Punic culture lingered on and some think that the Punic language, which was a semitic language like our own, may have contributed to present-day Maltese. However, Latin and Greek were the 'official' languages, and with some hiccups, Malta remained a Latin area until the Aghlabid Arabs overran Malta in 870AD.

The Arabs had made several raids on Malta during the ninth century, and the Byzantine Romans had made a strenuous attempt to resist Malta's capture. What happened next is not clearly known, but it can be imagined that Malta was pretty devastated. Few coins dating to the next hundred years or so have been found, and the Aghlabids had their own troubles back in Tunisia, being replaced by the Zirid dynasty. Arab sources state that about 1050 the island was resettled and Mdina was rebuilt; there was also an attempt by the Byzantines to recapture Malta, but it was repulsed, apparently with the help of the 'locals' (who may well have been augmented by the importation of Sicilian slaves), who were given various privileges (such as being able to marry Arabs) in return. At that point the local population, numbering about 6000, had been reduced to the status of serfs, forced to adopt the speech and religion of their masters, said to number about 4000.

Count Roger the Norman arrived in 1090 from Sicily, and 'captured' the island without much opposition, but his son Roger II had to reconquer Malta in 1132, and gradually Sicilian domination was established, probably with the help of Italian

expatriates. The Norman dynasty ended in 1194. The succeeding Hohenstaufen, Frederick II, made serious attempts to Christianise Malta and the Law of Islam was replaced by the Law of Christ in 1232. Some Muslims were expelled, some were sent to Italy, but the majority adopted the Christian faith.

It should be mentioned that Muslims held inferior mudejar status and paid much heavier taxes - it was advantageous to convert, and perhaps because of this the early governments applied no pressure to the great mass of the people, and Malta was still predominantly Muslim into the thirteenth century. There are few identifiable remains of the Arab period to be found, other than a number of cemeteries, usually called 'Tat-Torba' - in Qrendi's case this was possibly St. Catherine Tat-Torba, said to be roughly where the present Qrendi Cemetery is situated. The famous Maimounia gravestone, possibly from Rabat, is dated in 1174. Behind Tal-Hniena are the remains of a small building which shows traces of a curved roof, typical of Arab building technique. Saracenic symbols may be found carved into the walls of some of the older houses round about. There also had been Jews in Malta from Roman times, and Hal Lew (Leo's village) is a Jewish name.

However, the later rulers decided to abolish heresy in their dominions, and the remaining Jews were expelled in 1492, and the last professing Muslims in 1502. By then Qrendi enters into written history. Malta's new rulers kept records of taxation and military service obligations, and the Catholic Church, when it had established itself as an organization, kept records, and of course the notaries kept records of legal transactions. Some of these have survived, and Qrendi is mentioned in the military service list of 1417. Some twenty seven names are listed, many of which are surnames in the village today (bearing in mind that the village boundaries may not be exactly the same as now). They include

### (Casali Leu et Carendi)

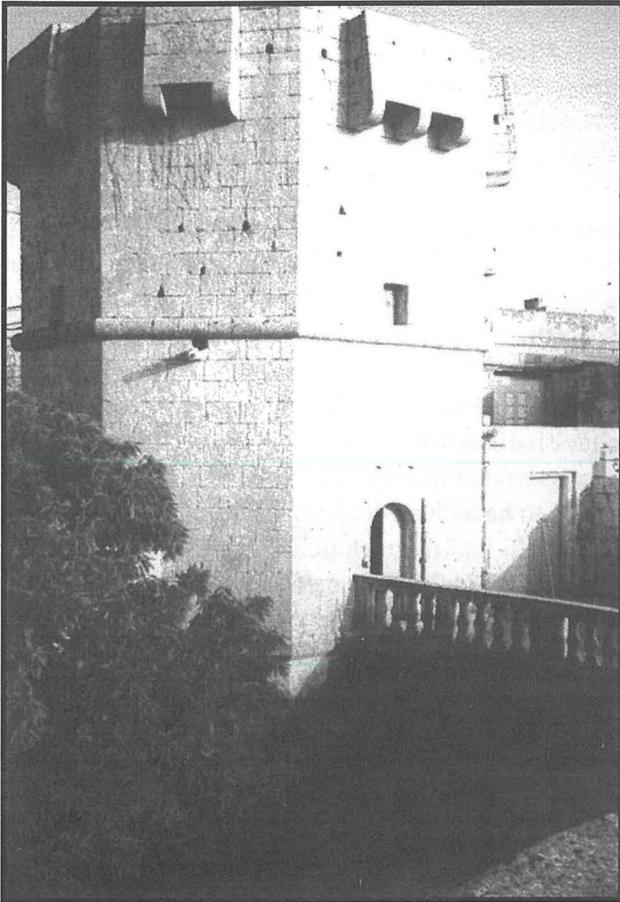
Chiccu Camilleri  
Cola Habdille  
Micheli Camilleri  
Aguistinu Calabru  
Salvu Busalib  
Nuzu Busalib  
Chuchi Cassar  
Johanni Habedi  
Franciscu Maniuni  
Bernardinu Delfe  
Cola Gugla  
Cola Hajede

Perricuni Bugeja  
Canna Spiteri  
Cola Maniuni  
Antoni Maniuni  
Thumeu Habdille  
Gualteri Actasi  
Bernardu Bugeja  
Perellu Bugeja  
Antoni Bugeja  
Marchu Bunichi  
Fidericu Cagege  
Ramiundu Habdille  
Constanzuu Consiglu  
Pinu Habdille  
Andrea Maniuni

These persons were males aged between 16 and 65. Adding females, children and old people at a guess brings the population to about 100. Interestingly, many of the names are still featured in Qrendi today - not always spelled the same way, of course e.g. Habdille = Abdilla, Maniuni = Mangion, Bunichi = Bonnici etc.

Bishop Dusina, who visited Qrendi in 1576, a century and a half later, records 7 households in Casale Manin, 54 in Casale Carendi and 22 in Casale Leu. 83 in all - we do not know how many lived in each household, possibly several as most of these would be farms, 250-350 persons, a major increase on the previous century - which is also reflected in the church building, which will be referred to later. Qrendi was becoming more prosperous, and more independent, wishing to obtain parish status itself - which was granted in 1618 by Bishop Cagliares. At that time there were said to be 202 'hearths' i.e. households in the new parish, perhaps 860 persons - a big rise, possibly reflecting a major improvement in security and general prosperity after the Great Siege - and no doubt a major increase in quarrying for all the new fortifications and buildings.

Parish priests had to compile a list of parishioners each year, the *Status Animarum*. Some of these for Qrendi, the new parish including Leu and Manin, still exist. In 1632, and this is quoted by Abela, the figure was 1024, but in 1645 it was 378. There was also a drop in the reported populations of Siggiewi and Zurrieq, but not in Mqabba. What had happened - was there a major raid by the Saracen pirates, or more than one raid? The multangular fortified tower in Triq it Torri was a sottoposto for a detachment of soldiery and cavalry of the Knights and was presumably there for good reason. Both Bishop Dusina (1576) and Commendatore Abela, Malta's first historian, writing in 1647, mention pirate raids as a reason for the



*The multangular fortified tower in Triq it-Torri.*

depopulation of the countryside and the concentration of people in the larger villages away from the coast. There is a date of 1603 (check) on an interior wall of the Tower and we remember too the ring of 17 watchtowers built by Grand Masters Lascaris and De Redin in the 1650s of which there are two in the parish, one at Wied iz Zurrieq and one Torri Hamrija in the archaeological park. We remember also that Dragut took away 6000 people from Gozo in 1551. Ottoman naval power was broken by the Great Siege of 1565 and the subsequent naval battle of Lepanto in 1571, but it left space for razzias of the Barbary Coast pirates, who despite the efforts of the Knights were not finally eliminated until Napoleon completed the task. The taking and selling for slavery or ransoming of people was big business.

After this drop the population figure rises to 734 in 1658 and stays between 600 and 800 for the next hundred years, when it rises again at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, reaching 1560 in 1881, and 2336 in 1993, a fairly steady rise and typical of Malta generally. The Status for 1687 has 673 names, and the surnames are as follows (not always spelled the same way) -

Agius, Attard, Axiaq, Azzopardi, Balzan, Barbara, Bartolo, Bonnici, Brincat, Bugeja, Busuttill, Buttigeig, Cachia, Callus, Camilleri (45), Caruana, Cognet, Cortis, Dalli, Darmanin, Debono, Farrugia (136),

Formosa, Gatt, Gauci, Grech, Grixti, Lorenzo, Magro, Mallia, Mangion, Mizzi, Muscat, Pace, Psaila, Spiteri, Tabone, Vella, Zahra, Zammit.

Farrugia, the most numerous, was not on the 1417 list, though there were Farrugias all round, for instance in Kbir, (Providenza), Siggiewi, Mqabba, and Zurrieq, so the Farrugias may have had some land in what is now the Parish, but of those which were on the list, the Camilleris did 'best.'

By 1417, Qrendi probably had Christian chapels. The small church adjoining St Matthew is one of the oldest surviving Christian buildings in Malta; there is mention of the Casale de Maqlube in an early document and it may have originated from before the Maqluba fell in the great tempest of 1343. The Dutch artist Schellinks, who visited the Maqluba in 1664 drew traces of buildings round the rim of the crater - and he drew St Matthew Church looking like St Basil in Mqabba, with a large rose window in its end. The present St Matthew must be a rebuild of that second church (and in fact the end of the present church was bomb damaged during the last war and rebuilt in its present style). In the early days anyone who could afford to build a chapel, where they would have Masses said to their Saint, at the main festivals, and under which they would be later buried. Bishop Dusina, who listed all the Chapels in the Islands in 1576, records 450, to serve a population of about 80,000. In Qrendi there were many chapels, two where the parish church stands and at least one in San Salvatur Square. Space does not permit the listing of them all; Hal Lew had three or four, and Hal Manin one; these together with Hal Millieri, Nigret, Bubacra, Zurrieq and Filfla were all part of Zurrieq, one of the original parishes of Malta, listed by Bishop De Mello in 1436 - in those days most priests were attached to the Cathedral in Mdina and travelled out to conduct services etc.

In earlier times religious observance was done with a literal acceptance, including signs and images, which is difficult to imagine today. Services, when conducted, were all in Latin, not understood by most of the congregation, and often by the clergy involved. The Angelus Bell was rung five times a day, I am told, until recent years in Qrendi, and people would pray then, wherever they were. There was plenty of sin (as now!) but auricular confession and absolution were available, then as now, to open the gates of salvation for all. To be saved from peril or suffering was attributed to Divine intervention, and gratitude was shown often by a gift to the Church - even by building a church itself. The Chapel of St Anne was built in gratitude for the successful lifting of the Great Siege.

How were people living in those early days? The Phoenicians and Romans, and probably the Arabs (who

generally accepted the arrangements obtaining and developed them, particularly as respects irrigation) operated large farms, manned by slaves or serfs. Following the fall of the Arab regime small settlements spread out over Malta and Gozo; some, as villages, flourished and then declined - examples locally being Hal Manin, Hal Lew, Hal Kbir, Hal Niklusi etc. Others were farm complexes, *vicolos*, again many of which became subsumed into the neighbouring villages. The reasons for abandoning villages are complex; one was the pirate raids - there are very few villages remaining close to the seashore - another was practical - to make proper use of mills, blacksmithing and other trades one needs bigger units, another was social, and a big reason was the Church. Big beautiful churches, with effigies of Saints, and religious murals, with regular services naturally drew people to the places where these were sited. Sometimes a disaster was involved; Hal Kbir, for instance was decimated by the Plague of 1676 and never recovered. Another influence was the building programmes of the Knights, which from 1530 drew large numbers of people to the Three Cities, and then Valletta and Floriana.

As stated, the Church played an even greater part in the life of the Islands then it does now. Our first parish priest was Ganni Camilleri, followed by Salvatore Burlo, but in 1620 Benedict Camilleri (who rebuilt St Catherine's) was appointed and remained until 1668. We do not know specifically what was happening in Qrendi but it has been said that at least two of our churches, Tal Hniena and St Matthew date back originally to the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. The little church on the left side of the present St Matthew is one of the oldest Christian buildings in Malta, and is said to be where the old lady of the legend was praying when the Maqluba collapsed in 1343.

The former village of Hal Manin ( the 'Rahal' = stopping place or station of the Armenian) can be recognized by the many wells in the fields opposite



Map 1. (1852)

the Plague Cemetery. It had its own church dedicated to St Nicholas, and the titular painting is now in the vestry of the parish church. Hal Lew (the Rahal of Leo - apparently a Jew) was rather larger, and its street plan was still featured on a map of 1752. Bishop Dusina records 22 households in 1576 and four churches, the Annunciation (decens and dealbeata - in good order and whitewashed) which was deconsecrated in 1658, the Nativity of the Blessed Mary, which seems to be the present Tal-Hniena, which was rebuilt and reconsecrated in 1650. The side chapel to the left could be the site of an original foundation. There was also a chapel dedicated to St Catherine near Qrendi, deconsecrated in 1658, and one to St Thomas, which seems to have been down the Zurrieq road.

Qrendi had three churches in the village in 1576 and five outside. Dusina mentions San Salvatur first (as it was the first one he came to). It was a very old chapel and was endowed by the Camilleri family from the rent of a garden in St Nicholas Street. It was rebuilt by the Camilleris in 1658 more or less as it is today. The main (now the parish) church was dedicated to the Assumption, and Dusina describes it as 'ampla' - big enough, and it contained a side chapel dedicated to the Annunciation. The church was built on the site of two former chapels, one dedicated to the Assumption, and the other to St Anthony. These were to the back and right of the present church and the floor of the former St Anthony Chapel was used for burials.

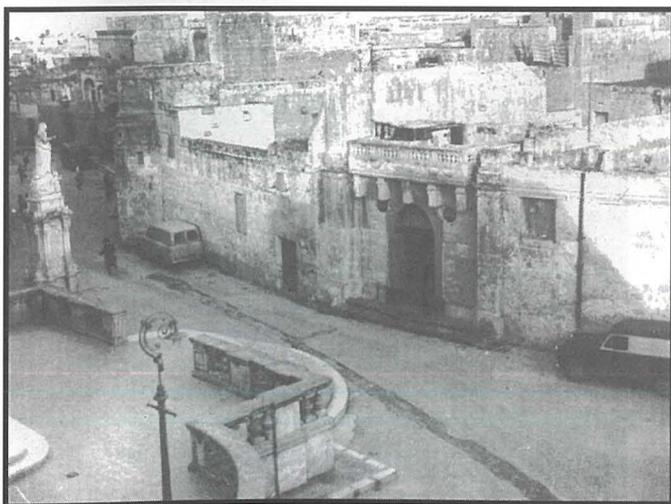
However, when Qrendi became a separate parish a better church was considered necessary, and in 1620 a larger church in the form of a Latin Cross was started (like Bir Miftuh at the time?). Church building was a long process in those days, a collective effort in which all could take part. It was finished sufficiently for worship in 1655, and nearly complete in 1679, when a new parish priest, Fra Dumink Formosa, took the courageous step of calling for it to be rebuilt again - after 60 years of effort. Qrendi was of course growing in size and wealth, and had escaped the worst effects of the Plague of 1675-77. Perhaps also the fine neighbouring churches of Siggiewi, Mqabba, Zurrieq, and even closer, Tal Hniena were another encouragement. Lorenzo Gafa, the architect of the subsequent rebuilding of the Cathedral in Mdina was called in, and designed the church which we see today; it was completed in 1720 and incorporates only a small part of the old church, in the vestry. Dusina records another chapel dedicated to the Assumption - though this may have been the old chapel behind the church - it was deconsecrated in 1658.

In the countryside (ruralism) Dusina

records five churches; Santa Katarina, which was rebuilt in 1628 on land belonging to the Camilleris and St Matthew, which we have already mentioned. St Nicholas, to which St Nicholas Street leads, was founded in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and was part of the feudal lands of Lancilotte. Latterly it belonged to the Monastery of St Nicholas in Catania, and as it now stands was rebuilt in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. There was a chapel dedicated to Santa Lucia, which Fra Carmel Attard identified near the Guarena, which was deconsecrated in 1658. All that one could find now was a small rectangular foundation. There was the chapel of St Thomas the Apostle, but this may be the same St Thomas as was in Hal Lew - Dusina says it was a mile from the village and was beside a cemetery with ancient graves. There are two later chapels in Qrendi; the chapel of St Anne in St Anne Street, and Our Lady of Graces on the way to the Guarena. St Anne was built by Giovanni Schembri in 1585 in consequence of vows he made in thanksgiving for the successful conclusion of the Great Siege of 1565. Our Lady of Graces was built by Anglu Spiteri of Qrendi, in 1658; it was originally dedicated to Our Lady of Victory and was nicknamed Tal Bilaget.

Besides our churches should be mentioned the Palazzi, summer homes of Knights and notables, of which we have six in Qrendi. The oldest is the Gutenberg Palace, in Triq il-Fulija, the Guarena on the way to Hagar Qim, the De Piro in San Salvatur Square, both now beautifully restored, and three others in Triq il-Kbira, one next to the Convent, one almost opposite, and one, the Agius Spiteri, which was largely demolished when the road in front of the Church was cut through. The fine walled Alexander Ball Garden, dating from the beginning of the British period, is on the way to St Catherine's.

From the 15<sup>th</sup> century rolls we have deduced that



*One of the Palazzi, the Agius Spiteri, which was largely demolished when the road in front of the Church was cut through.*

the population of Qrendi was then about 100, and this probably declined until about 1480, when a period of prosperity began to arrive. The Knights had a survey done of Malta before they arrived, but this has been lost. The earliest description is that of a French Knight, Abbe Jean Quintin D'Autun. D'Autun had arrived in Malta some years before, even before Grand Master De L'Isle Adam, and so should have had a reasonable knowledge of Malta by 1536 when he wrote his 'Descriptio.' There is not space here to go into all the fascinating details - he describes a rocky but fertile land, with the Maltese living frugally in poor quality homes (or caves), kept from starvation by wheat imported from Sicily, but producing excellent cotton, and textiles, and cumin; he mentions orchards, including palm, olives and vines and in particular honey - older residents will remember honey being sold in many places, but beekeeping has declined as also the areas of countryside where bees can feed!

He says: 'There can be seen everywhere nothing but dark herbs of an inferior kind. The inhabitants make use of certain kinds of thistles instead of wood, which together with dried cow's dung, is used for the baker's oven . . . drinking water comes from the rain (when there is any) which is preserved in cisterns and more frequently in ditches.' Even then Malta dried out in the summer, though the water table was higher than it is today.

It is difficult to appreciate living without electricity, telephones, newspapers, television, vehicles, running water and sewage, and schooling for all, most of which came to us less than a century ago. Likewise all the jobs available now in government, parastatal organizations and the professions and in the private sector just did not exist in the times we have been recording. But these are the times of our forebears, the soil from which we have sprung, and it is good to know where we have come from, what are our roots.

Our village of Qrendi has grown steadily (where did its name come from - some say it is a corruption of 'grande', The Big One, or it is possible that it was an Arabic personal name) from our estimate of about 100 in 1417 to a population of about 2400 today; people are flooding into the village who have had no connection with it, as are others leaving. The community feeling which is one of the 'nice' things about Qrendi is weakening but still apparent, happily fostered by the Council and other local organizations such as the Santa Maria and Lourdes Band Clubs. Qrendi is becoming a 'high demand area' with house prices to match. Fortunately, the planning limits are nearing exhaustion, and maybe the population will stabilize.