

**Report on Tunny Fishing in Malta with
a particular focus on the Mellieħa *Tonnara***

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1. Introduction

Archaeology Services Cooperative Ltd (ASC) was commissioned for the compilation of a report about the history of tunny fishing in Malta with a particular focus on the Mellieħa *Tonnara*. The aim of this report is to present the results of this research that was carried out.

This reports presents a general overview of the practice of tunny fishing in Malta, and focuses both on the Mellieħa *tonnara* as well as on similar practices of tunny fishing in Sicily.

2. The Malta-South East Sicily connection – the *Tonnara*

(David Muscat)

2.1 Early Records of Tuna Fishing in the Maltese Islands

The earliest records of tuna fishing around the Maltese Islands go back to the 15th century when according to a document found by Professor Godfrey Wettinger,¹⁵⁴ Salvatore and Domenico Pullicino were given permission to lay a *tonnara* in the Maltese waters for 10 years so as to check the feasibility of setting up a tuna industry. It is not known whether this initiative turned out successful.

2.2 The Laying out of the First *Tonnara*

Following this, in 1564, Ambrogio Tiradono, a Genoese nobleman residing in Trapani, Sicily, asked Grandmaster La Valette for permission to set a *tonnara* in the Maltese islands.² On 14th May 1564 Tiradano was granted permission for 10 years but had to abide by the following conditions:

- (i) For the first five years Tiradono was to fish for tuna without having pay any tribute to the Grandmaster;

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¹⁵⁴ Archivio di Stato di Palermo, Real Cancelleria, Vol 155 (1484), f. 201^{rv}

² Archives of the Order of St. John in Malta, MSS 430, f. 246^v - 247^{rv} (1564) u 431, f. 240^r (1565)

- (ii) For the next five years he had to give the Order of the Knights of St. John one ‘barili’ of salted tuna out of every ten ‘barili’ produced;
- (iii) He had to provide the local market with 500 ‘barili’ of salted tuna and export the rest if he wished;
- (iv) The Grandmaster could make use of the tunny nets of the *tonnara* once Tiradano’s contract ended and did not wish to renew it;
- (v) After the ten year period there would be another issue of tenders and if Tiradano submitted a good offer, he would be given first preference.¹⁵⁵

In order to set up his *tonnara* Tiradano bought at his expense nets, boats and other material from Sicily. The privilege granted allowed Tiradano to lay more than one *tonnara* if he so wished. He enjoyed exclusivity in that no one else could lay a *tonnara* in Maltese waters for those ten years. Anyone else caught fishing for tuna in Maltese waters during that period would have been fined 1,000 scudi and all his equipment would have been confiscated.¹⁵⁶

In those days it was common practise to grant exclusive fishing rights to entrepreneurs who invested in similar initiatives. For instance, in 1630, Principe di Villadorata acquired *iure proprietatis* to lay a *tonnara* off Marzamemi.¹⁵⁷

Tiradano was given ample time to search for the best place where he could lay the *tonnara*. He could avail himself of natural water sources from wherever he wished and was even allowed to dig wells to obtain water for himself and his workmen. He could also construct stores, towers or tents related to the *tonnara* on the Order’s property without the Grandmaster exacting any payment for the use of the land.¹⁵⁸

Under La Valette’s instructions there could not be any other fishing done for two miles around the *tonnara*. Anybody roaming around the area was to be fined 10 ‘scudi’ with boats and other equipment being confiscated. Local people who were employed to guard the *tonnara* nets were exempted from serving in the Dejma, the local militia.¹⁵⁹

There is no further mention of the *tonnara* in the rest of the 16th century. In 1649 however, Commendatore Gio. Francesco Abela in *Della Descrizione di Malta Isola nel mare Siciliano*, speaks of a place called l-Ahrax - in Mellieha - which was known for the migration and fishing of tuna:

*“V’habbiamo anco il posto, o sito del passaggio de’tonni chiamato l’Aharasc ove si sogliono ciaschedun’anno da Partitarij pigliar buona quantita, che in quei tempi abonda l’Isola tutta”*¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Lo Curzio Massimo, *L’Architettura delle Tonnare* (EDAS 1991), p.86

¹⁵⁸ Archives of the Order of St. John in Malta, MSS 430, f. 246^v - 247^{rv} (1564) u 431, f. 240^r (1565)

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Abela Gian Frangisk, *Della Descrizione di Malta*, (Midsea Books Edition 1984), p.136-137.

This is the first direct reference up till now that points to Mellieha as the place where *tonnara* was practised. It is remarkable to note that Abela writes of large quantities of tuna caught in this place. He also points out that this activity had been going on for a while. Abela provides a rough sketch of a sea monster that in 1642 was found dead on the shore (Refer to **Figure 1**). The monster Abela referred to is thought to have been a shark since these are known to follow tuna.¹⁶¹

2.3 The 18th Century

In the early and mid-18th century, the Knights of St. John decided to fortify the coastline by the building of towers, redoubts, batteries, bastions and digging of trenches. In the vicinity of l-Ahrax, the Knights built Fedeau Battery, known as “Il-Batterija ta’ Qassisu”. A map of 1748 of this battery marked this fortification as a *tonnara* base –

*“Pianta della Batteria Fedeau a sinistra della spiaggia della Melleha destinata per officina della tonnara colla piccolo aggiunta da farseli a tal fine in 1748”.*¹⁶²

Within the battery there were small rooms for 16 fishermen (*marinai*), a covered area of 25 square canes for 300 ‘barili’, a tent covering the ditch where the fish could be placed and a ramp leading the battery to the pier. The battery was built in 1715-1716. In 1748 several alterations were made to transform the battery in a small tuna processing plant.¹⁶³

There is evidence of similar alterations occurring in South East Sicily to improve upon *tonnara* facilities. For example, in 1726 the Rao Torres family built a *malfaraggio*, a store and other facilities to sustain the Capo Passero *tonnara*.¹⁶⁴ Similarly, in 1752, the descendents of Principe Nicolaci di Villadorata restructured the *tonnara* buildings in Marzamemi.¹⁶⁵

On Saturday 1st June 1748 Grandmaster Manuel Pinto de Fonseca inaugurated a new *tonnara* enterprise in Mellieha Bay. The first tuna was caught the following morning and donated to Inquisitor Paolo Passionei. The nets were laid in a place called Fgura. In August of that same year a good number of amberjack (*aċċjoli*), were caught at one go in a *lieva*. Some of the fish caught were donated to religious and other charitable institutions.¹⁶⁶

Another reference to the *tonnara* was made by Canon Gian Piet Francesco Agius de Soldanis in his book *Damma tal kliem Kartaginis mscerred fel fom tal Maltin u Ghaucin* (1755-1759). De Soldanis refers to Abela’s book and to l-Ahrax as the place where the

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Hughes Quentin, *Malta: A guide to the fortifications* (Said 1993), p.84-85

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ <http://web.tiscali.it/portopalo/LaTonnara.htm>, p.4.

¹⁶⁵ Lo Curzio Massimo, *L’Architettura delle Tonnare* (EDAS 1991), p.86

¹⁶⁶ Testa Carmel, *The Life and Times of Granmaster Pinto* (Midsea 1989), p.130.

tonnara was laid but he added that for several years the fishing activity in the area had ceased and that in his time steps were taken to re-establish the industry but to no avail. De Soldanis talked about the building of new stores and rooms at Mellieha Bay for the same purpose –

*“In questi ulitimi anni rinnovato nello stesso luogo, e fabbricati alcuni magazzeni nelle rade del porto della Mellieha, me ogni cosa ando invano, sarallo in avvenire se non si daranno a conoscere piu avveduti I pescatori del tonno ”.*¹⁶⁷

Contrary to what was happening in Malta, according to Massimo Lo Curzio, the *tonnara* industry in South East Sicily flourished in the 18th century to the extent that there was an increase in the exportation of tuna and the erection of new small tuna conservation and processing plants.¹⁶⁸

For several years there was some or virtually no tuna fishing in Maltese waters. Evidence of this can be gathered from the *Libretti delle Pratiche de Bastimenti con la Nota del loro quipaggio e passagieri*. This book mentions that in August 1745 Andrea Farrugia from Zabbar, together with five other men from Zabbar, Ghaxaq and Cospicua, made five trips to Marzamemi to import tuna to Malta.¹⁶⁹

Similarly, in the same year, Filippo Farrugia from Cospicua, together with six other men from Cospicua and Zabbar, made five other journeys to Marzamemi and Capo Passero for the same purpose. Regular trips to Marzamemi and Capo Passero were made every year from June to September. Usually they travelled in a *xprunara* aboard which there used to be five to ten men and 10 to 15 tuna for the local market.¹⁷⁰

Several other attempts were made in the late 18th century to re-organise the *tonnara* at Ghadira. For instance, on 13th March 1779 Felice Borg was granted the privilege by Fra Ludovicus d’Almeijda on behalf of Grandmaster de Rohan to lay the *tonnara* at Mellieha Bay. To set up the necessary nets, Borg spent 2,000 scudi.¹⁷¹

Apart from Mellieha Bay, the *tonnara* was set at other sites in the North of Malta, namely Irdum id-Delli, limits of Mellieha, il-Gzejjer ta’ San Pawl, l-Ghallies and Madliena Bay.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁷ Agius De Soldanis, *Damma tal kliem Kartaginis mscerred fel fom tal Maltin u Ghaucin*, National Library of Malta (1759), MS 143, f.136

¹⁶⁸ Lo Curzio Massimo, *L’Architettura delle Tonnare* (EDAS 1991), p.112

¹⁶⁹ *Libretti delle Pratiche de Bastimenti con la Nota del loro quipaggio e passagieri*, National Archives of Malta (1745)

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ NAM, Petitions 1143/B (1899).

¹⁷² NAM, Government Gazette, 20/5/1899.

2.4 The 19th Century

In 1849 Carmela de Stefano asked Governor O’Ferrall to be granted permission to lay a *tonnara* not only at Irdum id-Delli but also at l-Ghallies and il-Gzejjer ta’ San Pawl. In her petition, de Stefano refers to six to eight sites which were used for tunny fishing. De Stefano was given a permit by the Marine Police Department to lay the *tonnara* in the three sites listed above on the 30th June 1849.¹⁷³

Another *tonnara* was laid at least from 1856 at Marsaxlokk. It seems that this was the only place where a *tonnara* was set in the South of Malta. In 1876 a man by the name of Diacono employed around 30 men in his *tonnara*¹⁷⁴

A section of the net in those days was called “disa” and the cables were made of esparto grass. A *tonnara* was laid in Marsaxlokk up to 1895 when the *Societa Maltese de Pesca* decided to abandon this enterprise due to other fishing practices in the waters surrounding the *tonnara*; practices which were hindering the same *tonnara*. Diacono had requested that the Government forbid other fishing practices in the vicinity of the *tonnara*¹⁷⁵

Unlike what happened in Sicily at the end of the 19th century, where the five *tonnara* from Capo Murro di Porco to Capo Passero, South East, i.e. Torreuzza, Marina di Avola, Vendicari, Marzamemi and Capo Passero, were given legal protection,¹⁷⁶ the *Societa Maltese de Pesca* was not given any privilege and had to abandon his initiative.¹⁷⁷

2.5 The 20th Century

In the early 20th century several *tonnare* were laid around the islands. On 20th May 1899 the Collector of Customs, F. Vella, issued a notice calling for tenders for the licences of *tonnara*. These were to be submitted by 31st August 1899. Interested people could apply to lay a *tonnara* in any locality they wished. However the notice referred in particular to seven established sites, i.e., St. Paul’s Bay, Mellieha Bay, Cirkewwa, Gnejna, Delli, Marsaxlokk and San Blas, Gozo.¹⁷⁸

In 1901 Salvatore Ellul Bonici, owner of the Delli and Cirkewwa tonnare, in a petition to the Government wrote about the heavy costs incurred to obtain all the necessary material and tools to set a *tonnara* similar to the Sicilian system, something which Ellul Bonici claimed was “a novelty to Malta”:

¹⁷³ NAM, O’Ferrall Petitions Vol.3 (1849-1851)

¹⁷⁴ NAM, Petitions 3019 (1876).

¹⁷⁵ NAM, Petitions 6088 (1895).

¹⁷⁶ Lo Curzio Massimo, *L’Architettura delle Tonnare* (EDAS 1991), p. 56-63.

¹⁷⁷ NAM, Petitions 6088 (1895).

¹⁷⁸ NAM, Government Gazette, 20/5/1899.

“Introdurre in questa isola la pesca con reti simile a quella che si usa in Sicilia, Tunisia e Francia”.¹⁷⁹

The same Ellul Bonici invested a lot of money in the *tonnara* industry. Sometime around 1900-1905 he built a large store for tunny nets at Bu Nuhhala, near Anchor Bay, limits of Mellieha. The building cost him £300 and the *tonnara* itself cost him £4,000.

The elderly still recall the Sicilian *tonnaroti* (*bahrin* in Maltese) who sat up camps and tents for three months near the Bu Nuhhala *tonnara* store. The Sicilian *tonnaroti* taught the Mellieha *bahrin* how to lay the nets, capture and handle tuna and other fish. In 1905 Ellul Bonici built another warehouse (magazzino) at St. Paul's Bay to shelter the boats and nets of his tunny fishing enterprise.¹⁸⁰

In 1908 Ellul Bonici, in another petition to the Governor of Malta, referred to his *tonnara* as based on the Sicilian system. Ellul Bonici used to lay the nets at Id-Delli from mid-April to end of June and at Mellieha Bay from July up till September.¹⁸¹ Sicilian *tonnaroti* continued to visit Malta to train the Maltese *bahrin* and participate in the local *tonnara* up to the 1920s.

According to several sources, some based on personal experience, who worked with the Mellieha *tonnara*, the owners of this enterprise used to buy boats and other equipment from Sicily. Gamri Fenech, the last *padrun* (*rais*), in an interview with David Muscat,¹⁸² spoke about the purchase of a *xieru* (the main *tonnara* boat) from Syracuse, some time around the 1950s. At that time several Sicilian *tonnara*, for instance those of San Panagia, Marzamemi and Di Avola, were in decline and their owners were selling boats and other equipment.¹⁸³

In the summer of 1961 a minesweeper tore apart the last *tonnara* laid in Mellieha Bay. From then onwards no further attempts were made to lay any other *tonnara* in Maltese waters.¹⁸⁴ A similar fate struck the Capo Passero *tonnara* in 1975 when an oil tanker ruined the nets.¹⁸⁵

2.6 The Structure of the *Tonnara*

Unlike most of the *tonnare* of South Eastern Sicily, the Mellieha *tonnara* was more of a *tonnarella* since it employed around 20 people. There was always one *rajjes* (*rais*) unlike, for example, the two *raisi* of the Capo Passero *tonnara* and not more than five boats were

¹⁷⁹ NAM, Petitions 4657/E (1901).

¹⁸⁰ NAM, Petitions E462 (1905).

¹⁸¹ NAM, Petitions E1947 (1908).

¹⁸² Personal Communication (1993).

¹⁸³ Lo Curzio Massimo, *L'Architettura delle Tonnare* (EDAS 1991), p.66-74.

¹⁸⁴ Muscat David 2000, History of It-Tunnara tal-Mellieha, unpublished paper, Interview with Gamri Fenech

¹⁸⁵ <http://web.tiscali.it/portopalo/LaTonnara.htm>, p.7.

used. It seems that the Maltese did not make use of the boat called in Sicilian “musciara”¹⁸⁶

The Maltese *tonnara* was made up of just two rooms – il-kampin and il-qtil il-ħut. The setting of the nets was similar to that of the Sicilian *tonnara* but on a smaller scale. The Maltese *tonnara* nets were laid at the end of April/beginning of May and the season lasted until June. However, for several years, the *tonnara* was laid also from July until September. This meant that in Malta both the *tuna di corsa* (tonn bikri) and *tuna di andata* (tonn tal-ħarif) used to be caught unlike in South East Sicily where the nets were laid only from May until June.¹⁸⁷

3. A Survey of Westreme Battery, Mellieħa Bay.

3.1 Introduction

Mellieħa, situated along the Northwestern coast of the Maltese islands suffered mainly from seabound pirate attacks. In the 16th century the Knights of the Order of St John followed the example of Sicily and started building watchtowers along the Maltese coasts.¹⁸⁸ In 1714, French military engineers urged the Knights to defend the coasts of Malta. As part of this ambitious project Mellieħa Bay was fortified with two batteries, Fedeau on the northern shore and Westreme on the southern shore of the bay. A redoubt was installed at the back of the bay.¹⁸⁹

3.2 Fedeau Battery

Fedeau Battery known also as Tonnara, Ta’ Qassisu or Vendôme battery, was built between 1714 and 1716 on the left hand side of Mellieħa bay. This battery was armed with four 8-pounder iron cannon. The blockhouse of this battery served a secondary role to that of defence. In 1748, the blockhouse was enlarged to serve as an officina della Tonnara where 300 barrels of fish could be stored.¹⁹⁰ Today the site of the blockhouse and battery is occupied by a tourist resort.

3.3 Westreme Battery

Westreme or Ta’ Rasmus Battery was built between 1715 and 1716 on the southern shores of the bay (refer to **Figure 2, Plates 1 and 2**). This battery still retains signs of the ditch,

¹⁸⁶ Muscat David 2000, History of It-Tunnara tal-Mellieħa, unpublished paper, Interview with Anthony Fenech.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Mallia David - Malta: A case study in the development of fortifications. The Spanish-Portuguese bastioned towns as a world route amongst the five continents- The arrival of the Knights of St John in Malta.

¹⁸⁹ Spiteri C. Stephen 2002, pg 81,87.

¹⁹⁰ ibid., pg 82.

the circular gun platform cut in the rock and traces of gun emplacements (refer to **Figures 3, 4 and 6**, and **Plates 4 to 7**). On the other hand, the blockhouse still survives and lately has been restored by the Restoration Unit of the Works Department as part of a project by the Mellieħa Local Council to house a museum of the *Tonnara*⁵

The blockhouse was placed diagonally along the gorge of the battery so that two of its outer faces served as a redan and helped defend the landward approaches to the work. The blockhouse still retains original features including barrel vaulting of the ceiling and musketry loopholes in the outer walls (refer to **Figures 6 and 5, Plates 1 to 3**).¹⁹¹

Throughout the British period, many coastal military buildings were handed over to the Civil Government. In 1889 the British Government leased Westreme Battery for a period of 24 years to Federico Borg to store the *Tonnara*⁵¹⁹² This Battery served as a store for the *Tonnara* up till summer of 1961 (refer to **Plates 8 and 9**).

During the late 1930s prior to the Second World War the British started another programme of coastal defence around Mellieħa. Gun emplacements were added to the roof of the blockhouse, a search light room was built adjacent to the blockhouse whilst a beachpost was dug in the circular gun platform of the Knights' battery.

3.4 The *Tonnara* Museum

After the *Tonnara* ceased in 1961 when a minesweeper destroyed the nets,¹⁹³ the battery was practically abandoned and squatters used it as a seaside resort. However old people still recounted their experience on the *Tonnara*. In 1993 a group of young people, members of a cultural Non-Governmental Organisation, the *Nixxiegha Kulturali* started working to create a *Tonnara* museum along with the Mellieħa Local Council. One of these young people, David Muscat started interviewing old seamen who worked on the *Tonnara* and started archival research which he is still undergoing.

By 1999 the Maltese Government leased Westreme battery to Mellieħa Local Council in order to setup a museum of the *Tonnara*. The Local Council requested Archaeology Services Cooperative Ltd, to produce a plan of the Museum. Presently Art Club Mellieħa is setting up the Museum.

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¹⁹¹ *ibid.*, pg 82.

¹⁹² Muscat David 2000, History of It-Tunnara tal-Mellieħa, unpublished paper.

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Appendix I:**Glossary of Terms
Related to the *Tonnara*
(David Muscat)**

Maltese	Sicilian	English
Tonn	Tonno	Tuna
<i>Tonnara</i> /Tnanar	<i>Tonnara</i> /e	Tunny net
Pedal	Pedale	A long net leading to the main net.
Spika/Spejjek	Spigolo	Entrance to main net
L-itkalar	Calatu	Laying of the nets
Disa	Ddisa	Fabric of the net
Baħrin	Tonnaroti	Tuna fishermen
Rajjes/Padrun	Rais	Leader of the <i>tonnara</i>
Sid	Padrone	Owner
Xieru	Sciere	The main boat
Mazzri	Mazziri	Stones thrown into the sea to hold the nets in place.
Qtil il-ħut	Mattanza/ Camera della morte	Slaughter of tuna
Lieva	Leva	Lifting of the nets
Maħzen	Magazzeni	Store

Figures



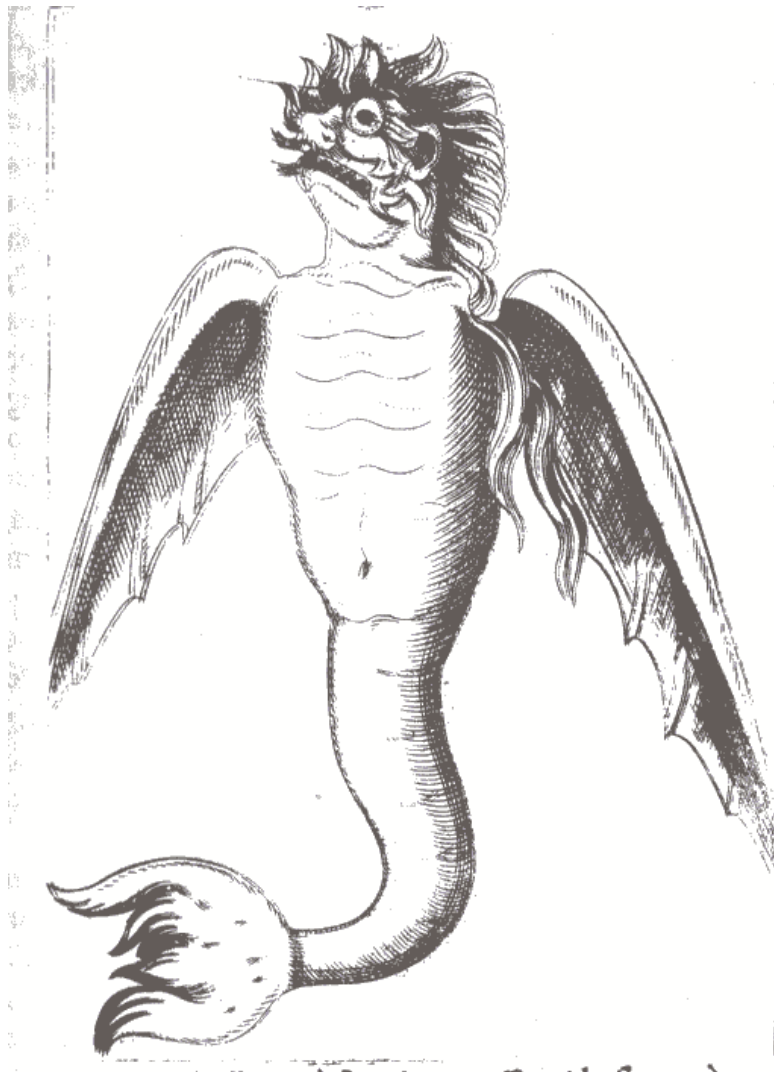
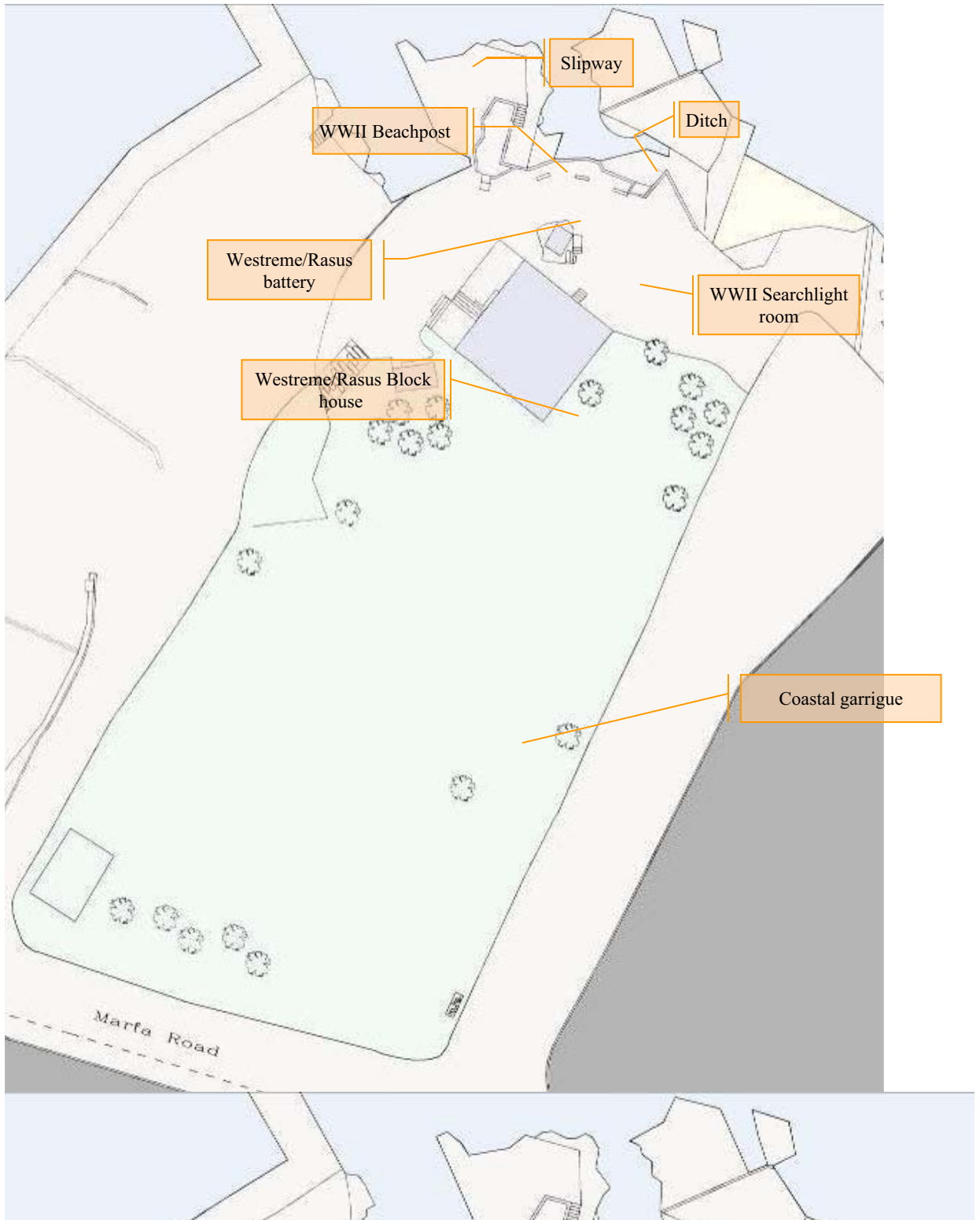


Figure 1: Sea monster depicted by Abela (1647: foglio 137)



Figure 2: Mellicha Bay and Westreme Battery complex



late 19th and early 20th century

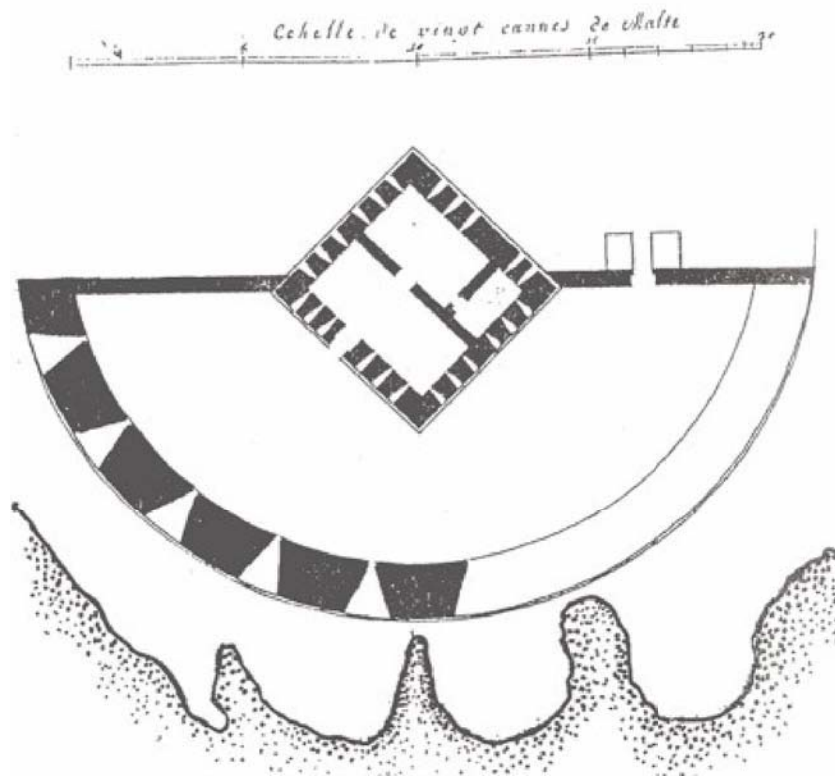


Figure 4: Plan of Westreme/Ta'Rasus Battery (Spiteri 1989: 180 fig.214)



Plate 1: Façade of Westreme Blockhouse



Plate 2: Westreme Blockhouse from the South



Plate 3: Musketry embrasures



Plate 4: Ditch and cannon platform



Plate 5: World War II gun emplacements



Plate 6: Search light room



Plate 7: Beach post



Plate 8: One of the Large anchors known as *Kap Rajjes*



Plate 9: A *barkazza* lying in front of Westreme Battery