



The Black Rock

by Dr. A.N. Welsh



On old maps we do not see Filfla mentioned as such, but the words Piedra or Pietra Negra, the 'Black Rock' appear. From what I can gather the black rock refers to Filfla but also to a mediaeval anti-pirate lookout north of Torri tal-Hamrija (which replaced it). The exact site is lost but it may well have been where there is a small landing place and cave nearby. The rocks in this area are black and basaltic and it would be reasonable to call Filfla the 'Black Rock' – why then 'Filfla' ? The word comes from the Latin *fulfula*, a peppercorn, and it has been thought it may have referred to a field let at a peppercorn rent for the maintenance of the church on the island (or maybe the rent of the island itself). Don Nicholas Burlò was appointed its priest in 1574, and the description says Saint Mary of Furfula, otherwise 'of Sorina', otherwise 'of Siccium'. Bishop Dusina in 1576 directed that its income be given to the Church of Saint Leo in Bubacra, but that the chapel should be repaired so that the devotions of the faithful should not be 'diminished'. Apparently services were still being held on the island, albeit with rather complicated logistics. Eventually the chapel was taken down and the titular painting removed to Saint Leo.

Everyone knows the very attractive legend of the Lord taking the sinful (or moslem) village of the inhabitants of the Maqluba, possibly Casal Maqluba, and depositing them in the sea, making Filfla. But how could anyone really believe such a thing! Filfla is such an obvious sight that surely it must have been

visible before the Maqluba fell in – unless of course it was not. In the nineteenth century another island appeared in the sea, Graham Island, but sank again, the result of volcanic activity. Could Filfla have come up as a result of volcanic activity in the middle ages?

The opening of the Maqluba is a historic fact, occurring as a result of a great storm in 1343, and one hundred years later in 1443 a chapel was consecrated in its memory on Filfla. It will be remembered that Filfla was larger than it is now (by it is said 30%), having been reduced by gunnery practice during the war, and so there would have been more space for a small building. The prewar maps show two smaller islands to the south and Stork Rock about half a mile to the west. The chapel was not a success (Filfla is three miles from the nearest point in Malta, below Mnajdra) and as mentioned above was eventually abandoned.

Traces of Phoenician activity have been found on Filfla, and in the days before motorised boats it might well have been a store and refuge for fishermen. The first roll of the Church we have dates from 1436 and it refers to one 'Nerus Fabianus Zammit pro beneficio S. Mariae di Fulfula'. Before the chapel of 1443 there must have been at least a shrine on the island, and who funded the benefice – fishermen or descendants of the people lost in the Maqluba? Was it St. Mary of the Peppercorn a manifestation of the Virgin, which name was then applied to the island? Before the gunnery practice, did it look more like a peppercorn?

As with many things, the truth remains to be uncovered.

Nevertheless on warm evenings it is pleasant just to sit on the black rocks at Wied iż-Żurrieq and gaze out to sea with the dark shape of Filfla always in view, brooding in the distance, mysterious and attractive, packed with secrets.

