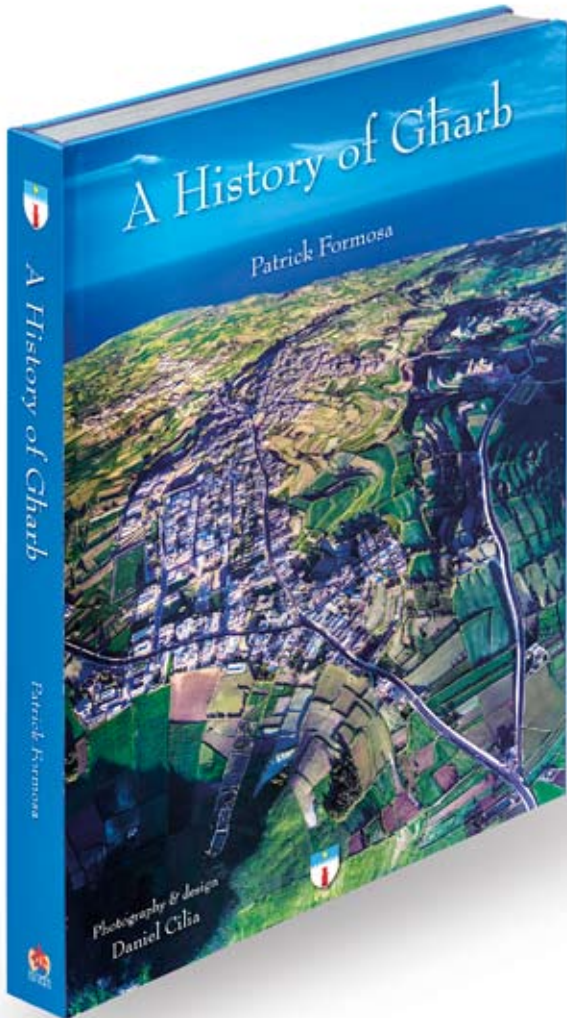


# Book Review: A History of Għarb

Patrick Formosa

Malta: Salesians of Don Bosco (through Fr. Charles Cini SDB) (2018); 304 pages

REVIEWED BY MAURICE CAUCHI



Many have gone through the process of highlighting their birthplace by writing its history, but surely no one has produced such a comprehensive, detailed, fascinating volume such as the one just published by Patrick Formosa, *A History of Għarb* (2018). And if this is considered to be an exaggeration, I will follow it with another: This volume is by far the most comprehensively illustrated, the most visually attractively laid out of any such attempt at informing the nation of what village life was all about.

Following an introductory chapter describing the layout, geography and geological formations of the village, Formosa looks at the history of Għarb over the ages. It takes us back to Neolithic times to discuss remains first excavated by Dr David

Trump, right to the most recent discoveries in Piazza *Gerano* (formerly known by the more homely name *Fuq il-Blata*).

For outsiders, one of the most characteristic features of Għarb has been the more obvious remains of a Semitic heritage as manifested in vocabulary as well as some characteristics of pronunciation (now largely lost), indicating a link with Semitic languages, particularly, in my opinion, with that of Lebanon/Syria rather than with North Africa. It is an unfortunate fact that the last evidence of origins has practically disappeared. Such language remains – no more than language equivalent of archaeological shards – have to be clearly distinguished from the so-called ‘Brejku’ (‘Brajku’ ‘Ebrajku’) which some still confuse with the Għarb dialect, which the initial investigators (Mikiel Anton Vassalli and others) have shown was no more than a gimmick, a way the villagers show their irritating foreign visitors that they were not welcome, a metaphorical raised middle finger in fact.

The history of Għarb ranged over the desolate Arab and subsequent periods. Many lives were lost to pirates, particularly when Gozo was practically cleared of able-bodied persons, and in the raid of 1551. The author makes the point that since the local villages were better off than most others, perhaps they were in a better position to rescue their relatives from slavery.

During the French occupation, Malta and Gozo were divided into ten districts, and Għarb formed part of the ninth district. The revolt of the Gozitans was quick and effective: After only 42 days the French were ousted, but not before two Gozitans (one of them from Għarb) were taken prisoners for their role in the uprising and shot. I find it ironic that while we celebrate the events of the ‘Sette Giugno’ when four Maltese were accidentally shot, we seem to have complete amnesia about those who were deliberately shot for their part of their active participation in an uprising!

Until 1893 the village of San Lawrenz was part of Għarb, and the author describes several issues which do not form part of Għarb any more, but did so in the past. This includes Dwejra. In fact chapter three is devoted entirely to the mysterious and much sought after ‘fungus Melitensis’, which is neither a fungus, nor strictly speaking entirely ‘Melitensis’ either. It was however, guarded by the Knights and British rulers for its perceived medicinal properties.

A chapter on churches in Għarb highlights the great respect that the inhabitants had for their religion. Chapels abounded, spread all over the terrain, built by those who could afford them, close to their homes or fields, aiming at reducing the time spent travelling to their homes. An argument brought to convince the hierarchy that Għarb needed a parish of its own was the fact that it took several hours to walk to the matrice in Rabat, having to leave home when it was dark, posing physical and even moral risks to women, some, it was said had even been raped. But the main problem seems to have been the maintenance of all these chapels, built with enthusiasm which could not always be maintained. When Pope Gregory XIII sent Mgr Dusina as Apostolic delegate in 1575 to check on the state of

the chapels, he found several chapels which were derelict and were condemned. It appears that church doors were a very collectible item at the time, and most chapels were without a door.

This is followed by chapters about the parish churches, the old one ‘Taž-Żejt’ as well as the one that later superseded it. They are both treated with extensive, interesting, historical detail. As in previous chapters the illustrations are simply magnificent and greatly enhance the attraction of this book. Dealing with the third major church in this village, Ta’ Pinu, Formosa outlines the process which started with Karmni Grima’s mystical experience, a vision which, as only locals seem to know, was also shared by Fraŋġisk Portelli (who, as it happens, was also my mother’s uncle). The gargantuan efforts involved in raising the funds for the building of this magnificent temple through donations from ordinary people are well described. In particular, the contributions of humble parishioners like the famous ‘Frenč tal-Għarb,’ who is said to have included doctors among his patients, have contributed greatly to the success of this project, which later on were extended to the erection of a via crucis up the hill opposite the church.



The book bristles with interesting historical details, varying from description of the cat hole with its curved outline ensuring easy access to the house while reducing draught, to the cost of building the domus curialis which amounted to ‘611 pounds sterling, 13 shillings 8 pence 1 farthing’: certainly emphasising the value of money at the time.

The transformation of a village population into the educated majority it is today has taken the best of a couple of centuries, starting from a time when elementary school education was the only one that could be afforded. The language question even left its mark: students in elementary schools were asked to choose to learn either English or Italian.

A chapter on legends and traditions highlights a number of well-worn aspects which specifically relate to this ancient village, as well as others which have not quite reached such notoriety. It emphasises also the widespread presence of niches containing statues of saints – a testimony to the highly ingrained respect for religious practice in the past.

A chapter on other various aspects of life in Għarb couldn’t escape mentioning the dramatic demographic changes that have occurred over the ages. From a population of around 500 persons up to the mid of the 18th century, the population tripled to over 1600 by the end of that century, and remained at this high level until the 20th when it fell again to below 1000, largely as a result of emigration which has affected this village more severely than any other locality elsewhere in the Islands.

Interesting also are the comments on other aspects of life which have now largely disappeared, including the making of roofs using crushed potsherds (deffun), which unfortunately might have caused the crushing and destruction of any archaeological remains. As everyone knows, bizzilla was a flourishing industry which kept women busy earning few pennies.

In another chapter the pastimes and customs of the inhabitants are described in considerable detail, including some that are believed to be unique to this village, from pre-TV era, when the street was the meeting place. More recently, the football club and the band club have taken prominent roles in these fields also.



The book includes a USB card with more than 40 exclusive interviews done with the people of Għarb between 1971 and 1973.

One unusual and certainly attractive feature is the addition to this book of recorded interviews, thus providing facilities for actually listening to the unique dialect of this village, which has long since disappeared. It reminds one of the rich vocabulary used by locals for their various activities, whether at work or at play. It counteracts the current mania for introducing foreign vocabulary while at the same time forgetting our own language.

One superb feature of this publication is no doubt the photography and design of the book by Daniel Cilia. No effort has been spared in ensuring that these magnificent photos were taken from every possible point of view, from aerial photography to views from cat-holes.

The provision of facilities for students to undertake a course of serious studies at tertiary level, leading to a dissertation as part of a BA (Hons), has to be recognised and acknowledged.

This publication should be in the hands not only of every person living in the village, but also those interested in the micro-history of our nation. It will hopefully spur other villages to undertake similar studies to highlight the contribution of the average person to the creation of a national identity, and serve as an antidote to our current concept of Maltese history as a period of servility to foreign landlords.

The book is available from the author on 79440029.