

Mosta - a historical, urban and demographic overview

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■ If one were to give a quick glance at a map of Malta showing the built-up area of the island, one would encounter no difficulty in locating the town of Mosta, since this is found roughly in the centre, its built-up area only fused to that of Naxxar. This central location, is probably also reflected in the meaning of the name 'Mosta'. E. B. Vella, after consulting with persons well acquainted with oriental languages, concluded that the name 'Mosta', is a derivative of the Arab word 'wast', which means 'in the middle of' or 'something put in between'. Vella gives credit to this meaning since he argues that not only is Mosta roughly in the middle of Malta, but also lies in between two areas of high relief which are the Rabat-Dingli plateau and the Naxxar uplands (Vella et. al., 1986, pp. 1, 23).

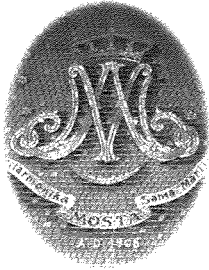
From Prehistory to the Middle Ages

■ Man has inhabited the area where the town of Mosta lies today since Neolithic times. Witnesses to this statement are the 'cart tracks' and two dolmens. The former are found in the areas of Santa Margerita and of Fort Mosta at Misraħ Ghonoq, whilst the latter adorn 'ix-xaghra ta' Wied Filep'. All of these locations overlook Wied il-Ghasel, Mosta's main topographical feature (Caruana, 1993, p. 169).

Various other archaeological findings point towards a continuation of human settlement in the area where today's Mosta is found. Such findings include Punic tombs, which E.B. Vella (Vella et. al., 1986, p. 29) himself discovered in the spring and summer of 1928. These are scattered all over Mosta's countryside especially in areas near the valley. Other archaeological remains, which Vella himself found, include a dwelling and tombs dating back to the Roman period (Vella et. al., 1986). Other remains, dating back to the same period, are attributed to communities who endorsed the new faith brought by Saint Paul. These remains include tombs and two small catacombs, one of which is found below the fortifications known as the Victoria Lines, and the other not far away at Ta' Bistra (Vella et. al., 1986 pp. 47, 50).

As for the rest of the island, evidence from the Arab period about settlement in the Mosta area is scant. However evidence surfaces up again in the late Middle Ages. Here one can find that the area today occupied by Mosta was made up of a number of hamlets, such as Raħal Calleja, Raħal Sir, Raħal Hobla, Bise (Pessa) and Dimag (Dimekk). Eventually, by time, these hamlets coalesced into a more nucleated type of village so that by 1419, it was recorded that Mosta/Calleja was home to 310 persons while Pessa/Dimekk contained 165 inhabitants. By time the village became more nucleated, however the population did not increase much. Some six to seven decades later, the population of Mosta only increased to 482 inhabitants from the 475 it had back in 1419; a meagre increase of one person per decade (Sant, 1996 p. 22).

The late Middle Ages ended with a tragic demographic disaster for Mosta. In 1526, Barbary corsairs headed by Rajjes Sinen, landed at Salina Bay and attacked the village. Besides the villagers slain in the attack, four hundred were driven into slavery. The village, which apparently was one of the most prosperous on the island, suddenly got divested not only of the great majority of its inhabitants but also of its opulence since those who were spared from the corsairs' attack sold much of their goods and fields in order to ransom their beloved.



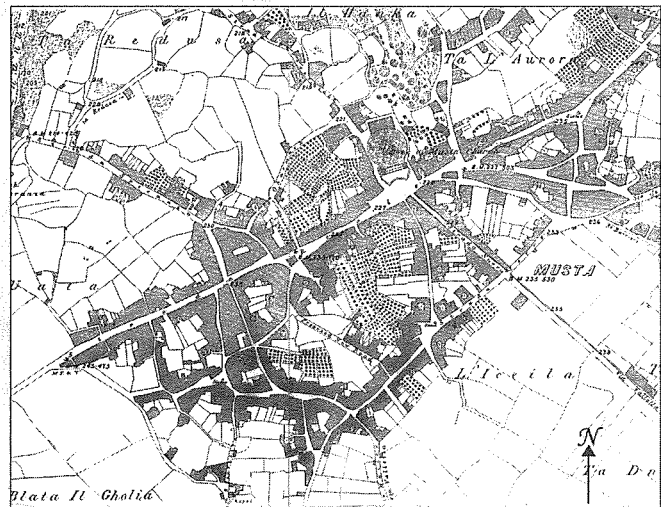
The 1526 attack is also the episode that provides the historical background for the popular legend 'l-Gharusa tal-Mosta' (Vella et. al, 1986 p. 57-59).

The era of the Order of St. John and the early British period

■ The year 1530 heralded the arrival of the knights of St. John as the new rulers of the islands. The Ottoman Turks had already ousted these Knights from Rhodes back in 1523. Only a few years after they settled in their new possession, another Turkish attack threatened again their stability. This attack, better known as the Great Siege took place in 1565. (Blouet, 1993, pp. 47, 49, 54). Blouet (1993) argues that:

In the spring of 1565 there were about 9,000 men-at-arms in Malta. Of this number over 5,000 were Maltese and their contribution was decisive. Maltese women and children, too, played an important part and a large number of local inhabitants were killed in the fighting (p. 66).

Therefore it would not be mistaken to state that the demography of Mosta, like that of the rest of the island, suffered yet another downswing. Surprisingly enough, only ten years after the siege, the population recorded at Mosta was 580 (Sant, 1996 p. 25). Such an increase in population can probably be attributed to the redistribution of the Maltese population after the 1565 siege. Therefore a sizeable number of those who came to Mosta would not have been pre-1565 Mostin.



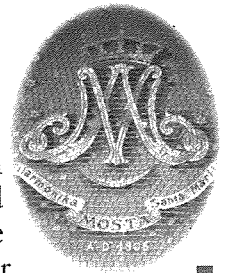
Mosta around 1899

An important date for the village of Mosta was 1608 since Bishop Tommaso Gargallo severed the village from the matrice of Naxxar and declared it a parish in its own right (Borg, 1998a, p. 46). Mosta was granted this right since the village was growing in population and prosperity, a recurrent, although not steady trend, throughout the period in which the knights of the Order of St. John governed Malta.

Date	Population
1614	900
1632	1,579
1645	1,214
1658	1,078
1670	1,181
1680	1,300
1687	1,243
1797	2,593

Table 1: Population of Mosta during the rule of the Order of St. John
(Source: Sant, 1996, p. 25)

The population increase (Table 1) took place as a result of socio-economic well being brought about by the Order's presence in Malta, a good example of which is the distribution of land grants, given to people wishing to build houses in villages (Sant, 1996, p. 25).



The reign of the Order of St. John was succeeded by the short-lived French occupation, which spanned from 1798 to 1800. These two years were characterised by war, which the Maltese waged upon the occupiers. In all 20,000 Maltese perished, even though it is not known exactly how many Mostin died during this war. It is however known that around 633 Maltese soldiers who took part in the war hailed from Mosta (Vella et. al, 1986, pp. 114, 116).

When the French were ousted, the British took over. Although the Maltese were willing to have the British as their sovereigns, this does not mean that their socio-economic condition got much better (Blouet, 1993, p. 137). As a matter of fact, during the first half of the 19th century Mosta and Naxxar were 'the poorest among the poor' (Bonnici, 2002, p. 74). One has also to remember that this period of poverty coincided also with the building of the Mosta Rotunda, begun in 1833 and finished in 1860 (Caruana, 1993, p. 171). Vella argues that all the villagers, women and children included, toiled to build their new church, and they worked even on Sundays and public holidays. Proof of this is the cost of the new church which was £21,000, a trivial amount when compared to the cost of St. Paul's Anglican Church in Valletta, a much smaller edifice which cost £18,000 and took only five years to build (Vella et. al, 1986, pp. 173, 175).

The census of 1842 reports that Mosta had a population of 3,368 but by ten years later the figure had risen to 4,305. From these, 3,250 persons were considered as poor. This amounted to 75.71 per cent of the village population; a miserable record by today's standards (Bonnici, 2002, p. 74). The great majority of Mostin were farmers and farm workers, and apparently the cotton industry thrived in this area, since the 1837 Royal Commission reported that Mosta had 500 female cotton spinners and weavers; the highest number in Malta (Sant, 1996, pp. 36, 37).

Mosta in the late 19th and 20th centuries

■ Throughout the rest of the 19th century and the early 20th century, the population showed a fluctuating trend.

Date	Population
1861	3,828
1901	4,365
1911	5,783
1921	4,866

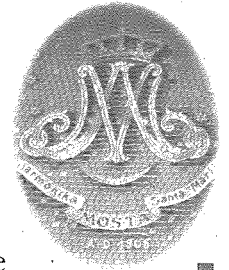
Table 2: Population of Mosta 1861-1921
(Source: Sant, 1996, p. 35)



Mosta around 1957

The decrease in population, which took place between 1911 and 1921, is attributed to emigration, a result of dire economic conditions. Mostin emigrated mostly to California in the USA and to Mackay in Australia. So strong was the emigration trend that during the 1920's a quite impressive total of 226 Mostin settled in Australia (Sant, 1996 p. 35).

From the map of Mosta in 1899, it is evident that Mosta was a nucleated village showing also some ribbon development along Strada Reale (Triq il-Kbira), which was then the main road, Strada Parrocchiale (Triq il-Parrocča) and Strada Speranza (Triq it-Tama). Of



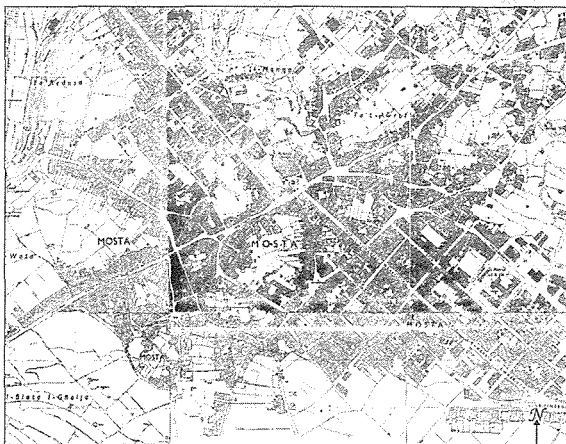
notable importance is Via Nuova Valletta, nowadays Eucharistic Congress Road, since this road is practically the only straight road to be seen in the map, and thus points towards the introduction of the planned element in Mosta's urban fabric. This road, which was opened back in 1853-54 (Sant, 1996, p. 40), was to influence radically the future settlement pattern in Mosta, since it began to expand progressively along the flanks of this thoroughfare, instead of the previous pattern centred around Strada Reale.

This trend can be clearly observed if one were to have a look at the 1957 map of Mosta. This shows that Mosta still maintained its nucleated pattern, however, new urban development took place in planned blocks built on both sides of Via Nuova Valletta. This new development introduced a gridiron street plan in this newly built part of Mosta.

Building activity in Mosta showed a pattern related to that of population increase or decrease. The first decade of the 20th century witnessed a building boom. This surge in building, besides influencing the urban fabric of the village, also showed that direct participation in the flourishing building industry engendered a steady income; a major catalyst of change in the employment structure of the inhabitants of Mosta, who increasingly began to diversify from their traditional agricultural base. However this boom was not to last forever, and the period after the First World War, a period of recession, brought the building activity to a standstill. This situation was further aggravated by the emigration of skilled persons experienced in the building industry to foreign countries (de Lucca & Bonnici, 1996, p. 77).

Further aid towards modifying the old settlement pattern of Mosta came in 1929, the year in which the construction of Constitution Road began (Sant, 1996, p. 46) This street is another prominent feature in the 1957 map and it is located west of the Rotunda, following a north-west - south-east direction and beginning from the parish square. Development did not take

long to materialise along this thoroughfare so that the ribbon development present in 1957, had already changed into planned residential blocks following a gridiron street plan in 1968.



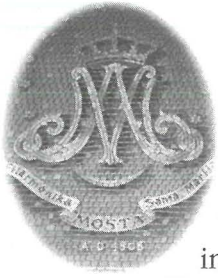
Mosta around 1968

The 1968 map shows marked urban growth in Mosta, which continued to follow the trend initiated back in 1854 when Via Nuova Valletta was opened. Here one can see that a further major planned road was opened. This is Vjal l-Indipendenza. Like its predecessors, this main road gave the impetus for development to take place along both its flanks. In the 1968 map, this road was still not completed and building consisted only of a few detached houses on the southern side, and some planned residential blocks

on the northern side.

Regarding the demography of Mosta, one can say that this greatly increased during World War Two due to the influx of refugees from Valletta and Cottonera. These refugees were housed in public buildings such as oratories and social clubs (Vella et al. 1986, pp. 408, 437, 438). As the end of the war approached, many refugees decided to return to their former dwellings, however others decided to continue living in Mosta (Borg, 1998 b p. 75).

When writing about present day Mosta, Sant (1996) argues that:



World War II served as a catalyst of change for Malta and particularly for Mosta. In the ensuing years, but especially in the sixties and seventies, Mosta shed its rustic character and became a 'town' rather than a 'village'. The permanent settling of wartime refugees in Mosta, the large number of servicemen who rented apartments in the village, the intermarriage of locals with outsiders, Maltese and foreign alike, the effects of emigration and immigration, the impact of tourism, the powerful and persuasive force of the media - these and other factors have spelt the end of Mosta as our pre-war ancestors knew it (p. 49).

The major reason why 'pre-war ancestors' would not recognise Mosta as it is today is the great urban expansion of the village. Table 3 shows the great explosion in Mosta's population, which more than doubled in less than half a century.

Date	Population
1954	7,660
1967	8,335
1985	12,148
1995	16,629

Table 3: The population of post-war Mosta (Source: Sant, 1996, p. 49)

The great urban expansion referred to above began in the immediate post World War Two period, when government policies, which gave incentives for repairing damaged buildings and demolished tenements, revived the building industry. This building boom, which proved to be the largest one to date in the Maltese Islands, encouraged developers to put new virgin land up for sale (de Lucca & Bonnici, 1996, p.80). Returning back to the 1968 map, one can see that land was already being developed on the southern flank of Vjal l-Indipendenza. This was to be the beginning of the residential zone of Ta' Mlit. Building in Ta' Mlit expanded greatly in 1975, when the government launched its first housing estate in Mosta. The 1970s witnessed also a surge in building in the areas of is-Sghajtar, Santa Margerita, Tal-Wej, San Anton, Sant' Andrija, l-Isperanza and Wied is-Sir (Vella et. al, 1986, p. 493).

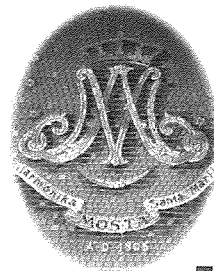
When describing this surge in urban growth in Mosta, de Lucca and Bonnici (1996) argue that:

While the building area at is-Sghajtar integrated well within the rest of the development, the housing estate at Ta' Mlit was looked at differently. This project gained a slightly negative stigma, and for a time was regarded as a sign of social deprivation (p. 80).

From interviews conducted by the present author, it seems that the 'slightly negative stigma' associated with the housing estate of Ta' Mlit, persists even to this day. A postperson who is a native of Mosta and who works in Mosta, described the housing estate at Ta' Mlit as having sub-standard housing (interview with Joseph Abela).

In a similar vein, a lecturer working in a post-secondary institution, who is himself a native of Mosta, argued that if one were to talk about the status associated with different residential areas in Mosta, the housing estate at Ta' Mlit would surely get the lowest rank. This is due to the fact that here one can find a concentration of social problems. Such a concentration materialized since government housing policies in the 1970s gave first preference to people with social problems. Thus, since Ta' Mlit housing estate was the first one of its kind in Mosta, it ended up having the most acute mixture of people with social problems in present-day Mosta (interview with Paul Attard).

The Ta' Mlit residential area, does not only contain the government housing estate. It



expanded greatly also due to the Home Ownership Schemes of the 1980's, which were similarly introduced in the Santa Margherita and Ta' Bistra areas (de Lucca & Bonnici, 1996, pp. 80, 81).

Conclusion

■ All these building developments have contributed to produce a very different Mosta from the one that was represented on the 1899 Mosta map. If one were to have a look at the most recent map of Mosta one would surely note the huge increase in the built up area at the periphery of the village. These newly built up zones are most conspicuous on the eastern side of Mosta, primarily made up of the Santa Margherita, Sghajtar and Ta' Mlit residential areas. Development on the western side of Mosta has not been as compact as on the eastern side, due to the presence of Wied il-Ghasel and Wied l-Isperanza. Here, ribbon development along certain roads as Tower Street, Hope Street, and Fort Road, is more prevalent. Compact residential zones such as at il-Blata l-Gholja, iz-Zokrija, Ta' Bistra and Sant Andrija have also been developed, although these are not as large as their eastern counterparts.



Mosta around 2000

In conclusion it would be interesting to note that all the names that nowadays are used to refer to different residential areas in the town of Mosta, were in the past, names of particular areas of land devoted to agricultural use, which in less than a century were transformed into built-up areas. Therefore these names must not only remind present and future generations what Mosta had been in the past, they must also prompt serious thought about for how long this rapid development can continue without measures of control.

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INTERVIEWS:

- Joseph Abela, personal communication (16 March, 2004).
- Paul Attard, personal communication (27 March, 2004).

MAPS:

- Works Department Maps: 1899, 1957, 1968.