

THE DEVELOPMENT OF
DOMESTIC SPACE IN THE
MALTESE ISLANDS FROM
THE LATE MIDDLE AGES
TO THE SECOND HALF
OF THE TWENTIETH
CENTURY

George A. Said-Zammit

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

‘An ideal home acts as a territory that mediates, reflects, and shapes social identity’
(Amorim and Lourerio 2003: 1).

Aims and Objectives

The main source of inspiration that has contributed to the development of this study has been Malta’s most precious natural resource: the local limestone. For many centuries, this has played a vital role in the life of the settlers to build their abodes and settlements as well as to defend themselves against their enemies. The Neolithic settlement of Skorba and the native megalithic temples, for example those of Mnajdra and Ħaġar Qim, are an excellent example of this principle (Evans 1971; Trump 2004). The utilization of the local stone and the human exploitation of the natural environment through the ages were two major factors that influenced how and where people live.

The archaeological evidence confirms that there was further development in the use and dressing of the local stone in the Punic Period (Said-Zammit 1997a; 2008) and in the Roman Period (Bonanno 2005; Gouder 1979b). In the Middle Ages it was used for the building of churches, palaces, houses and defensive systems, spread in different parts of the Maltese islands (Dalli 2006). It was employed also for the building of various vernacular structures outside the urban centres (Fsadni 1992; Jaccarini 2002).

In the Knights’ Period (1530–1798) the local stone was exploited for the development of the most ambitious defensive system these islands have ever seen, particularly in the Grand Harbour area (Spiteri 1994; 2008). A fortified city (Valletta) was built, while new settlements were developed in other parts of the country (Blouet 1993). It was also used for the building of palaces, hospitals and churches (Sire 1994).

During the Colonial Period (1800–1964) the British made extensive use of this natural resource to build additional defensive systems as well as houses and churches that were inspired by nineteenth-century architectural styles (Mahoney 1996). During this period new urban and suburban settlements developed at a fast pace. The use of concrete after the Second World War, together with the development of new construction techniques, materials and equipment meant that buildings could be built in a relatively shorter time.

The opening of the local economy after the acquisition of Independence in 1964 led to the development of the earliest industrial estates in different localities, which contributed to the establishment of new suburban areas and settlements (Busuttill 1988). New houses, apartments, housing estates

and hotels started to be built in various parts of the country, gradually threatening the existence of some rural areas. Although the local stone is still used in contemporary houses, the use of prefabricated materials since the second half of the 20th century has led to a different domestic environment and climate. As will be demonstrated throughout this study, the local limestone, being the principal building material of the Maltese islands is, therefore, the essential physical and material element of the houses.

This work has also been inspired by the unpublished genealogical research which the author had carried out for a long time in the local archives to trace the origins of his family. The vast collection of parish records and notarial acts provide a plethora of information through which one can decode various aspects of Maltese society through the ages. The archival records on demographics and the notarial acts on property deeds provide the societal framework created by and for the houses and their inhabitants.

Therefore, these two sources have served as a means of inspiration through which the author thoroughly engages with different types of Maltese dwellings, including the *palazzi*, terraced houses, farmhouses, the urban poor houses, hovels and cave-dwellings.

This study traces and analyses the evolution of domestic space in Maltese vernacular and *polite* houses through time. The houses under study range from humble buildings of modest size, materials and design, like farmhouses or those for the less affluent town-dwellers to buildings of grand design, like townhouses and private palaces. Covering the periods from the medieval to contemporary times, this work considers various aspects of Maltese lifestyle, culture and economic activities to assess the local houses both from an architectural point of view and from an economic and anthropological perspective. The specific aim is to examine Maltese houses not as a static relic of the past, but as a vibrant place of human activity and social interaction, in which people act and react in different ways, according to different circumstances. In this sense, houses are also studied in terms of their spatial properties and how these generate privacy, interaction and communication, accessibility and security, and, equally important, how domestic space relates to gender roles, status and class.

The main objective of this study is to reach a deep and nuanced understanding of domestic space and how it relates to the islands’ history and the development of its society. The complex nature of the Maltese houses can

only be addressed through applying a multidisciplinary approach. Therefore, this research promotes a multifaceted enquiry into the houses of the Maltese islands, reaching from the physical buildings and their material culture, via the perception of houses in art and literature, to the socio-economic significance of buildings in terms of property relations and economic activities. More specifically, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of domestic space in Malta, this study pursues the following lines of investigation:

- a. systematic house surveys and rigorous data recording to establish categories of different types of dwellings;
- b. detailed field surveys, cartographic analysis and geographic research to relate the evolution of settlements to the development of domestic space;
- c. the study and appreciation of literary sources and *oeuvres d'art* to evaluate how Maltese houses have been perceived by travellers, visitors and artists;
- d. the documentation and evaluation of house furniture and contents through comparative studies of permanent museum exhibitions and notarial records;
- e. the analysis of a wide range of historical sources (including notarial records and travelogues) to explore Maltese houses as a place of human habitation and socio-economic activity;
- f. a systematic analysis of a small but coherent sample set of house and settlement plans using formal techniques for spatial analysis (Space Syntax) to study the evolution of the Maltese houses and settlements through their intrinsic spatial properties;
- g. the analysis of demographic data (for example, population records and the national censuses) to study the socio-anthropological dimension of the Maltese houses;
- h. the analysis of recent local domestic architecture to evaluate the perceptions of Maltese contemporary society.

These individual strands of enquiry have their own merits, however, when combined they complement and amplify each other and allow new and deeper insights into the evolution of the Maltese houses.

The Geographic Setting

To comprehend the importance and value of the local building stone as well as the socio-cultural and economic context of the Maltese houses, one needs first to make reference to the geographical context of the Maltese islands, their geological setup and climate. Houses and settlements cannot be studied out of their physical or natural context, otherwise one is likely to obtain a partial or deceptive picture. Moreover, in a Braudelian sense, it is when the Maltese islands are considered within a Mediterranean context that

one can comprehend better the islands' landscape and their particular history (Horden and Purcell 2000).

The Maltese islands, located in the central part of the Mediterranean Sea, are situated about 93km to the south of Sicily, 354km to the north of Tripoli, and 288km to the east of Tunisia (Figure 1). The archipelago, having a northwest to southeast orientation and a total surface area of approximately 316 sq km, consists of three main islands: Malta, Gozo and Comino (Figure 2). The smallest other islands of the archipelago are uninhabited. Malta, the main island, has a maximum length of approximately 27.4km and a maximum width of about 14.5km, thus having a surface area of about 247 sq km. Gozo, the second largest island, has a surface area of approximately 66 sq km. Comino is the least inhabited and has a surface area of about 3 sq km. The Maltese islands have a number of naturally sheltered harbours. The highest point in Malta, at 253m above sea level, is Ta' Dmejrek in the parish of Dingli.

The Maltese islands have a sedimentary type of rock, consisting of five superimposed layers (Figure 3 (a) and (b)). The lowest layer is the Lower Coralline Limestone. This is the earliest rock layer to have been formed in these islands about 30 to 25 million years ago. Above this there lies the porous Globigerina Limestone which is the most important for the local building industry. On the latter sits the Blue Clay which occurs mostly in western Malta and in various parts of Gozo. Being an impermeable layer, Blue Clay gives rise to the formation of the perched aquifers, ideal for field irrigation and domestic use. Upon this lies the porous Greensands layer, which occurs only in small pockets of land. The most recent rock layer to have been formed is the Upper Coralline Limestone, which is particularly important for the production of grit and concrete. This occurs mostly in western Malta and in eastern Gozo.

The Maltese islands consist of three basic geological regions, namely:

- a. **the Coralline Region:** roughly extending from Marfa harbour to Dingli cliffs, it is the region in which Upper Coralline mostly prevails in Malta. It consists of two subregions: the dry coralline, where perennial water is hardly available, and the wet coralline characterized by several perennial water springs;
- b. **the Globigerina Region:** this comprises the rest of Malta and extends from roughly St Paul's Bay down to Marsaxlokk harbour. It consists of a series of sheltered harbours which gave rise to several settlements. This region comprises two subregions: the predominant globigerina, where the best ports of the island are located, and the less common globigerina, a smaller area where all geological deposits occur;

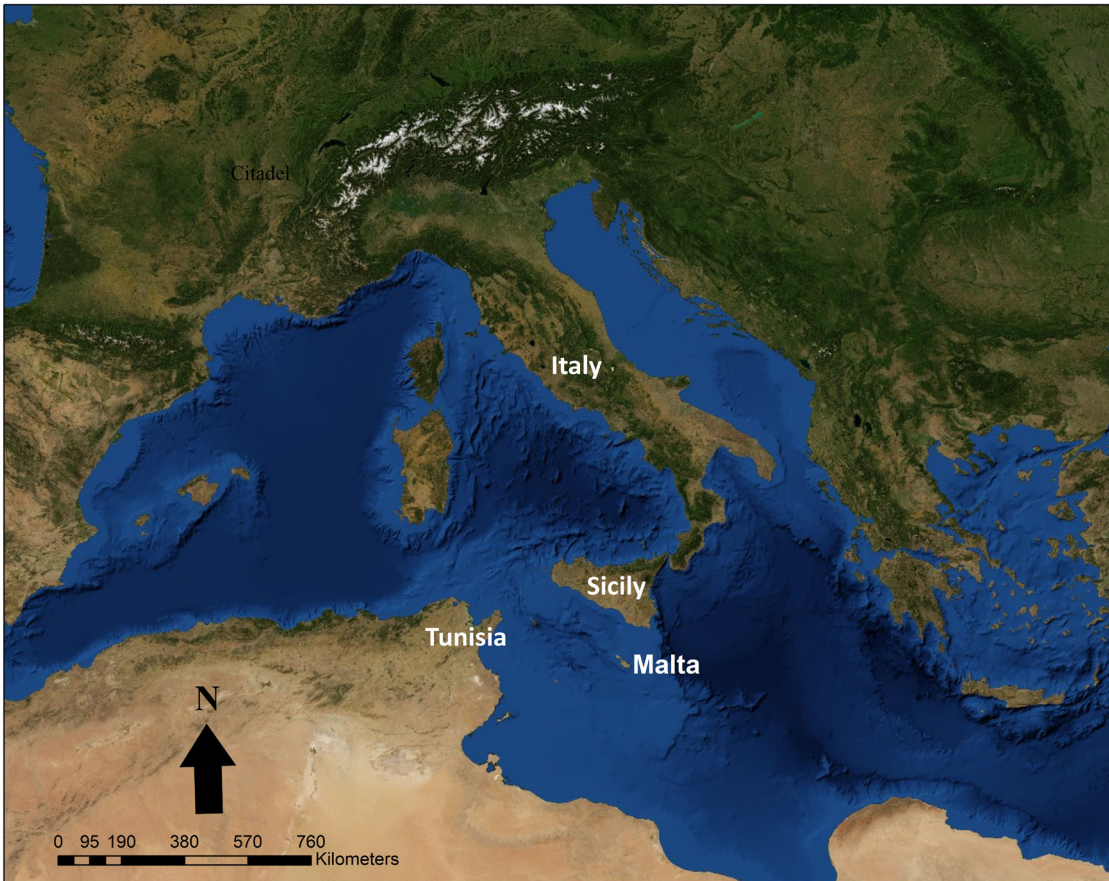


FIGURE 1 – MAP OF THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN REGION INDICATING THE LOCATION OF THE MALTESE ISLANDS

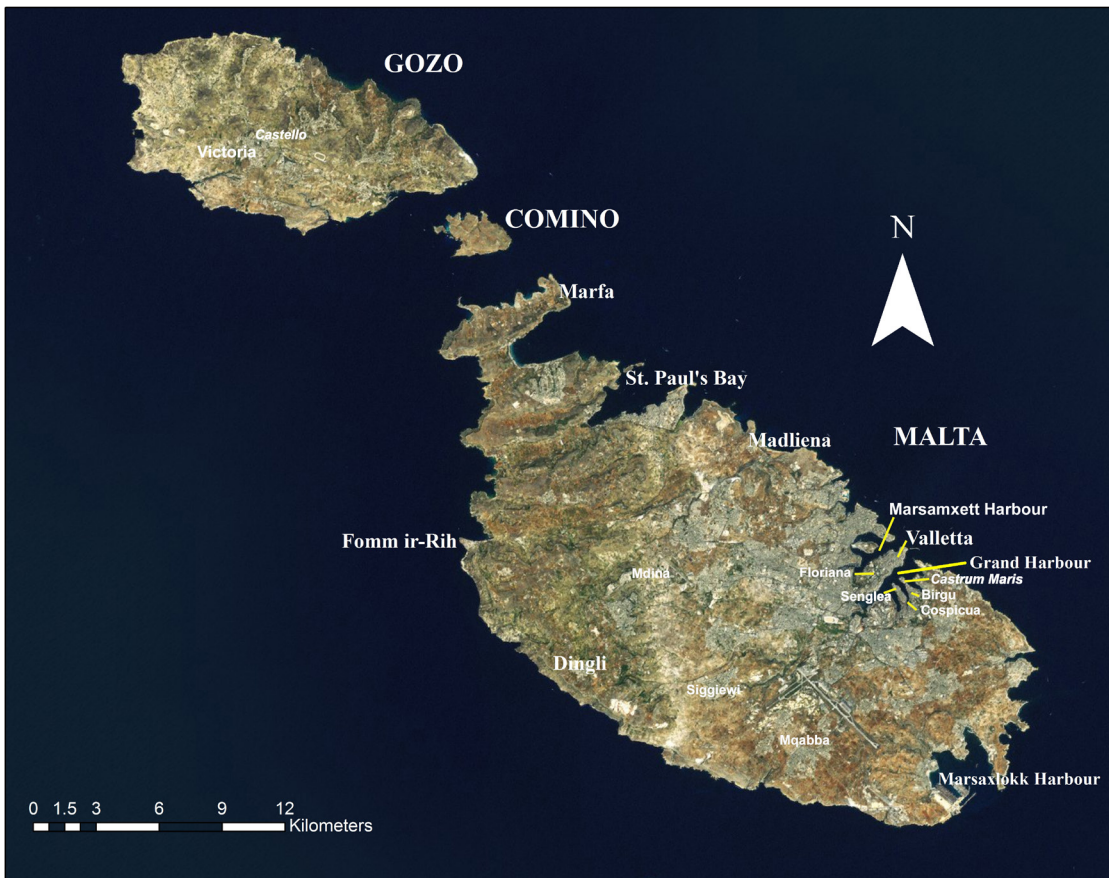


FIGURE 2 – THE MALTESE ISLANDS

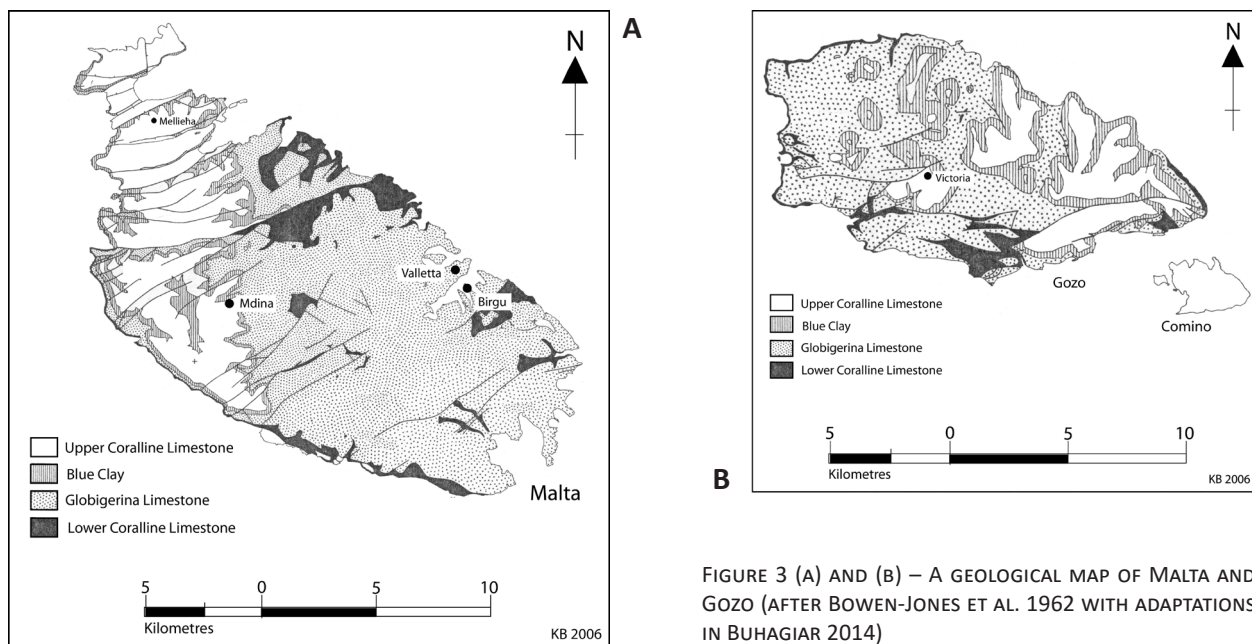


FIGURE 3 (A) AND (B) – A GEOLOGICAL MAP OF MALTA AND GOZO (AFTER BOWEN-JONES ET AL. 1962 WITH ADAPTATIONS IN BUHAGIAR 2014)

- c. **Gozo:** this is characterized by a series of open harbours, particularly in its southern and northern parts. All geological layers feature on this island.

Geologically, the western and northern parts of Malta consist of a chain of parallel hills and valleys. They are separated from the rest of the island by an extensive natural fault, known as the Great Fault, which runs from Madliena to Fomm ir-Riħ. In northern Malta the escarpment is sometimes abrupt and broken by deep embayments, while western Malta is characterized by deeply incised valleys and undercliff areas. Soil erosion on the hill-tops of western and northern Malta does not allow proper agriculture, however across the hill slopes the land is utilized for crop cultivation and animal grazing (Buhagiar 2014: 42-54). The valleys of this part of the island, sheltered as they are between these hills, are extremely fertile because these are irrigated by the springs that originate from the Upper Coralline uplands (Bowen-Jones, Dewdney and Fisher 1962: 235-88).

In contrast, in the eastern part of Malta several valley systems descend to the central plains. A tongue of high ground known as Sciberras peninsula, on which Valletta was built, separates Marsamxett Harbour from the Grand Harbour. The most prevalent type of rock that occurs in this area is the Globigerina Limestone. It is, in fact, in eastern Malta where one finds the most extensive surface quarries (Buhagiar 2014: 49-50).

Gozo and Comino have similar characteristics to northern Malta. Gozo consists of a chain of flat-topped hills, across which one finds many terraced fields and a series of valleys. The most common rock types are the Globigerina and the Upper Coralline.

Recent statistics issued by the National Statistics Office (NSO) show that today 34% of the total land is still used

for agriculture. This contrasts well with the situation that occurred half a century ago, when agriculture still occupied approximately 56% of the total land area (Busuttill 1993: 11; Vella and Camilleri 2003: 1569-71). The rise of new towns and the development of new industrial areas in different parts of the islands were certainly some of the main reasons which led to this decline in agricultural land. In fact, in 2010 the total urban fabric amounted to about 25% of the total land area of the Maltese islands. There was also an increase in the land devoted for industry, which increased from about 3% to approximately 7% of the land, while forested areas and wetland in Malta and Gozo constitute about 1% of the total land area. Urban areas have spread in most parts of the islands, with a major concentration in the Grand Harbour area, being the most densely populated district in Malta. While several settlements are located in different coastal or harbour areas, a considerable number of others are situated more inland (Figure 4).

Historically, the former capital city of Malta was Mdina, a medieval town in the centre of island, while the main town of Gozo was also situated in the centre and was known as the Castello. Until the mid-16th century the Grand Harbour area was dominated by a medieval castle, known as the *Castrum Maris*, which sheltered the nearby maritime settlement of Birgu. However, when Valletta became the new capital in the second half of the 16th century, the Grand Harbour area developed into one of the most conurbated regions of these islands. Here developed several new important maritime towns: Floriana (the suburb of Valletta), Senglea (or Isla) and Cospicua (or Bormla). Together, Senglea, Cospicua and Birgu are also known as the Three Cities. While Valletta is Malta's capital city, Gozo's main town is Victoria (or Rabat), the island's most inhabited settlement, located close to the medieval Castello or Citadel (Figure 2).

