



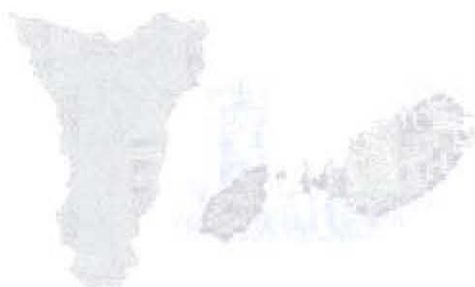
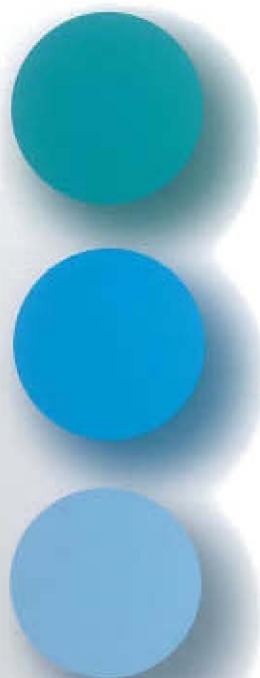
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## Tal-Koçċla Territory:

### Understanding the Genesis of the Maltese Suburb of il-Fgura situated at the Outskirts of the Cottonera Harbour Towns (1842-1925)

Dr. Simon Mercieca and Magistrate Joseph Cassar

The urban zone, now known as il-Fgura, started spreading like a fungus a few decades ago, but the appearance of the first lined houses in the area dates back two centuries. It was in the middle of the nineteenth century that this district began to develop into a marginal suburb of the harbour town of Bormla, which is one of the three towns situated in the south-east of the Grand Harbour. However, if one wants to unearth the history of il-Fgura's remote past, i.e. before the sixteenth century, one has to rely mainly on archaeological evidence and from what has been unearthed one can try to make an interpretative reading of the habitation patterns and use of the land of the area for the period which lacks written historical evidence. After all, very few, if any conclusions can be drawn from archaeology as this area has been savagely built up and like other places close to it, development was undertaken regardless of the historical remains. The latter were either destroyed or sold on the market. Thus, in the unearthing of recondite historical figures, the major evidence about il-Fgura's past can only be drawn from surviving written information and oral traditions; it should be stressed that unfortunately archaeology in this particular case cannot be used as a substitute.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike major towns in Europe, Malta lacks coherent municipal archives. The only towns and places in Malta that had a form of archives were Mdina and Valletta. One comes across sparse historical references about the remaining towns and villages, but to unearth them a historian has to go poking into different and diverse registers preserved at Malta's National Archives at Rabat (Malta), the National Library at Valletta, the Archbishop's Curia in Floriana, and the Cathedral Archives Mdina besides those in private archives.<sup>3</sup> The principal sources encountered for the study of il-Fgura were the place-names of the area as they appeared in different survey sheets and notarial records and the ecclesiastical information on the people who inhabited these localities during early modern times. In fact, the earliest written records on this area are to be found in the notarial archives and these date back to the early sixteenth century. In the case of il-Fgura, this type of documentation concerns mainly land transactions in the area undertaken by owners who, in most cases, did not live in this outlying district.

Before the urban development of ubiquitous concrete-brick houses sparked off, the area was made up of strips of wastelands, fields with little vegetation in summer, scattered farmhouses,

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<sup>2</sup> In the area occupied by the present town of il-Fgura, a number of ancient remains were found, in particular a number of tombs which were identified as belonging to the Phoenician period and therefore they go back to the 3rd or 4th century B.C. Six Phoenician tombs were discovered between the 28th of October and the 21st of December 1948. These tombs were discovered in the area known as Tal-Liedna.

<sup>3</sup> S. Mercieca, "Fonti religiose per lo studio della famiglia a Malta", *Popolazione e Famiglia nel Mezzo Giorno Moderno Fonti e nuove Prospettive d'Indagine*, ed. Giovanna da Molin, (Cacucci Editore - Italia, 2007), pp. 125-164.

winding paths, lanes, passages, meadows and four curving, irregular streets, the width of a cart, connecting this area to the surrounding localities. One street connected this district towards the west, to the area known as Raħal il-Ġdid, while from the eastern direction, it led to the village of Haż-Żabbar. The next passage was the one that from Bormla crossed il-Fgura, where it formed an axis with the street leading to Haż-Żabbar, and continued in a northerly direction towards the village of Hal Tarxien. Half way through, this passage branched off, on the borderline between the present limits of il-Fgura and Hal Tarxien, to another path that twisted to the village of iż-Żejtun. Therefore, these two principal passageways met at the road junction, situated more or less on the spot where today stands a monument made of four pillars crowned with a small cross.



*Fig.1- The road junction where the four principal streets in il-Fgura met. In this area was situated the old church, whilst the entrance to Carmel Street is visible to the right of the picture.*

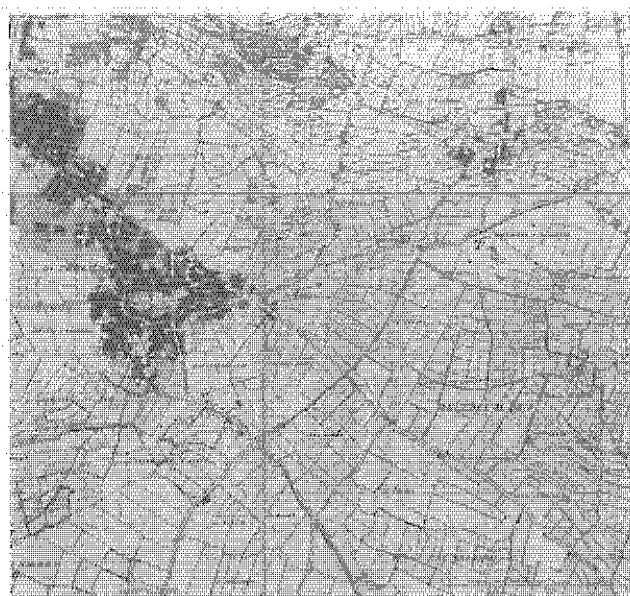
In terms of territorial size, il-Fgura has a surface area of 19km<sup>2</sup> or 6 per cent of the total surface area of Malta, as this amounts to 316km<sup>2</sup>. According to a study conducted by David M. Boswell in 1994, ninety-five per cent of the surface area of il-Fgura was built after the Second World War and over sixty-four per cent of the same was developed after 1964.<sup>4</sup> The remaining open spaces and patches of greenery were mostly taken up for building in the last years with the result that in il-Fgura, very little agricultural land remains.

The spreading love for the study of landscape introduces new pursuits in the area of historiographical positivism. It is of particular interest to study how the nomenclature of the fields of this area were written down along the centuries as there appears to have been a gradual increase over time in the number of place-names. This rise indicates that the fields in this area had undergone a number of divisions during modern times. Gio Francesco Abela mentions the

<sup>4</sup> D. M. Boswell, "The Social Prestige of Residential Areas", *Maltese Society. A Sociological Inquiry*, ed. R. G. Sultana and G. Baldacchino (Mireva Publications, 1994), p. 138.



existence of the area Ta' Birghelien<sup>5</sup> whilst the notarial acts give the existence of other place-names such as the area of "tal ficara"<sup>6</sup> and the hamlet of Hal Hellul with its district of Tax-Xemx u l-Qamar.<sup>7</sup> The survey maps of the early twentieth century give the existence of the following place-names besides the other three previously mentioned: Ta' Zilfa, Tal-Patri, Ta' Ghalel, and il-Bwar amongst others.<sup>8</sup> The survey map of 1987 includes more place-names to this area of il-Fgura, besides the one already mentioned and these include Tal-Liedna, Ta' Tira, Ta' Penza, Ta' Merini, Tal-Gallu, Ta' German and Tal-Fgura:



*Fig.2- Survey map made around 1925.*

On the other hand, if one wants to study the social structures existing in the area and unearth its first nuclei of households, one needs to seek historical evidence beyond the limits of present day il-Fgura. Although il-Fguta grew on the margins of Bormla, it never fell under the parochial jurisdiction of the latter. Here one needs to specify that a distinction should be made between the territorial limits established by the Archbishop's Curia for religious purposes, and those established by the State. The former shaped the parochial territory whilst the latter were set up for purposes of secular administration and to classify the electoral districts as established by law. Thus, when one comes to study the development of the territory of il-Fgura, one needs to compare the historical evidence with what was happening on the adjunct territory of Bormla to really understand why this territory only developed during the industrial period. But when it comes to the search for historical documentation, or information about this area, it has to be sought within the context of Tarxien, because as a parish it formed part of the latter until it was

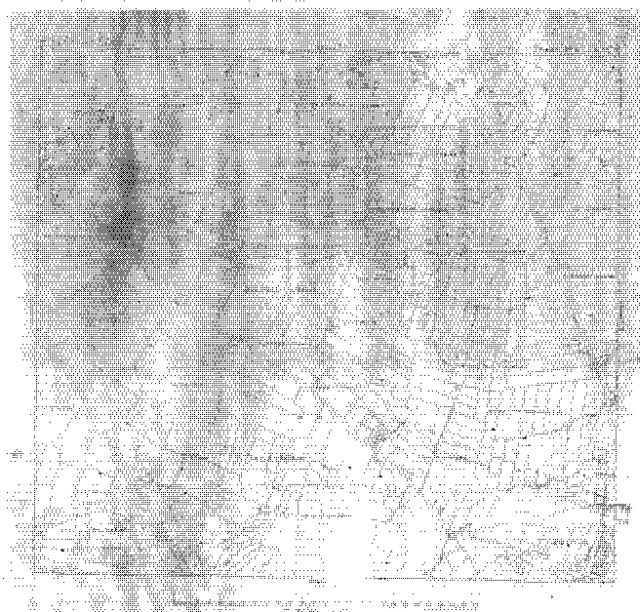
<sup>5</sup> F. Abela, *Descrizione di Malta* (Malta, 1647), p. 105.

<sup>6</sup> G. Wettinger, *Place-names of the Maltese Islands ca. 1300-1800* (Malta, 2000), p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 280, 489, 615.

<sup>8</sup> One example is the survey map of the carried out around 1926 from which this information has been taken. These site plans are conserved within the Government Agricultural Division.

established as a separate parish in 1965. An eye should also be kept on the adjacent village of Hal-Zabbar, in particular, when researching the notarial archives. Some notaries in the sixteenth century for example, preferred to associate parts of this territory with the neighbouring village of Hal-Zabbar.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the bulk of information, full of eye-catching details about the urban genesis of Il-Fgura, lies buried in the registers of the parish of Hal Tarxien.



*Fig.3- Survey Map of a part of il-Fgura territory compiled in 1987.*

Parish documentation is generally associated with the religious life of a community, but it also sheds light on the social life and other mores related to the urban development of the area. An important document which sheds light on these themes is the *Status Animarum*. Each *Status Animarum* is a full-scale record of all the inhabitants living at Tarxien in a particular year. The parish priest was supposed to keep them on a yearly basis. However, many *Status Animarum* of Tarxien went missing. The surviving *Status* can be traced at the Parish Archives, the Archbishop's Curia in Floriana or the Cathedral Archives at Mdina. The surviving *Status* provide a timeline of the urban transition that had occurred in il-Fgura. These documents were and still are a form of religious census conducted by the parish priest after Easter Sunday. In this record, the parish priest wrote down the names of each parishioner. The census marked each member according to the houseful to which he belonged (called in Latin *domus*) and each household was recorded according to the street or area where it was situated. The earliest *Status* of Hal Tarxien goes back to 1687 whilst the first time that the village streets were recorded by name, was in the *Status Animarum* of 1800.<sup>10</sup>

Through the study of the *Status Animarum* of Hal Tarxien for the period of 1842 to 1925, the urban genesis of il-Fgura can be reconstructed by noting how differently various parish priests

<sup>9</sup> Wettinger, op.cit, p. 43. Tal Ficara was described as "clausura in contratu tal muegħil de Rabal Czabbar".

<sup>10</sup> In this *Status Animarum*, only one street in the village was given by its proper name, that of "Trieht Berta".

alluded to their farm-dotted outskirts. Furthermore, these *Status Animarum* show that the area which today is known as il-Fgura and which borders Ħal Tarxien, Raĥal il-Ġdid, Bormla and Haż-Żabbar was known as Tal-Koċċla. It is of particular interest that this particular nomenclature is found mainly in the *Status Animarum* of Ħal Tarxien, the Government Censuses, notarial records but never really figured on the Government survey maps or site plans.

It should be pointed out that this area of Tal-Koċċla is spelled differently in these records. The spelling varied from one series of documentation to another. In the parish *Status Animarum*, this place-name is written differently according to the incumbent parish priest, with the result that over the span of seventy-three years, these variations were encountered 'Ta Chocla',<sup>11</sup> 'Tal Cocla',<sup>12</sup> 'Tal Cocola',<sup>13</sup> u 'Tal Coccla'.<sup>14</sup> In a notarial deed, the place-name was written as 'Tal Coclu'.<sup>15</sup> Government censuses returns referred to this area as 'Contrada Tal Coccela'<sup>16</sup> and 'Tal Cocc'la'.<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that parish priests and notaries had a solid knowledge of Italian and Latin culture and language while senior government officials had learned the English language. This factor must have influenced the way how these officials wrote and interpreted this particular place-name.

In fact, thanks to the references made to place-names and street names of the outlying areas of Ħal Tarxien, it becomes possible to literally visualise, as if reading an old map, or a traveller's description, how the outskirts looked like in the past, before it became one big site primed for development. Nomenclature too talks about events. In analysing one *Status* after another, it becomes possible to start to picture and imagine how the area of il-Fgura began to develop.

The first time that the name of territory Tal-Koċċla appeared in the records of Ħal Tarxien was 1842. According to this *Status*, very few families lived in the district 'detta tal Chocla' among them were Lorenzo Balzan, his wife Francesca and their five children and Salvatore Bezzina who lived on his own.<sup>18</sup> The fact that only two families are found living here does not mean that it was a small area but that it was scarcely inhabited.

The parish priest at the time, Don Antonio Fenech was responsible for drawing up this and other *Status Animarum*. He paid particular attention to detail, which is indispensable for locating this territory. From the given information, the territory extended to areas which today are associated with Raĥal il-Ġdid and bordered the town of Bormla and the present day village of Ħal Tarxien.

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<sup>11</sup> P[arish] A[rchives] Tarxien, *Status Animarum 1842*. (unpaginated sheets).

<sup>12</sup> P.A. Tarxien, *Status Animarum 1843*. (unpaginated sheets).

<sup>13</sup> P.A. Tarxien, *Status Animarum 1849*. (unpaginated sheets).

<sup>14</sup> P.A. Tarxien, *Status Animarum 1871*, pp. 39v – 40r.

<sup>15</sup> P.A. Tarxien, *Deed of Notary Michele Clandio Debono*, dated 27 June 1861.

<sup>16</sup> *Census of the Civil Population of the Islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino taken on the 3rd May 1871* (Malta, 1872), p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> Vide of *Census of the Maltese Islands 1891* (Malta, 1892), table X, p. 21; and *Census of the Maltese Islands 1901*, (Malta, 1903), table X, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> P.A. Tarxien, *Status Animarum 1842 - 1849*. (Unpaginated sheets).



According to Fenech, the Tal-Koċċla territory bounded the following fields, the 'Clausura tal-Ispanjol' and the 'Clausura Ta' Żilfa'. The first field was on the borders of Bormla whilst that of Ta' Żilfa circumscribed the present day village confines of Ħal Tarxien.

These two adjoining zones were barely inhabited at the time. In the Ta' Żilfa zone lived only one family, that of Evaristico Piscopo whilst in the field of Tal-Ispanjol, there were two families; the first one was Paolo Tonna's, who was a widower and lived with the family of Giuseppe Alfonso. The other family was that of Michele Azzopardi and his wife Grazia. The parish priest added an important detail which helps in the identification of the geographical location of this field by stating that the Azzopardi family lived 'near the church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel'.<sup>19</sup> This means that this strip of land was situated on the margins of the village of Ħal Tarxien and touched the limits of the parish of Bormla and Ħaż-Żabbar. Despite the fact that the eastern limits of this territory were distant from the village core of Raħal il-Ġdid, the parish priest still considered this area as part of the latter village. During this period, Raħal il-Ġdid was a cluster that fell under Fenech's parochial jurisdiction.

The phrase 'vicino la chiesa di Carmine' is important as it refers to one of the few standing edifices of particular importance that existed within this district. Unfortunately, the church was demolished when Triq Ħaż-Żabbar (also known as Żabbar Road), which until recently was the most sought after residential street in il-Fgura, was widened. Furthermore, this information can be checked with relatively old survey maps. They give the location of this church and therefore this information can be further ascertained and the exact point where the church was situated at Triq Ħaż-Żabbar can be established. The church was situated approximately where the four main pathways of il-Fgura met. In other words, it was positioned where Triq Ħaż-Żabbar crossed the street that from Tarxien led to Bormla. It was located at the corner of the extreme end of this street, when the latter formed a junction with Triq Ħaż-Żabbar. The fact that this street, which from il-Fgura ran to Ħal Tarxien, is still known as Triq il-Karmnu (or Carmel Street) can be attributed to the presence of this wayside little church. This church was built by Salvatore Busuttil in 1790 in the place of a venerated religious shrine of the Virgin Mary but had a rather short life as it was pulled down and was rebuilt anew by one of Busuttil's nephews, who was also called Salvatore Busuttil, in 1844<sup>20</sup> that is two years after it was mentioned by the parish priest Fenech in the *Status* of 1842.<sup>21</sup>

A study of the next *Status Animarum* of 1843 shows the beginning of the development of the territory of Tal-Koċċla, which began to be embraced in the urban development that were taking

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<sup>19</sup> The exact phrase used 'vicino la chiesa di Carmine'.

<sup>20</sup> A. Ferris, *Descrizione Storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo* (Malta, 1866), pp. 441-2.

<sup>21</sup> This second church was pulled down in 1956 to make way for the enlargement of the road that from Raħal il-Ġdid led to Ħaż-Żabbar. In the meantime, the Carmelite Friars, who were taking care of the religious duties of this area, built a new church, situated just a few metres away from where this old church stood, in 1950.

place on the outskirts of Bormla due to the activity generated in the Grand Harbour and at the town of Bormla in particular with the beginning of the construction of Malta's first dry-dock at Margherita ditch in 1842.<sup>22</sup> This *Status* includes the presence of an additional offspring to the young Balzan family, whilst the territory of Tal-Koċċla had a slight increase in the number of residents.

This *Status* gives another important topographic detail which confirms that the zone was situated on the outskirts of the territory of Hal Tarxien. In this *Status*, the inhabitants of the territory Tal-Koċċla were shown to be the last households in the parish and that this territory was flanked by 'camera detta tal Borg'.<sup>23</sup> This latter zone is now in the heart of Raġal il-Ġdid, having on its limits the present Schreiber football ground (known also as Pace-Grasso). Thus, according to this *Status*, the territory of Tal-Koċċla had its limits to the south bordering Tal-Borg and extended to the east for over a kilometre until it reached the limits of the church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and bordered the fields (or clausuri) known as Tal-Ispanjol and Ta' Żilfa. Furthermore, this *Status* shows that the area of Tal-Borg was, as Tal-Koċċla, barely inhabited. This can be also confirmed from the site plans of 1926; it is shown to be prevalently rural. In fact it was only developed in the 1970s. In 1843, there was only one person living at Tal-Borg. He was Lorenzo Bondin, aged 78, who lived in a solitary room.

The *Status Animarum* of 1844 gives another clue about the geographical assessment of this locale. Bondin was recorded to have been still living in the Schreiber area but it also recorded that there was another family living across this same stretch of land.<sup>24</sup> This was the family of Everistico Piscopo, who lived with his son Giuseppe, who was a bachelor. In the previous *Status* of 1842, the Piscopo family was recorded to be living in the stretch of land known as Ta' Żilfa, but from the *Status* of 1844 onwards, this family will begin to be always given as residing in Tal-Koċċla territory.<sup>25</sup> On-the-ground explorations can confirm that this was not an actual change of residence but a clerical re-classification of an area of residence. Perhaps the parish priest Fenech was making a pastiche about the exact location of these strips of fields or *clausure*.

Thus, the 1844 *Status* confirms that the Tal-Koċċla nomenclature meant, at this period, an extensive territory that stretched from Tal-Borg up to Ta' Żilfa area. Furthermore, this *Status* confirms that the 'Clausara ta' Żilfa' bordered on the fields situated in Tal-Borg with the result that this former enclosure was considered then to be part of the district of Raġal il-Ġdid.

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<sup>22</sup> N[ational] L[ibrary] M[alta] BO-4-45, W.A. Griffiths, *A Brief Outline of the Foundation and Detachments of H.M. Naval Establishments at Malta compiled at the Request of Rear Admiral G.A. Ballard*, (May, 1917), p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> P.A. Tarxien, *Status Animarum 1842 - 1849*. (unpaginated sheets). This name originated from the Arabic word Borg, which in English is translated into mound. See D.H. Trump, *Malta: An Archaeological Guide* (Faber and Faber Limited London, 1972), p. 75.

<sup>24</sup> P.A. Tarxien, *Status Animarum 1842 - 1849*. (unpaginated sheets).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

The 1859 *Status Animarum* gives additional topographic information as it associates the area of Tal-Koċċla with a street that leads from Raġal il-Ġdid to Haż-Żabbar and is more or less, the present Triq Haż-Żabbar. The words used are 'strada che conduce per Zabbar e Clausara Del Carmine contrada detta tal Chocla'.<sup>26</sup> The next information given in this *Status*, anticipates that this area was going to be a fertile ground for development and that it was experiencing a slow demographic growth. In fact, it was one of the most populated areas at the time in il-Fgura as there were fourteen households listed living in this street. Near the 'Clausura del Carmine', the parish priest mentions another street opening on the town of Bormla which he classified as 'Strada Cospicua'.<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that Cospicua is another name for the town of Bormla. This street is listed just after Tal-Koċċla and led to the Polversita Gate. This street was inhabited by a family, that of Angelo Darmanin.<sup>28</sup> From this *Status*, one can conclude that this street was situated on the border of Tal-Koċċla territory or as he qualified it 'Contrada del Cocola', as this family was listed immediately after the housefuls residing in the latter territory.

Furthermore, from this *Status*, the character of the Tal-Koċċla territory can be further reconstructed. Thus, whilst to the north, the borders touched the outskirts of Bormla, towards the south-east, the territory fell within the confines of the village of Hal Tarxien and Iż-Żejtun. This fact was again vividly expressed by the parish priest as he stated that the 'Contrada del Cocola' was to the east 'vicino il mulino del Zejtun ossia in contrada Ta' Buliem'.<sup>29</sup> The *contrada* Ta' Birġheliem was located on the limits of the already two mentioned villages. The village of iż-Żejtun is one of the villages that has its limits bordering those of Hal Tarxien and their respective parish territory passes through this area. In fact, this windmill, which still exists, is up to this day an unofficial landmark in the demarcations of limits of the towns and villages in this area.



*Fig.4- The south eastern limits of il-Fgura where approximately the borders of the villages of Hal Tarxien, iż-Żejtun and Haż-Żabbar bounded whilst the old windmill served as a landmark.*

<sup>26</sup> P.A. Tarxien, *Status Animarum* 1859. (Unpaginated sheets).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Another *Status* which was probably drawn up in 1870 continues to show the importance of this area vis-à-vis the increasing industrial fret that was taking place at the Grand Harbour. For the first time, this *Status* mentions the presence of two limekilns.<sup>30</sup> These must have come into being between 1860 and 1870, as there was no reference to these edifices in the 1859 *Status Animarum*. It is rather difficult to localise the exact place of these two limekilns as in the following decades this activity mushroomed in il-Fgura. The owners of the first two limekilns came from well endowed families: the Penza family and the Cutajar family nicknamed Ta' Beibet. Incidentally, the names of these owners are related to particular place-names in il-Fgura. It seems that the first limekiln was situated somewhere within the limits of an area known as Ta' Penza, whilst the nickname Ta' Beibet also referred to a place-name and according to Guzè Aquilina was an 'out of the way site in the neighbourhood of Ghajn Dwieli'.<sup>31</sup>

These limekilns were opened at a time when there was frenetic building activity in the Bormla area. In 1855, the decision was taken to extend Dock No.1, with the result that the Admiralty took over the site of the Bormla market. Its relocation meant that two new markets were built in lieu, one for Bormla and one for Senglea, at an estimated cost £10,255. The extension to the dock was completed by 1862. In February of that same year, the Admiralty began its preparations for the building of a Naval Prison at Corradino, which overlooked the Grand Harbour and touched il-Fgura territory. The building operations commenced in the following year. In 1870, the Admiralty started negotiations for the acquisition of certain lands on the north-east side of French Creek in connection with the building of the Somerset Dock.<sup>32</sup> This increased the need for the production of lime and the unspoilt territory of il-Fgura, distant from inhabited areas, but a stone's throw away from the harbour towns, appeared an ideal ground for this type of production. In this period, town peripheries, which were still rural and unspoilt, were considered prime sites to house the unhealthy fumes created by polluting industries.

Other members of the Cutajar family sought to take advantage of this boom, and ended up owning at least three limekilns in il-Fgura, one was situated at Triq Bormla and the other two were in Triq il-Karmnu. Old survey maps indicate the presence of an important limekiln in Żabbar Road. This could have originally been opened by Penza. Other limekilns would eventually open in other parts of this district, one of which was set up in the area where today stands Triq it-Tagħlim which is situated in a side street of Triq il-Karmnu.<sup>33</sup> Other small limekilns were

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<sup>30</sup> P.A. Tarxien, *Status Animarum 1870*, (undated and not paginated). The date was established on the basis of a study of the age given to the individuals appearing in this *Status*. Their names and age were compared with those of previous and succeeding *Status* so that the year of this *Status* could be correctly reconstructed. Furthermore, this *Status* is not complete.

<sup>31</sup> G. Aquilina, *Maltese English Dictionary* (Midsea-Malta, 1987), vol. 1, p. 95.

<sup>32</sup> N.L.M. BO-4-45, Griffiths op. cit., pp. 19-20.

<sup>33</sup> See Survey Map of 1987. Available at the Government Lands Department, Malta.

opened in this street in the last century besides those owned by the Cutajar family. There was also a limekiln at the turn of the twentieth century, situated next to the edge of the upper part of Wied Blandun valley.

Perhaps the most important *Status* for this research paper is that of 1871. It was drawn up by parish priest Paolo Lauron, who had succeeded Fenech in 1864. Like Fenech, Lauron did his best to locate his parishioners, although he had to face topological difficulties associated with the semantic shifts that were occurring in the place-name of this large territory, with the result that sometimes he also made a pastiche in locating the clusters situated in outlying districts. In common parlance, the area started to lose its original name. New names began to be given to different parts of the area. The place-name Tal-Koċċla began to prove transient.

Perhaps, the best example that demonstrates this shift is provided by a deed in the records of notary Michele Claudio Debono. By this deed, drawn on the 27<sup>th</sup> June 1861, Giuseppe D'Alfonso and his wife Anna nee' Abela donated a field to their daughters. Fenech was asked to be one of the witnesses. According to the notary the donated land was situated in the 'Contrada ta Zilfa', and within this "contrada" existed an area, which was being donated, known as 'Iddaura tal-Coclu'. The notary mistook the meaning of the word "dawra" for a small part of a field, when in fact, as is being argued in this paper, this meant an extensive territory. Furthermore, the way the notary spelled the word "Coclu" brings to mind a nickname of person rather than a name of a place. Later documentation drawn at the turn-of-the-century gives the presence of a family which carried the nickname "Tal Coclu".

The resulting doubts and confusing ideas about the exact location of Tal-Koċċla territory that began to be recorded at the second half of the nineteenth century resulted in the parish priest Lauron being more meticulous when he wanted to indicate the exact placing of these outlying clusters in his parish documentation. Thus, when this territory was mentioned by Lauron, he included the areas that touched on the borders together with those which were inside its limits. Lauron held the opinion that Tal-Koċċla was an extensive territory because he did not only refer to it as a "contrada" but also uses the word "daura". In fact, he speaks about il-'contrada ta daura tal coccla'. The word 'dawra' as a territorial denomination does not appear in Godfrey Wettinger's dictionary of Maltese place-names. As this dictionary focuses mostly on late medieval and place-names in use in early modern times, one can rightly conclude that the fact that this word "dawra" is missing, means that it came in use rather late. Mikiel Anton Vassalli gives the name "dawra" but he did not link it to land use. According Vassalli it meant 'sphere', 'circle' or an 'orbit'.<sup>34</sup> This meaning indicates that etymologically it meant a wide space. There are references in Gio Pietro Agius De Soldanis' manuscript that the word "dawra" was used in the eighteenth century in connection with a territory. De Soldanis refers to Id-Dawra tax-Xlendi in his

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<sup>34</sup> M.A. Vassalli, *Lexicon* (Rome, 1796), p. 151.



etymological dictionary.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, Erin Serracino-Inglott and Gużé Aquilina associated this word with a territorial space. Serracino-Inglott explains ‘dawra’ as ‘qasam art’<sup>36</sup> or ‘a large strip of land’. On the other hand, Aquilina lists the word under the word “dar” meaning home or house, and explains it as ‘semi-circular part of’ land and then refers to a number of place-names, including among others the place-names in Gozo of Id-Dawra il-Kbira and Id-Dawra tar-Ras. Furthermore, Aquilina refers to the place-name ‘Id-Dawra tal-Coccla’, when he discusses the etymology of the word ‘coccla’ in a separate entry of his dictionary and gives as example ‘a name of a district and fields on the road to Raħal Ġdid leading to Ħaż-Żabbar near il-Bwar and l-Irqajja’.<sup>37</sup>

There are no doubts that the use of “dawra” as against “Dawwar” or “Dawwara”<sup>38</sup> (the latter two encountered by Wettinger during earlier periods) got currency in common parlance in the eighteenth century, and this word ended also, perhaps during the nineteenth century, with the territory of Tal-Koċċla. Lauron was the first parish priest at Ħal Tarxien who used it with reference to this territory.

The meaning given to “dawra” as an extensive territory of land is collaborated by the *Status Animarum* compiled by Lauron as a number of strips of land or *clausure* were listed as part of this “dawra”. Therefore, when Lauron refers to Tal-Koċċla, he indicated different areas in the territory and its limits. Since the word “dawra” was losing its original semantic meaning, the parish priest uses an equivalent in Italian and qualifies its meaning with that of “contrada”, thus coining the expression ‘Contrada ta daura tal Coccla’. In fact, the parish priest divides this area into different sections and refers to another strip of land, the “Contrada ta’ Birgheliem” which was on the limits of the “Dawra Tal Chocla”. According to Gio Francesco Abela, a Maltese historian of the seventeenth century, the strip of land Ta’ Birgheliem was part of a bigger district known as Tax-Xemx u l-Qamar<sup>39</sup> which in this period extended from Il-Barrani at Ħal Tarxien to San Gwann T’Għuxa in Bormla.<sup>40</sup> This probably means that during the time of Abela, Ta’ Birgheliem was only a small strip of land or “clausura”. By the late nineteenth century, Ta’ Birgheliem and Tax-Xemx u l-Qamar became two separate districts.

Despite what may appear to be a lack of clarity from the parish priest Lauron regarding the meaning of “dawra”, he succeeded in being precise in what is known as the geographical morphology of the area. Like his predecessor, he located the Dawra Tal-Koċċla on the limits of Triq Bormla, leading to a street which he named as ‘Via Casal Zabbar’. Furthermore, this

<sup>35</sup> Aquilina, vol. 1, op. cit. p. 206.

<sup>36</sup> E. Serracino-Inglott, *Il-Miklem Malti*, vol. 2, (KKM-Malta, 1975), p. 26.

<sup>37</sup> Aquilina, op. cit. vol. 1, p. 66.

<sup>38</sup> Wettinger, op. cit. p. 106.

<sup>39</sup> Abela, op. cit., p. 105.

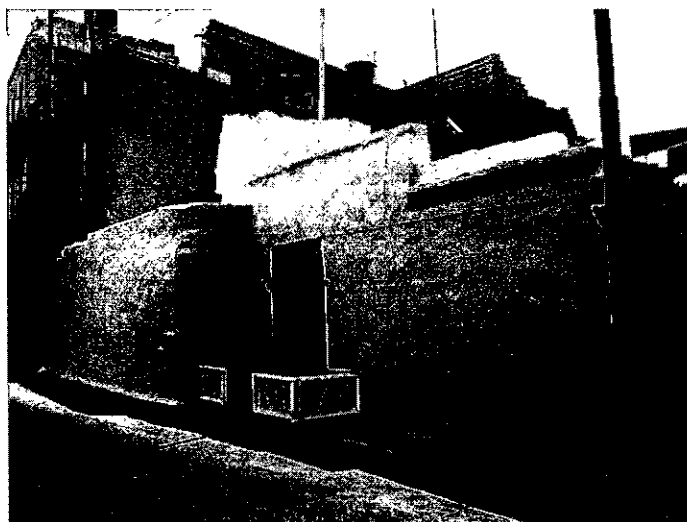
<sup>40</sup> Wettinger, op. cit., p. 43.

“dawra” bounded to another street, known as ‘Via del Carmine’. These two streets delineated the end of the Tal-Koçċla territory from the south, whilst to the west this territory bordered an area known as “San Simone”. Does the place-name “San Simone” in the *Status* refer to the area known today as Saint Simon Street or Triq San Xmun in Maltese? On relatively old site plans, this street was only a pathway between fields dotted with a few farmhouses.



*Fig.5- The upper-part of Strada Carmine. The old settlement is still visible in this part of the street.*

Furthermore, in the *Status Animarum* just mentioned, the ‘Via del Carmine’ is divided into two sections, with each one housing a number of households. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the upper part was known as “Strada Carmine” proper whilst the lower part was referred to as ‘Via del Carmine’. An on site inquiry will reveal this reality. The oldest nucleus of buildings is on the upper part of Triq tal-Karmnu. The middle part housed open fields dotted with one or two farmhouses whilst another set of scattered buildings was situated in the lower part of the street close to Żabbar Road, whilst at its end stood the old small church dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel.



*Fig.6- An old farmhouse situated in the middle part of Carmel Street.*

This *Status* also reveals that the parish priest was paying attention to detail as he was using two different Italian terms to express the English meaning of street, that of “via” and “strada” and each word was being used to express a different morphological context. Maltese too has only one term, “triq” which can both mean a “via” and a “strada”. An interpretative reading for the use of the “strada” is that it was employed in the context of an urban reality, and to express the presence of a line of houses, which in this period were situated in the upper part of Carmel Street. On the other hand, the word “via” was being used to refer to that part of the street or to a curling pathway which was dotted with scattered habitation. These types of constructions were situated in the lower part of present day Carmel Street. The same holds for Żabbar Road which during this period was a twisted pathway inhabited by peasants living on scattered farms.



*Fig.7- The last surviving building of a farm-house in Żabbar Road, il-Fgura.*

In the margin of the *Status*, within the territory of Tal-Koċċla the parish priest records the existence of the farms in the area by using an old Italian word of “ricetti”<sup>41</sup> which is the plural for the Italian word “ricetto”. Incidentally, the Maltese word “razzett”<sup>42</sup> is a loan word from the Sicilian “rizzettu” but the origins of both is the Medieval Latin word of “receptus”.<sup>43</sup> There were farms or “ricetti” on the strip of land Ta’ Żilfa which now are indicated as part of the Dawra Tal-Koċċla. During Lauron’s period, there were two Vella families living at Ta’ Żilfa and they were closely related to each other.<sup>44</sup> The fact that there were only two families residing in this area indicates that they were living in a small room or on a farm dispersed in the countryside.

The information on il-Fgura’s toponymy is syndicated by an important remark made by Lauron,

<sup>41</sup> P.A. Tarxien, *Status Animarum 1871*, f. 39v.

<sup>42</sup> C.J. Jaccarani, *Ir-Razzett The Maltese Farmhouse*, (Malta, 1998), p. 6. In this book, Carol J. Jaccarini shows that in Maltese there is no Semitic word for a farm. In fact the Maltese word *Razzett* is derived from the Romance languages.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> P.A. Tarxien, *Status Animarum 1871*, f. 39.

and written as a subtitle that the “Contrada ta daura tal Coccla” reached “sotto i bastioni della Cottonera”.<sup>45</sup> The people living in this area were qualified to be part of the Dawra Tal-Koċċla. This means that this district extended to Triq Bormla and onto the area known as Triq Valperga and continued along the line of fields situated next to that part of the Cottonera bastions which overlooked the valley of Wied Blandun at Ġhajj Dwieli.

The *Status* of 1871 introduces new demographic aspects that confirm the rapid changes taking place in the harbour area, in particular, with the impending development of Somerset dock. Thus whilst a number of pathways were inhabited by very few families, others, in particular the principal roadways and Triq il-Karmnu, began to experience the presence of younger families taking up residence in them.

During this period, Żabbar Road remained an area on the border of Tal-Koċċla, populated with sparse clusters of housing. Among the recorded residents, there were Francesco Piscopo and his wife Maria, whose maiden name was Micallef and Giuseppe Micallef and his wife Marianna Piscopo. There is no doubt that these families were all related through marriage. Carmel Street began to experience a population densification to the extent that, at this time, it was the most highly populated street in il-Fgura.

The natural question to be asked, at this point, is why was this particular street in il-Fgura prone to population increase, and was preferred to the other main streets, such as Triq Haż-Żabbar and “Strada Cospicua”? The main reason that may come to mind, if one had to exclude planning permit issues which, at this period, were inexistent, is that the first residents to swell to il-Fgura were from the core of the village of Hal Tarxien. Carmel Street offered an ideal abode as it was the street in il-Fgura nearest their original home town. On the other hand, the decision of these people to reside in this particular street and later on in this district was not related to the pastureland or field or farm activities that were exercised at this time at Hal Tarxien, but should be related to the various activities that took place at the Grand Harbour. These new inhabitants were extremely poor and were mainly labourers who were hired daily on an hourly basis and were engaged in different piecework activities. Most probably, they worked as stevedores and ship-chandlers. Thus, the reason why these labourers were moving to this district in Hal Tarxien is related to work opportunities associated with the Grand Harbour especially in the transportation and loading of coal. Yet, the first residents in il-Fgura did not all hail from Hal Tarxien. One finds a stunning number of Gozitan residents making up the first nucleus of its inhabitants.

According to this *Status*, the part of Carmel Street known as ‘Via del Carmine’ housed the family of Giuseppe Cutajar and Elizabeth Camilleri, a certain Maria Carmela Micallef and also another family of Giuseppe Cutajar and his wife Maria Delfonso. In all probability they were related. There was also the family of Felice Cutajar and his wife Maria Axisa and Gio Maria Axisa, his

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. ff. 39-40r.

wife Felicia Micallef and their eight children. On the same street lived Rocco Agius and his wife Maria but they lived on a farmhouse owned by Antonio Pensa. There were also Francesco Camilleri and his wife Angela Demanuele. They hailed from Qala in Gozo. Incidentally, they were not the only family from Gozo for even Giuseppe Cutajar's family was Gozitan. This is an interesting point in population study. In fact, it was a normal trend amongst emigrants, including those who left their villages or left Gozo to come and live in Malta and seek sites on the outskirts of the towns. To live in town was always considered too expensive. In Malta's case, they specifically sought dwellings on the outskirts of Hal Tarxien, which was one of the towns closer to Valletta and the Three Cities. The costs in the neighbouring countryside were undoubtedly much cheaper. Living close to the port meant that as labourers they could also find work as ship-chandlers or as assistants to port workers.

In that part of the street known as "Strada Carmine", Lauron identifies the following families: one family from each of the following; Sciberras, Busuttil and Borg, and two families of each of the following; Galea, Scerri and Mercieca. This upper part also had two families hailing from Gozo. The Merciecas were Gozitans; one family came from Xewkija and the other from Nadur.

Another demographic increase was registered by Lauron in the area of "sotto i bastioni della Cottonera" or "Beneath the Cottonera bastions". Here lived the following families; Tabone, Sciberras, Piscopo, Attard, Mifsud, whilst there were two families, Micallef and Spiteri. For this reason this district was a large one and was formed by a number of zones which still exist today and can be identified from survey maps of Malta including the most recent ones such as that of 1987. Hence the Tal-Koçċla area spread outwards and reached the borders of other big districts still existing today, Tal-Barrani and Ta' San Gwann t'Għuxa, and in the opposite direction it extended to Tal-Borg territory. Therefore, next to it, or touching it, in an easterly direction, were the strips of land known as Birgħeliet and Ta' Xemx u l-Qamar whilst the land clusters of Tal-Bwar, Tal-Irqajja, Ta' Żilfa and Tal-Fgura formed part of its district. At first, this district was flecked with many farms. It was only during the nineteenth century that, in certain districts, the building of homes began taking place. Construction works increased substantially towards the end of the nineteenth century and continued to increase during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century so much so that during the 1920s certain parts of this area became autonomous as was the case of Carmel Street which was no longer identified as part of the district of Tal-Koçċla.

There is no need to add that the increase in population in Malta brought about the need for housing units and this area next to the harbour underwent an uptake in construction activity. However, at the Government Agricultural Division of Għammieri, there are still maps showing what the area looked like in the past. Each district led to the next by a number of lanes and pathways that today have disappeared to be replaced instead by wide roads to accommodate modern means of transport, which have replaced the donkey, the mule and the cart.



Now we can continue taking a look at the demographic development that occurred in this area by studying the families that lived there. The *Status* kept by the Parish Priest Lauron for the year 1875 cannot be used for the study of il-Fgura's demographic trends. If one analyses this *Status* one finds that the families registered as living in the Tal-Koçċla area were few. However, this was not the result of a demographic decrease but due to a number of shortcomings such as the fact that the *Status* was not completed and also because certain areas or parts of Tal-Koçċla could have been considered as autonomous or independent zones. However, it would seem that the first explanation offers the most plausible reason for this apparent decrease as the *Status* of the following years indicates Tal-Koçċla as a zone where the number of inhabitants was increasing.

In the following year, the village of Hal Tarxien had a new parish priest, Franġisk Feliċ Attard (1876-1921). This parish priest introduced in his own system for the record keeping of the state of his villagers' souls. Instead of keeping a separate yearly register for the *Status Animarum*, he adopted a system in which he wrote the names of the villagers in a ledger. The names were written on the left hand side of a page and they were followed by a series of sets of columns and in each set were scribbled down demographic information about the person or the households concerned during the year under observation. The time span covered by each ledger varied from less than five years to a maximum period of approximately ten years.<sup>46</sup>

A glance at his first set of *Status*, which he began to compile two years after taking office, confirms that this area was undergoing demographic increase. The lists of families living at Tal-Koçċla for the year 1878 is long and includes, among others, the families Cutajar, Scicluna, Darmanin Vassallo, Sciberras, Piscopo, Bezzina (two families), Mifsud (two families), Balzan (two families) and Vella (three families). In the lists for 1878, 1879 and 1880 appear, more or less, the same families with the addition of the families who previously were mentioned as having lived in other areas in il-Fgura and now are considered as part of Tal-Koçċla. These were the families Camenzuli, Agius and Delfonso.<sup>47</sup> In these *Stati*, the parish priest included the cluster of Ta' Birgheljem, with the district of Tal-Koçċla. 'Via Casal Zabbar', 'Via del Carmine' and Ta' Żilfa were the smaller districts mentioned in these *Stati* to form part of Tal-Koçċla territory. The inclusion of Ta' Birgheljem and 'Via Casal Zabbar' confirm that modifications were taking place regarding the area that bounded Tal-Koçċla territory and that the parish priest was having difficulties in deciding where a number of his parishioners in his outlying districts lived since he registers them in every *Status* of the above mentioned years as living in different areas of il-Fgura. An explanation for this shift lies in the urban development that began to sprawl in this area and whose growth had a direct effect on the nomenclatures of this district. One must bear in mind

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<sup>46</sup> The *Status Animarum* for the period 1881-1900 is divided into two parts, the first covers the period from 1881 – 1890 and the second from 1891 – 1900.

<sup>47</sup> P.A. Tarxien, *Status Animarum 1878-1880*, ff. 182-184.

that it was not only in this upper part of il-Fgura, which, in the oldest *Status*, as we have seen, was included with Raħal il-Ġdid, that development began taking place. At the lower end of Ħal Tarxien, in the area where the small church of Santa Ubaldesca was situated, important urban expansion began to occur. This area was at the core of Raħal il-Ġdid. Its immediate circumference, in particular, the no-go area at the lower end of this district, which today skirts the Parish of Lourdes, was turned into a seedy construction site.

It seems that Don Frangisk Felic Attard was particularly preoccupied with the rapid urban expansion this village was undergoing. The most apparent change was in the way he qualified the Tal-Koċċla territory. He took immediate action to disassociate this part of il-Fgura from the rest of Raħal il-Ġdid and began to identify it directly with Ħal Tarxien. Perhaps, this idea dovetails nicely with this analysis, in particular as historical studies are always written with the unfair advantage of hindsight. This parish priest was staunchly against even the remote prospect that his parish may lose parts of its territory through the establishment of a flourishing outlying territory into an autonomous parish.

During his tenure, the most densely populated settlements lying in far away territories were established into a separate parish. Most of the new parishes established in the second half of the nineteenth century were at the hinterland of the harbour area, and these included Msida (1867), Hamrun (1881), Sliema "Stella Maris" (1884), Marsaxlokk (1897), and Kalkara (1898). St. Julian's (1891), Rabat – Malta (1903)<sup>48</sup> and St. Paul's Bay (1905) were settlements at the Northern district of Malta to be set up into autonomous parishes. He was not eager for his parish to experience loss of territory and discouraged as much as was humanly possible all attempts that were being made to separate Raħal il-Ġdid from Ħal Tarxien so that the former would be elevated to an independent parish. He expressed the same type of approach when it came to qualify the territory of Ghajn Dwieli, which is distant from the core of Ħal Tarxien and is situated on the threshold of the town of Bormla. He linked it with Ħal Tarxien whilst opposing any idea and discouraging even the remote prospect that this district should one day be swallowed by Bormla. Due to his intransigence on these matters, there were high officials at the Curia who wished to set him aside by pushing him upstairs and offered him the title of monsignor which, if accepted, would have meant that he would have had to resign his post as parish priest. Being a man of principle, he refused, for he was not easily bribed! Therefore when one reads the *Status Animarum* of Attard for the period 1881-1890 one can understand why the periphery of Tal-Koċċla was now being identified as part of Ħal Tarxien.

Thus, he began to distinguish the clusters of settlements that existed within this territory. Those who were living in that part which bounded onto Ħal Tarxien remained listed under the Tal-

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<sup>48</sup> On that year, the town of Rabat-Malta got separated from its neighbour, the old city of Mdina and elevated into a separate parish.

Koçċla district. Then there was a nucleus of families who lived towards Tal-Borg and Schreiber Area and these were struck off from the Tal-Koçċla territory and identified as hailing from Raĥal il-Ġdid or better still Casal Paola.

The area of Tal-Koçċla is mentioned again by the parish priest Attard in the separate notes that he kept as an annex to the *Stati* for the period between 1894 and 1906. The latter year is very significant, as it followed the year when the village of Raĥal il-Ġdid had been elevated to the status of a vice-parish (1905). In these notes, Attard refers to the area of Paola as situated at the periphery of Tal-Koçċla, but as his predecessor he still refers to it as “id daura tal coccla”. At the end of the day, he was continuing to consider this area as an outlying district of his parish.<sup>49</sup>

The rapid urban development that was taking place in the area of Tal-Koçċla becomes even more apparent in the *Status Animarum* which Attard kept from 1918 up to 1925. By this time, Raĥal il-Ġdid had succeeded in becoming a separate parish, a parochial autonomy that was gained in 1910. It should be noted that he succeeded in keeping the upper part, that is, the area which today is associated with il-Fgura, as part of the precincts of his parish. During this period, the building of houses continued to be mostly focused in the area of Carmel Street and the street leading to Bormla. This development led to a slight border shift as Carmel Street ceased to be related to the district of Tal-Koçċla and became an independent cluster. Hence, in this *Status*, the families who lived in Carmel Street began to be identified separately from those who resided in the area of ‘Tal Coccla’.

According to the *Status* covering the years from 1918 to 1925, families residing in *Carmel Street* were the Vella, Buhagiar, Camilleri, Axisa, Bonello, Farrugia, Bondin, Saliba, Darmanin. There were two families with the following surnames: Attard, Cauchi, Sciberras, three families of Abela, Galea, Zammit, Buttigieg, Vassallo and Borg and four families of Garzia and Cutajar. On the other hand, the number of families living in the Tal-Koçċla area were Manicaro, Bezzina, Attard, Balzan, Caruana, Zahra, Cutajar, Xuereb, Magri, Calleja, Callus, Theuma, Vella, Busuttill, Farruga (two families), Piscopo (two families) and Scerri (five families). While the number of families began to increase in this area, the Tal-Koçċla began to undergo further morphological change.

In brief, from a purely rural area it began to show clear signs of becoming a periphery of a town. This is backed by the fact that the people living in the neighbourhood, including those living on farms, were now being engaged as labourers in work connected with the harbour works in Malta. The transition took time. At first, there was an increase in the number of farms reaching a peak in the year 1891.<sup>50</sup> The number remained steady over the following ten years but already the Census of 1901 gives a clear indication of the decrease in the number of farms and this would gather speed in following years.

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<sup>49</sup> P.A. Tarxien, *Status Animarum 1881-1900*, f. 143.

<sup>50</sup> Op. cit. *Government Census 1891*, Table X, p. 21.

The area of Tal-Koccla had no particular reputation for its arable land. The land here was not one of the most fertile in Malta and this was due to the high amount of clay presence in the soil. The rocky hill site terrain, so characteristic with this district made the place further uncharacteristic for agriculture. This could be the reason why this area, as the parish censuses confirm, had very few peasants. Its agricultural labourers had to struggle more than their counterparts living in the northern areas to eke something out of the earth. The proximity of the sea meant that soil was windswept. To add insult to injury, amounts of soil were lost each year, carried away, during the short periods of heavy rain. But what was lacking in agriculture was gained in pasturage. Low land fertility offered space for good pastures where flocks and herds could graze. Thus, the inhabitants living in the scattered farms in this area preferred to invest in the keeping of sheep and goats. For these herdsmen, the tillage of the land was an auxiliary occupation. As the area was near the gates of Three Cities, herds of goats and sheep were a good source of profit, more perhaps than the tilling of the soil. Each morning herds of goats flocked into the Three Cities to give the urban residents fresh milk, while sheep milk gave soft or dry cheese. The goats were milked at the doorstep of the buyers. When the government passed legislation to prohibit the entrance of goats and sheep into the harbour towns, including the Three Cities, the farmers of the area began to adapt themselves to this new reality and slowly changed their pasturage habits and from herding sheep and goats began to invest in rearing livestock of cows.

Some farm lands had houses or small rooms built adjacent to the farmhouse to serve as abodes, whilst drawing on them the spectre of a slum area, and at the same time being a manifestation of the emerging urban depression. A casual glance at old photographs of this area as well as from the number of old houses that still survive in il-Fgura, the development of Carmel Street, (and in the following decades of the area between Raħal il-Ġdid and il-Fgura) took place by means of what is known as infill development (particularly in Carmel Street), whilst the main road experienced a form of ribbon development following a construction spree that overflowed from this main pathway and struggled to follow the grid pattern development.

The census returns for 1891 and 1901 specify the existence of farms that were to be found outside the inhabited area or that which today is known as the village core, so much so that the wording used was 'isolated Farm-houses in the country districts of Malta'. That of 1891, in particular, confirms the arguments made about the extent of this territory, as 'Tal Cocc'la' area was given as a separate district and its settlements were distinguished from the other inhabited clusters which were situated along 'Via C. Zabbar' or in 'Via Cospicua'.<sup>51</sup> The latter two formed, for the government censurers, a distinct territory in the outskirts of Hal Tarxien. Thus, a morphological reading of this census means that this district bordered on 'Via Zabbar' and its

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

North-Western limits confined with 'Via Cospicua'.

According to the Government Census of 1891, there were twelve farmhouses within the circumference of Tal-Koċċla area. This area was given as three separate districts. There was the 'contrada Tal Cocc'la', 'Via Cospicua' and 'Via C. Zabbar'. Each one of these areas had four farm-houses. Furthermore, the Census returns recorded the presence of ten other farms which were described to be situated at 'other places' within the territory of Hal Tarxien.<sup>52</sup> This means that the 'contrada tal Cocc'la' and its environs had the highest concentration of farms in the wayside territory of Hal Tarxien.

A different list of the isolated farm-houses exists for the year 1901 and it includes those situated in the outskirts of Hal Tarxien. The area is now divided in three (not four districts as in the census of 1891) and this included the Tal-Koċċla district, 'Beyond the Tunnel' – meaning the tunnel at Polverista Gate in Bormla and other places. With a casual look at this census, the number of farmhouses at Tal-Koċċla may appear to have increased. This time, there are eight farm-houses listed in the area. However, a more detailed analysis will show that in reality, the number of farmhouses remained the same as in 1891, and this increase is only due to the fact that the four farm-houses on 'Via Zabbar' were being included with Tal-Koċċla district. On the other hand, there was a decrease in the number of farms in 'Via Cospicua', which in this Census is referred to as the area 'Beyond the Tunnel'. The number of farms went down to three. Even the farm-houses situated at other places in Hal Tarxien decreased to six.<sup>53</sup>

These censuses offer proof that by-the-turn of the century suburbia was exercising pressure on agricultural and husbandry activities. They were ceasing to be the main occupation of the people living here and the area of il-Fgura was beginning to slowly bear the weights of industrial dereliction. The slow decline in the number of peasants, farming and agricultural activities are a clear indication of the wholesale shift that the countryside of this area will have to endure in the decades to come.

By 1944, the number of farmhouses was much less even though there were still some families who were registering as farmers. One must remember that, until some time ago these areas still had farmland, which was being farmed by some families. There was one family that tilled the land at Ta' Rqajja, another known to have been working Ta' Żilfa and another farm was situated in the whereabouts of Tal-Bwar. There was also one family left, in the vicinity of il-Fgura, who had a farm on the Zabbar Road in the periphery given as 'Tal Koppla'. From the registrations of these lands, one can conclude that by the year 1944, the name Tal-Koċċla had been lost, as this nomenclature does not appear with reference to this area. All the above mentioned areas, Ta' Rqajja, Ta' Żilfa and Tal-Bwar were now being considered as separate land districts from the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Op. Cit. *Government Census 1901*, Table X, p. 19.



territory of Tal-Koċċla.

After this brief demographic study it is fitting to analyse the diachronic evolution of some of the place-names used in for this area. As stated earlier on, the word “dawra” was used in the context of a district or an extended territory of land.

A more interesting factor is the series of names used to describe these areas. Most of these place-names originated from names of families who resided in the vicinity, and who, in all probability, over the centuries, became owners of parts of these neighbouring lands or rented fields in these areas. Thus the area that was mentioned at the beginning of this article and which touched that of Tal-Koċċla, that of Tal-Ispanjol, indicates that that strip of land was in the hands of a Spaniard or a family that carries this surname. The second reason is most probably the correct explanation as there are families living in the vicinity with the surname Spagnol. These families are found living in the sixteenth century in the towns around the Grand Harbour and also in the neighbourhood of Hal Tarxien.

According to Godfrey Wettinger the nomenclature of Birghelien, which was to be found touching the periphery of Tax-Xemx u l-Qamar, signifies ‘Bir ta’ l-lisir’ or “Taz- Żaghżugh”<sup>54</sup> and meaning in English ‘the well of the slave’ or ‘of the youth’. After all “ghelien” could signify somebody’s name. One must remember that in the Arabic and Muslim world, surnames were not used and instead people were identified by their first name especially by those to whom they were related. In this case, somebody’s name was being used after the word “bir” (well). There exist other examples of place-names at Hal Tarxien which follow this model. For example, the nomenclature for the small settlement at Birbixkilla could have originated from “Bir Paskal” or “Paschal’s Well”.<sup>55</sup>

The same can be said for the other area known as Ta’ Żilfa. The study and systematic reconstruction of the Maltese population that is being undertaken by the Department of History at the University of Malta is leading to the identification and quantification of all the families that lived on the island of Malta in the past. In fact, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, precisely in 1570, we find that Bernardina, daughter of Lorenzo Żilfa and Giovanna, was born in Birgu.<sup>56</sup>

The name il-Fgura also seems to originate from a family surname. Many were led to think in the past (and some still hold this idea until this day) that this name derives from the Italian “figura” and therefore its plural would be “fgajjar”. However, this interpretation is erroneous as this place-name most probably originated from the surname Fichera, Fighiera or Fighera. This surname too was to be found in the Three Cities during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, its presence in Malta dates

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<sup>54</sup> Wettinger op. cit, p. 43.

<sup>55</sup> Vide also A. M. Schimmel, *Islamic Names* (Edinburgh University Press, 1997, p. 37. Schimmel gives the example of the name “ghulam Rasul” meaning the servant of the messenger.

<sup>56</sup>P.A. Birgu, Baptismal Records, 5-11-1579.

even further back in time, as it was found recorded in Gozo, before it was used in Birgu, and is of Catalan origins. Furthermore, in the area of il-Fgura, there was a strip of land which at the beginning of the sixteenth century, was known as 'tal ficara'<sup>57</sup>. On the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1505, notary Consalvo Canchur recorded in a deed the existence of a strip of land 'in contrada tal muegil di rahal czabbar'.<sup>58</sup> This evidence, which was given by Wettinger in his book *Place-names of the Maltese Islands ca. 1300-1800*, excludes the possibility that the word could have originated from the Italian word for the figure of a statue that may have existed in the neighbourhood. Its origins got lost in time so much so that a popular belief got fabricated and eventually became an oral tradition that associates this nomenclature with the Italian word "figura".

This theory reached popular fame when E.B. Vella wrote his book on *Rahal Ġdid and Hal Tarxien*. He gave the semantic origins of the word il-Fgura as deriving from the Maltese word "figura". He also recorded that in the olden days, at the same spot where the old church was built in 1790, there was a statue of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and the peasants that used to cross the area, used to stop in front of the niche to say a prayer.<sup>59</sup> This statue of Our Lady began to be referred to as "il-figura" and as a result of what in linguistics is termed as protonic syncope, this word became il-Fgura. However there seems to be no historical basis for this tradition.

The last piece of evidence about the origins of this place-name is covertly given by the local ecclesiastic historian Achille Ferris. Ferris refers to the existence of a church in this area, and says that the people knew it as Tal-Fgura.<sup>60</sup> Ferris makes no reference to oral tradition about the origins of this place-name and its link to this religious shrine. Being an ecclesiastic, he had all the interest to include such a tradition if this was already in existence at the time of the writing of his book. Instead he refers to the fact that it is popularly held as being situated in Tal-Fgura. The fact that Ferris opted to indicate the exact name of the strip of land where this church was situated seems to imply that the overall area carried a different name. This toponym would continue to be registered under this format 'Tal-Fgura' in the twentieth-century survey maps. Such a use strengthens the argument that it originated from 'tal ficara' nomenclature.

Etymological studies are the most dangerous field of linguistics but from the elements that are at our possession, the reasons for this linguistic change can be both of etymological or phonetical transcription. In the first case, one needs to examine how linguistically "tal ficara" became "tal fgura". In this case, there is the problem to explore how an accented vowel "a" or "e" became a "u". In the second case, the rules of phonetic changes do not apply, and the reason can be found in the way how this nomenclature was transcribed by Ferris. This place-name was written 'tal

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<sup>57</sup> G. Wettinger, op. cit. p. 125.

<sup>58</sup> N[otarial] A[rchives] V[alletta] R[egister] 140/2, f. 136v.

<sup>59</sup> E.B. Vella, *Hal Tarxien u Rahal Ġdid* (Empire Press - Malta, 1932), p. 222.

<sup>60</sup> Ferris, op. cit. P. 441.

figura' by Ferris. Due to the success of his book, in particular amongst the learned circles in Malta, this area began to be known by this name, irrespective of the way how it was phonetically pronounced before.

It clearly transpires from Ferris that the reason why this area of present day il-Fgura became known as such and ceased to be remembered as that of Tal-Koċċla is due to the presence of this church which was located on the border of Tal-Fgura. The church was the sole monumental structure existing in this whole area with the result that the people began to slowly identify the locality with this nomenclature, and despite the fact that Tal-Fgura was a cluster in a bigger territory, the name of the bigger territory got eventually lost and the whole district began to be known simply as il-Fgura.

Furthermore, when one analyzes all the toponymic aspects present in these areas and the fact that many reflect family surnames, the origins of the name of this suburb from a family name become more concrete. Indeed, the precise name of the area il-Fgura dates far back to the early sixteenth century and that strip of land, said to be situated next to the territory known as the reservoirs (muegil) which was situated at Ħaż-Żabbar is a concrete reference to this area.<sup>61</sup> It should also be noted that one of the surviving place-names in the district of il-Fgura references to the presence of reservoirs. Between il-Fgura and Ħaż-Żabbar is situated a strip of land still called Tal-Bwar which means "meadows" or "of the water reservoirs". The date on this notarial document proves that word "ficara" has an older history in Maltese than that of "figura". This Italian word may have entered the local language in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. The story given by E.B. Vella supports this latter idea, but the existence of a strip of land with a "Fgura" toponym has an earlier history. Thus, one can rightly conclude that this particular nomenclature of Tal-Fgura was used in relation to this territory before the Italian word for statue or "figura" entered the Maltese dialect.

The place-name Tal-Koċċla also appears to have originated from a surname. In the parish archives of Birgu there are records of a marriage between Matteo Cociola from Messina and Beatrice La Russita. The marriage took place on the 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1630. According to the same records Matteo died on the 28<sup>th</sup> July 1634. In the parish archives of Senglea, this surname crops up again with reference to Geronimo Cociola from Sicily. Geronimo married Filomena (or Flavia) on the 24<sup>th</sup> June 1656 in Senglea. They had several children. However, one cannot tell whether this family had any connection with this land or not. Giloramo Caracausi confirms that this surname is of Sicilian origins. According to Caracausi, the surname Cociola is to be found mainly in the province of Palermo and Reggio Calabria.<sup>62</sup>

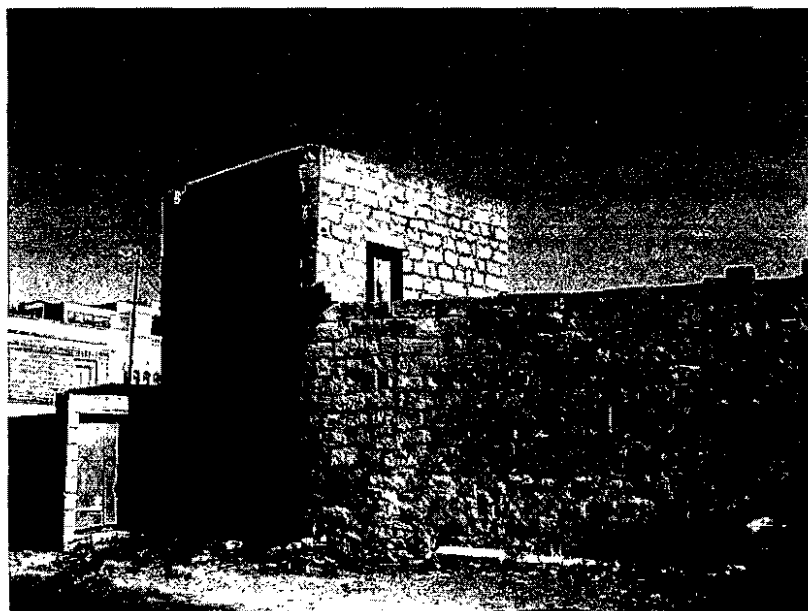
Above all, the proof that the Tal-Koċċla place-name derived from a family surname, rather than

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<sup>61</sup> Werringer, op. cit. p. 43.

<sup>62</sup> G. Caracausi, *Dizionario Onomastico della Sicilia - Lessici Siciliani*, no. 7, vol. 7 (Palermo, 1993), p. 415.

from somebody's nickname can be derived from a study of Godfrey Wettinger's *Dictionary of Maltese Place-names*. The dictionary covers the period from circa 1300 to 1800, however it focuses more on the late Middle Ages and early modern times. The fact that no strip of land with this particular surname has been included in this dictionary indicates that in early modern times it was not yet in use, as this family was not yet present in Malta. In great probability, this place-name originated during or after the seventeenth century, that is, after this family name was found recorded in the parish records. It was after this surname had asserted itself in the area that it ended up being used as a nickname. This surname had a very low frequency of appearance in the acts which means that it had already been lost or ceased to exist in Malta by the turn of the eighteenth century with the result that its fossilisation with the name of a territory can have given rise for this particular nomenclature to be used as a nickname, in particular, perhaps, for individuals or peasants who had taken up residence in one of the dispersed farmhouses situated on this territory.



*Fig.8- A scattered farm-house situated in the street named Triq il-Koppla.*

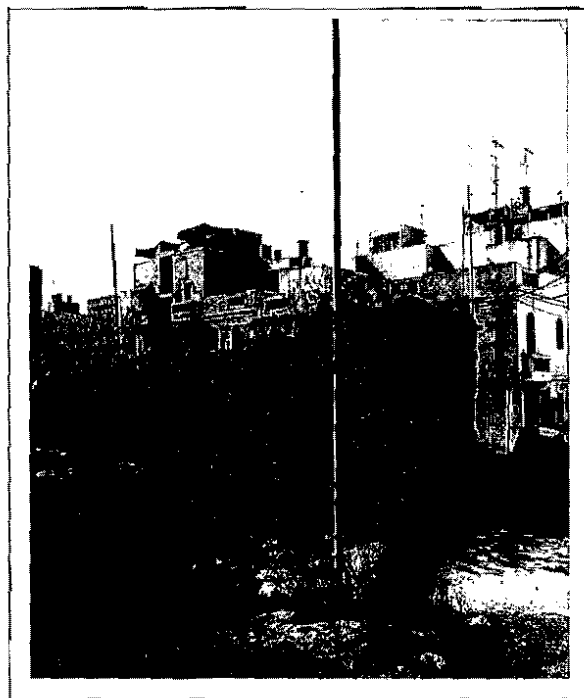
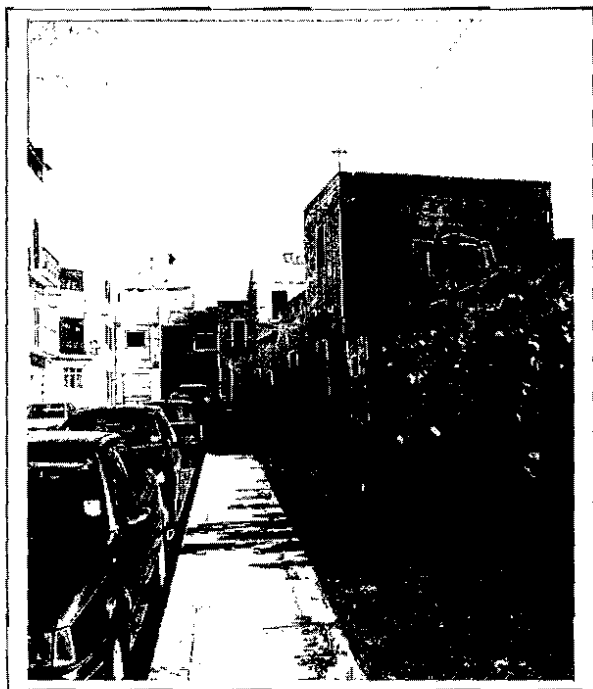
A contemporary tradition holds that the area was named Tal-Koppla in remembrance of the fact that it was from here that stone was quarried for the building of Bormla's church dome.<sup>63</sup> The word dome in Maltese is Koppla. However, this explanation lacks any historical foundation and the historical documentation disproves it. In fact, the Tal-Koppla place-name never appears in the old documentation of the parish censuses. It only made its appearance in recent documents. Now, it should be remembered that Bormla's cupola was built in the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the stone quarried for the building of Bormla's parish dome came from another

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<sup>63</sup> This information was given to the author by a resident priest, Don Mario Agius. He lives near the Tal-Koppla Street.

area, still in the parish precincts of Tarxien, known as Corradino.<sup>64</sup>

Thus the place-name Tal-Koċċla did not really get lost but it had experienced a nomenclature shift due to the changes that had occurred in the way of its pronunciation. The Government registers for the year 1944 contain references to presence of a farm in the precincts of the Dawra tal-Koppla at Żabbar Road. There are some misgivings as to the name Dawra tal-Koppla being the same as that of Tal-Koċċla, however, for reasons unknown, the nomenclature Koċċla changed into “Koppla”. The same thing happened when the English Administrators changed Italian street names into Maltese, including street names that derived from ancient Italian surnames such as Buongiorno, which lent its name to a street in Bormla and prior to the Second World War, it was renamed Good Day Street, or, to give another example, this time from the village core of Hal Tarxien, “Strada Rocca” (which means fortress or field), was translated into Rock Street. This was also the case of “Koċċla” that became “Koppla”. Today there is a street and a lane in il-Fgura that carry this latter name and the street name was translated into English as Dome Street. An interesting curiosity is the fact that this street comprises a stretch of land which goes from half way through il-Fgura reaching the edge of Raħal il-Ġdid, intersecting the enclosure of “Dawra tal-Koċċla”. Furthermore, the lane – Sqaq il-Koppla – is distant quite a few metres away from the street which carries the same name.



A nucleus of settlements situated at the heart of the Tal-Koċċla territory. At the end of this street (reproduced in Image 10), there is a lane which is hidden by the trees known as Sqaq il-Koppla, (Dome lane).

Nevertheless, this word became extinct. In epistemological terms, Koċċla means a limpet or an

<sup>64</sup> S. Mercieca, *Community Life in the Central Mediterranean. A Socio-Demographic Study of the Maltese Harbour Towns in Early Modern Times. Bormla: 1587-1815*. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis – Paris IV-Sorbonne, 2002. pp. 412.

empty seashell. In Maltese it can also signify a person who is epileptic. In fact, until a few years back, this Maltese word was also used disparagingly. It was not at all kind to tell somebody to go to “ikkoċċla”, that is to lose one’s wits. Today, among the youths of Fgura, this word has taken a completely different significance. It now tends to be used in the positive sense and is associated with the Italian word “cucciolo” (puppy) and is being used as a provocative and loving term. When a young straggling girl says that she has a “koċċlu” signifies that she has a boyfriend!

After all, this particular nomenclature, as can be seen from the *Status* used in reference to this paper, was not widely diffused and this could perhaps explain why it was excluded from the official survey maps. It was known amongst few people, who themselves were not sure of its correct pronunciation and some may have associated it with a nickname. This can be seen from the fact that this toponym was never written down in a consistent manner. From the study of surnames undertaken for the modern period, it is clear that when a name or a surname stopped to be written consistently in the same manner and with the same spelling it indicated that, in the scribe’s mind, this word was not clear. In all probability, the name could have been a rare one and once this name or surname died away, its proper way of pronunciation was lost to the people. The same argument holds for the studies undertaken on the names of localities. At the end of the day, the studies of the nomenclature interlace the study of the surnames. What saved the place-name Tal-Koċċla from being lost forever was the custom of past parish priests to record in certain details the name of their districts. This custom went hand in hand with their other good habit of preserving all names, with the result that even if the toponym changed, as indeed is the case here, so much so that today it is associated with a public street and is fossilised in the terminology “koppla”, one can still study the diachronic development of a word through a thorough search in their registers. The results can then be checked with information that may be gathered from other records and acts. In this particular case, these records enabled the reconstruction of the history of this urban centre of il-Fgura.

The Tarxien records recount this evolutionary process during which the name of this area shifts from Tal-Koċċla to il-Fgura. At the turn of the twentieth century this whole area began being identified more and more with the latter so much so that in the *Status Animarum* dated 1918-1925, next to the nomenclature Tal-Koċċla, was written in brackets, the name il-Fgura.<sup>65</sup> After a number of years, the old nomenclature lost ground to the extent that in the *Status Animarum* following that of 1925, this area starts being called simply il-Fgura and the word Tal-Koċċla disappears completely from the Tarxien church records.

Nowadays, none of the older residents of Hal Tarxien consulted remembers the use of this old place-name. For this reason it was decided to end the history of the area known as Tal-Koċċla in 1925. After this date, a new page in history begins for this particular area at the hinterland of the

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<sup>65</sup> P.A. Tarxien, *Status Animarum 1918-1925*, (unpaginated sheets).

harbour towns, which is itself a subject for another study and about which important works have already appeared, one of which was also quoted in this paper,<sup>66</sup> but as the concluding paragraphs of this paper shows, this new chapter in the history of il-Fgura is the story of a territory captivated by development.

The countryside of Il-Fgura got tainted by the urban sprawl that has ruined it, and is wrecking havoc to Malta's village cores and historic centres. The succeeding urban growth failed to create a properly designed urban centre and as an area, it is full of the planning mistakes associated with 1960s and 1970s development. It is an asphalt jungle, characterised by traffic-choked and congested main roads and a polluted centre. There is very little consistency in its street design whilst the construction of its modern condominiums lacks any hint of aesthetics. It was one of the first areas in Malta which had its relatively young historic centre engulfed in a massive overhaul, with the result that the 1960 urban infrastructure of terraced houses is being bulldozed to make space for anonymous blocks of flats. No rules really regulate the hedge heights of these buildings or their exterior design. The new mansions' façade are usually covered by stucco to appear glitzy, hiding underneath the dull and grisly colour of the concrete bricks. In other words, il-Fgura is a good example of the uncontrolled spread of Malta's suburbia.

The area has grown into a commercial hub. Despite its modern commercial character, most of the non-residents simply speed through the main streets heading towards Haż-Żabbar, Raħal il-Gdid, Bormla or Hal Tarxien. The result is that many of the young generations of il-Fgura, unlike their forefathers who in their simplicity of life had flocked to live in the Tal-Koċċla territory to be next to a lucrative industrial zone, are perceiving their home town as a dull residential area. Without doubt, this new urban zone has aesthetically suffered due to its class-based segmentation, being at first heavily proletariat and then moving towards a lower-middle class abode. However, its residential requisites were always pegged to the industrial requirements. Now, as Malta begins to enter into its post-industrial phase, the residential future of this once Tal-Koċċla territory appears uncertain and the characteristics of a downtown residence begin to infiltrate the neighbourhood, with the result that many amongst the young generation, who passed their childhood days in il-Fgura, dream of moving out.

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<sup>66</sup> Refer for example to D.M. Boswell, "The Social Prestige of Residential Areas", *Maltese Society, A Sociological Inquiry*, ed. R.G. Sultana and G. Baldacchino, (Malta, 1994) pp. 133-162.

## **Sviluppo di una metodologia per la progettazione di un museo open air linee guida per la valorizzazione del Cottonera**

*Prof. Antonio De Vecchi, arch. S. Colajanni, arch. Roberta Deletis*

### **Abstract**

*The characteristics of the historical centres of Malta and of Cottonera have induced to develop us a recovery methodology called "Open Air Museum" for the existing urban structure.*

*Therefore the Cottonera area needs the exploitations of its symbolic connotative characteristics that are essentially:*

- the close contact with the sea;*
- the wide and articulated presence of integrated fortifications in the urban structure;*
- the persistence of a good minor house building structure;*
- the morphological places;*
- the presence of historical buildings;*
- a interwoven and diversified whole of urban environments with vernacular characteristic;*
- The presence of a native culture conditioned from the influence of different domination and so representative of the southern Mediterranean.*

*This elements are a presupposition to develop the planning of "open air" museum that doesn't constitute only a net between points and buildings important only for their history but a space continuous of stimulating occasions that can be valorised in two directions:*

- 1) for the tourist, involving the visitor for permanence time more longer than the time employed for the visit of a specific interest point. Recent developments in tourism seek to integrate the social life of the place, in order to better understand the local culture and tradition.*
- 2) Rebalancing the urban quality of the people that live there, through services development that improving, bringing improvements in social, cultural and economic growth of the local community.*

*The search has been developed according to the followings points:*

- Definition of the concept of "open air" museum as methodology to recover the building patrimony;*
- Analysis of similar urban recovery examples;*
- Synthesis of the historical stories that characterized the urban system of the Cottonera and have determined the actual condition of the area;*
- Individualization of guide lines for a "open air museum";*
- Individualization of possible economic development.*

*At the end, this planning could stimulate a process of conservation and maintenance of the historical and cultural patrimony and bring over in a new economic development.*