
Ġgantija and the surrounding lands: insights through a late eighteenth-century contract

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The deed through which Giovanni Battista Cassar Desain protected Ġgantija is described and possible reasons behind his decision discussed. A plan accompanying the contract has been utilised to throw light on Ġgantija and the surrounding late eighteenth-century landscape. Relevant contemporary representations are analysed to throw light on the state of Ġgantija before the clearances of the 1820s. Caves, an underground spring, and a forgotten path have been rediscovered, highlighting the fact that the area remains largely unexplored.

The measures taken by the Maltese nobleman Giovanni Battista Cassar Desain to protect Ġgantija in the late eighteenth century remain remarkable and outstanding. His act, however, would have probably passed unnoticed were it not for the account given by the fifth prince of Biscari, Ignazio Paternò (1781, 117). Having been involved in the late 1770s in a project aimed at conserving the antiquities of eastern Sicily (Paternò 1781, 4-5; Taylor 2013, 164), the prince immediately recognised the importance of Cassar Desain's deed and mentioned it in an otherwise laconic description of the antiquities on site. Paternò tells us that in granting the lands containing an ancient building of semi-circular form on perpetual emphyteusis, Cassar Desain protected the ancient ruins by making an express condition that no stone was to be removed under penalty of forfeiture of the contract.

Consequently, reference to Paternò's account was repeatedly reproduced by various scholars. Already in the early nineteenth century, Bres (1816, 137) reproduced the account given by the prince, identifying the remains described with Ġgantija. More recent mention was made by Bonello (1996, 19), Freller (2009, 644), Grima (2004a, 26), and Pessina and Vella (2009, 403). The rediscovery of the original contract came through a short article by D'Anastas

(2005, 13) who made public the existence of archival material listing the property owned by Cassar Desain. The reference to the contract relevant to Ġgantija was found there (NAM, MCC Inventarium Bonorum, 6, f. 213v).

The contract

On 15 February 1776, Paulo Buhagiar from Xaghra, Gozo, was granted lands in the same village on temporary emphyteusis for 101 continuous years from mid-August 1777 for the annual sum of 300 scudi (NAV, Not. P.V. Giammalva R292/24 ff. 697v-702r). The lands, surveyed by Jacobo Bianco, measured five salmi, five tumoli and five mondelli, and contained a number of features. These consisted of a garden with different fruit trees and vines as well as a spring within a hewn subterranean cave. There was also a building accessible through an alley and a small animal pen leading to a cave. Also documented were a residential building within a courtyard, a kitchen, a field with a storehouse, a staircase, and two rooms above each other.

Access to the lands was from the contrada delle Fontane, meaning 'of the fountains', a reference to lands known since medieval times as 'lâl-Għejun (Wettinger

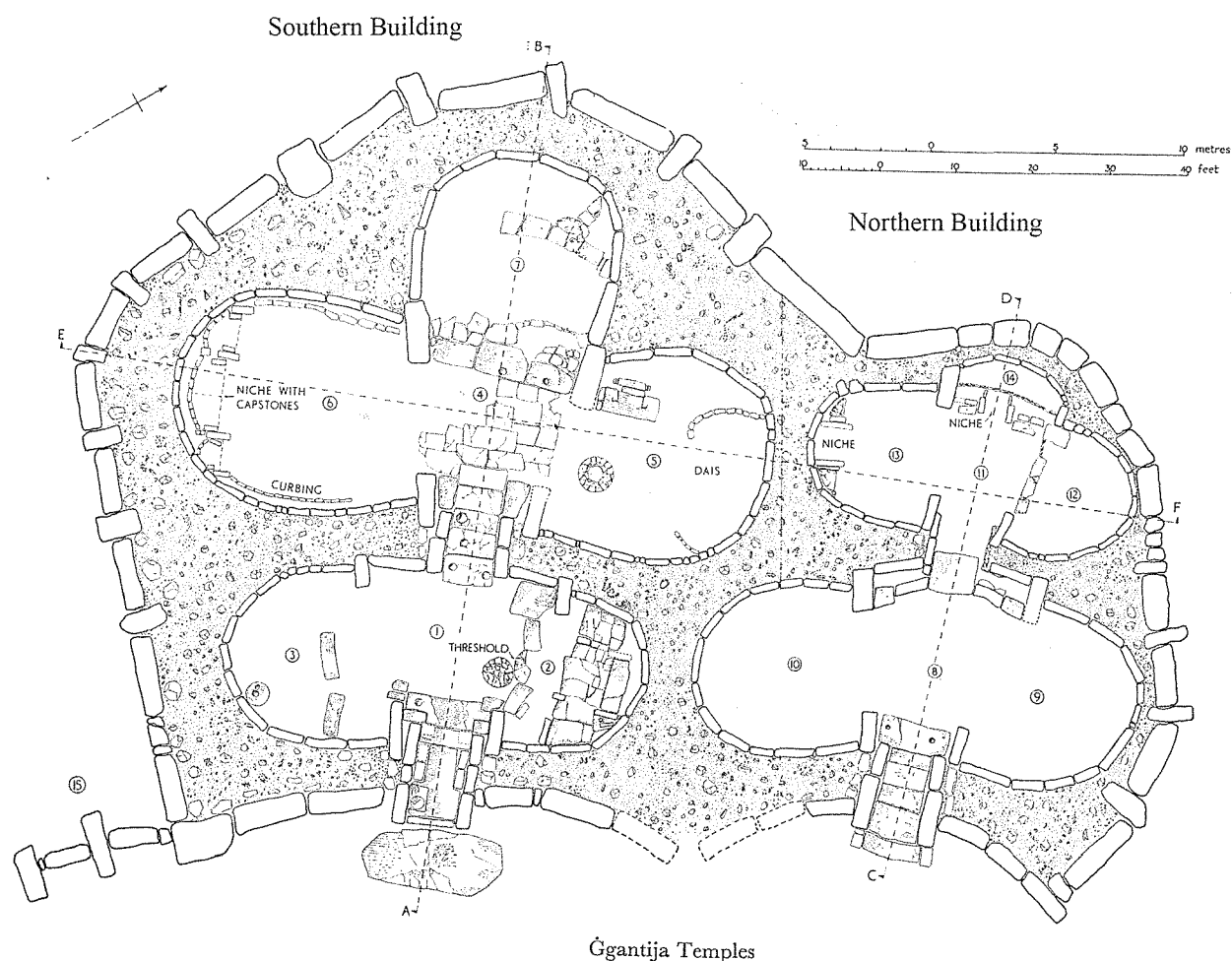


Figure 1. Plan of Ġgantija (after Evans 1971).

2000, 221). Through the deed, Buhagiar was obliged not to remove or take anything from the lands. As was common in contemporary contracts, the ownership and tenancy of the surrounding lands is listed, with a public road and lands of Rev. Michaeli Azzopardi documented to the east. Lands formerly belonging to medical doctor Giovanni Nicolai Gauci, the Fondazione Lascaris and others held by Giovanni Domenico Theuma were to the south, while to the north were lands belonging to Martini Xerri, Caroli Theuma, and others. A public road and lands belonging to the heirs of Federici known as tal-Barun formed the western boundary.

Preserving Ġgantija

More significant is the reference to Ġgantija as a tower known as ‘of the giants’ (*turri app[el]l[ato] delli*

Giganti). Its preservation was ensured through the following clause:

Di piu', che le pietre grosse, che formano l'antica Torre de[i] Giganti non possa il d[ett]o Censualista, e suoi sotto pena della cadicita di d[ett]o Territorio con tutt' i miglioramenti, che sin' allora si troverano fatti in esso, rompere, ne sconcertare da quel stato in cui si trovano, ne pure quell'altre caso mai vi fossero in qualche muro vicino, e formano parte dell'istesso, e non altri[menti] (f. 700v).

This meant that the new tenant was obliged not to disturb, move or break the large stone blocks forming Ġgantija and was to give the same treatment to the nearby walls in case they contained undiscovered parts of the said structure. If such condition was broken the owner would forfeit rights over the lands.

The contract corrects the account given by Paternò. It is clear that the lands were granted on temporary and not perpetual emphytheusis. Furthermore, the contract specifies that no stone was to be removed from the “Giants’ Tower” before directing that nothing was to be taken away from the lands in general. Probably inspired by the megalithic screen at the southern corner of the façade (feature 15 in Fig. 1) or the megaliths in the terrace wall in front of the temples (shown in Grima 2004a, 44-49) Cassar Desain extended the conditions applying to Ġgantija to the nearby walls, making his decision even more noteworthy. Paternò makes no mention of this.

The reasons why Cassar Desain chose to preserve Ġgantija remain unknown. An inventory of his library does not refer to any books related to the study of antiquities, and the presence of ‘several ancient things’ (*diverse cose antiche*) in one of his properties (NAM, MCC Inventarium Bonorum, 6, ff. 260v-268v, 273v) is not qualified further to support an interest in things archaeological. The interest of scholars such as Agius de Soldanis (Farrugia 1999, 1, 54) and Bartolomeo Mifsud, known as Padre Pelagio, (MCA, Misc. 55, ff. 143r-143v) might have influenced his decision. Indeed, Padre Pelagio gave a description, measured and attempted to draw up a plan of the temples, while Agius de Soldanis included measurements of Ġgantija that are different from those given by other authors. This indicates that both scholars visited and studied the remains. Another scholar, Giovanni Antonio Ciantar (1772, I, 341), does not appear to have made any serious study of the site as he only reproduces the description by Abela (1647, 119). Furthermore, although Ciantar’s *Malta Illustrata* was published just a few years before the signing of the contract, the book was not in Cassar Desain’s library (NAM, MCC Inventarium Bonorum, 6, ff. 260v-268v). Ciantar’s influence on the latter’s decision is unlikely.

Pessina and Vella (2009: 403-404) place Cassar Desain’s awareness of the importance of Ġgantija after von Riedesel’s visit to the temples in 1767, suggesting that the idea to protect Ġgantija came through the attention given to it by European visitors. Documented discussions on antiquities between locals and visitors (Attard Tabone 1999, 173; Paternò 1781: 117-118) support such hypothesis. It is important to note, however, that by being drawn up in February 1776, the contract predates the visits of travellers such

as Ducros, Borch and Colt Hoare as well as Hoüel’s second visit to the Maltese Islands (Freller 2009, 38, 92, 96, and 676). This not only reduces the role these well-known travellers might have had in shaping Cassar Desain’s actions but also reveals that the latter’s decision occurred quite early when seen within the context of the increasing number of visitors arriving in the Maltese Islands in the late 1770s.

But was Cassar Desain preserving Ġgantija with the noble intention of preserving ancient remains? Or was he hoping to dig up treasures like those discovered in Gozo in the previous decades (Farrugia 1999, 1, 57-58, 2, 13-14)? A definite answer cannot be provided, but it is important to note that in the eighteenth century even serious academic researchers collected ancient artefacts for personal purposes. Indeed, Agius De Soldanis, a contemporary scholar, was not ashamed of claiming to have asked for the clearance of over forty tombs to satiate his scholarly curiosity (NLM, Lib. Ms. 143/1 ff. 490r-490v). Similarly, explorations undertaken by Ciantar at the presumed ancient Temple of Hercules were only meant to obtain two specimens of marble for his museum (Ciantar 1772, 387-88, 461-62). Thus, in the absence of more direct information, delving into the real intentions of Cassar Desain would probably lead to the judging of past practices by modern standards. Nonetheless, his decision remains a significant event by a private individual to preserve the antiquarian heritage of the Maltese Islands, predating similar organised action by government by decades. It continued the legacy established by Abela who in his 1637 will took measures to preserve the antiquities and any undiscovered tombs at his Marsa garden (NAV, M. Ralli R412/5, f. 35v; Bonanno 1984, 36).

A plan of Ġgantija and the surrounding lands

The notarial act is accompanied by a plan (hereafter notarial plan) which throws light on the late eighteenth-century landscape around Ġgantija (Fig. 2, top). Many details are also shared by plate 26 in Smyth’s 1829 account on Ġgantija printed around fifty years later (Fig. 4) and will be used alongside the notarial plan to further support the arguments presented here. The area had until recently witnessed little change, undoubtedly following the transfer of Ġgantija and the surrounding lands to government.

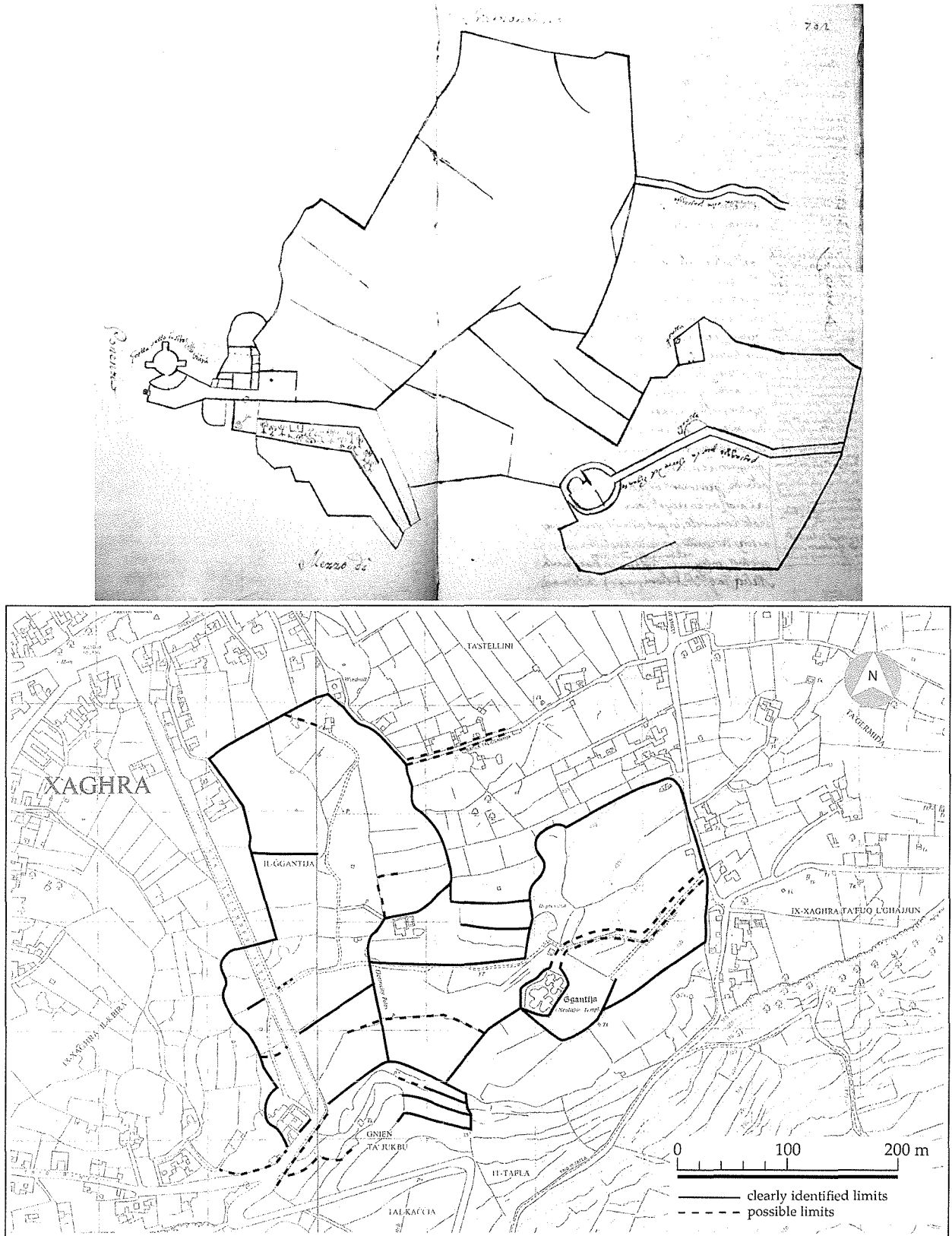


Figure 2. Map of Ġgantija and surrounding lands in 1776 (Notarial Archives, Valletta) (top) and overlay on a 1970s Ordnance Survey Sheet (adapted by Maxine Anastasi).

Ġgantija

In the notarial plan, Ġgantija is shown as a roughly circular building surrounded by a thick wall. This impression was enhanced by the megalithic blocks prominently visible on the exterior of the complex and debris on the inner parts. This was probably behind the name Giants' Tower used at the time and the representation of Ġgantija in a predominantly circular form by Borch (1782, 2, 24). In the notarial plan, the two buildings forming Ġgantija are already visible. The northern building is depicted as a semi-circular space connecting to a passage on one side and to the southern building on the other. In the southern building, a semi-circular space is shown.

The notarial plan is a rare document of the appearance of Ġgantija before it was cleared in the 1820s. Considering that surveyors (*periti agrimensori*) were engaged to prepare plans for eighteenth-century

contracts, one may argue that the plan is a fairly precise representation of Ġgantija. Research elsewhere has however revealed that such plans provide a schematic illustration of the properties surveyed and not a precise plan with accurate measurements (Bugeja, forthcoming). Indeed, I believe that an appropriate interpretation of the notarial plan should only be made by comparison with other contemporary plans, particularly those provided by the travellers Ducros (Strickland 2005, 90) and Hoüel (1787, pl. 251). Also considered is the plan by the Maltese Capuchin scholar Padre Pelagio (MCA, Misc. 55, f. 143v), better known through a modified copy reproduced in Evans (1971, 183) (Attard Tabone 1999, 175-76, fn. 3).

These four plans of Ġgantija (Fig. 3) differ in various details, further supporting the need for a cautious interpretation. A comparison of the plans to modern aerial views of Ġgantija (Grima 2004a, 31 top right

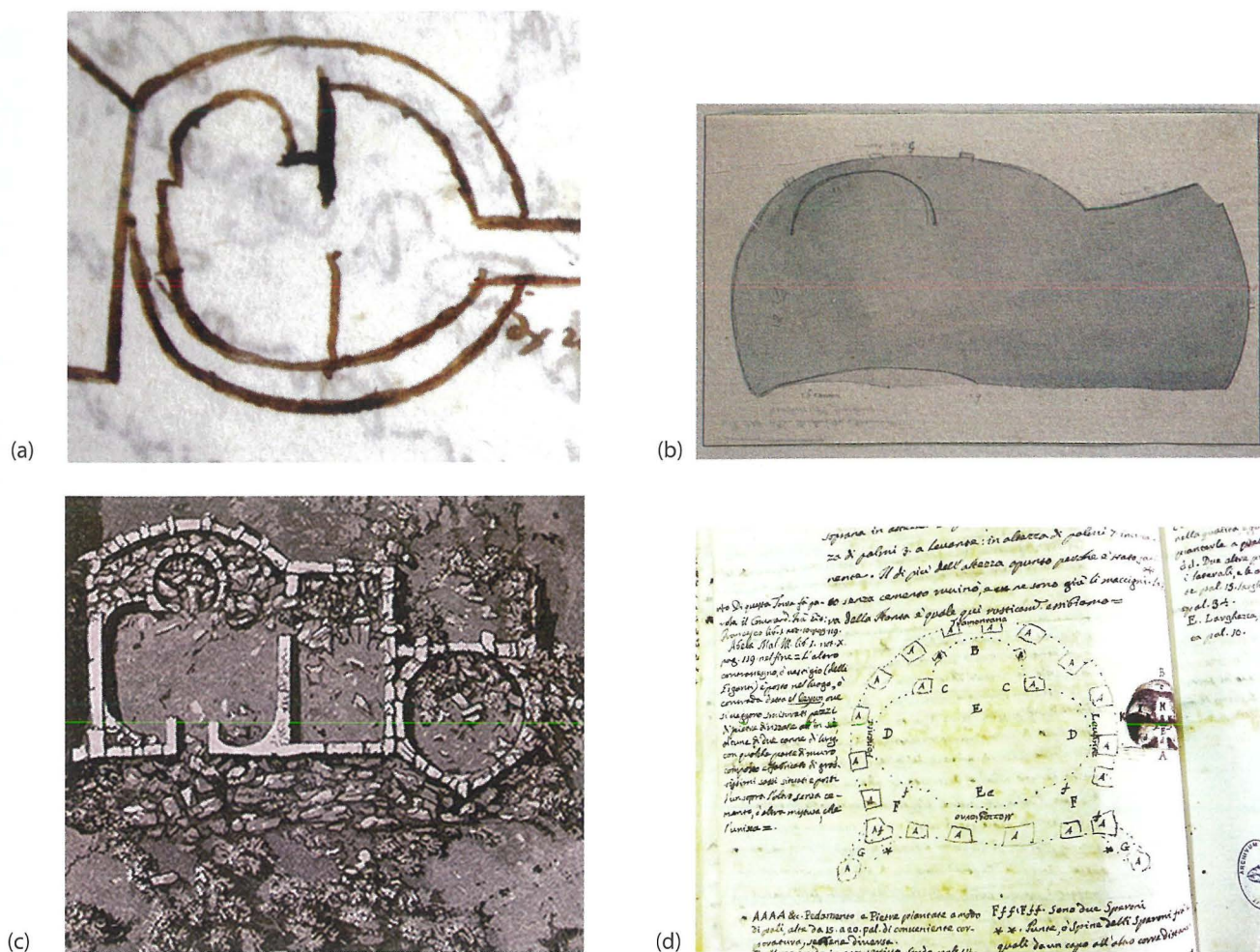


Figure 3. Plans of Ġgantija in (a) the notarial act (1776), (b) Ducros (1778), (c) Hoüel (1787) and (d) Pelagio (before 1781). Images (a), (b) and (d) are reproduced courtesy of Notarial Archives (Valletta), Rijksprentenkabinet - Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam) and Mdina Cathedral Archives respectively.

photograph) shows that the plan provided by Ducros is the most precise in giving a general representation of the temples. This observation is supported by the depiction of the outline of the northern walls of the temples, the obtuse angle between the two buildings and the portrayal of the collapsed northern corner. Although measurements are noted on Ducros' plan, it is not totally accurate considering the skewed shape of the depicted apse and other details in the outline.

Pelagio's plan shows the outline of three semi-circular spaces in the form of a clover leaf. Considering that it is only the northern building of Ġgantija that has a terminal niche this suggests that the spaces represented are the innermost three apses of the southern building. Only the inner apse of the southern building is consistently shown in the four plans, with Hoüel's plan also showing the curvature of three other spaces (i.e. 3c; 2, 3 and 6 in Fig. 1). In view of the above, it is here proposed that at least the upper part of the terminal apse of the southern building was already exposed in the eighteenth century, undoubtedly due to the fact that it reaches a 'greater height than those of other parts of the building' (Evans 1971, 176). Debris in the other parts of the southern building made interpretation difficult, with the different authors giving different details of these areas.

No details of the interior of the northern building are given in the four plans, revealing that it was probably still covered with debris. This lack of detail is also seen in Smyth's lithographs (1829, pls 26 and 28) and an illustration published by Grima (2004a, 17 lower photograph). As in Pelagio's plan, the northern building is not shown in an illustration loosely dated to 1830 (Anon 2005, 29). In contrast, the outline and details of the southern building are shown in plans of the 1820s. This may either indicate a phased clearance of Ġgantija in the early 1820s or the frequent contemporary reproduction of drawings representing mainly the southern building.

In the notarial plan and Hoüel's travelogue the two buildings forming Ġgantija are already discernible and shown to be interconnecting. No connection has however been revealed archaeologically (Evans 1971, 173) and the temples already appear separate in a view provided by Mazzara (1827, pl. 3). Another feature of note is the circular enclosure only shown by Hoüel (1787, pl. 251) adjacent to the temples. This detail has recently been used in arguments for an ancient burial mound on site (Azzopardi 2011, 11). Nonetheless,

such a feature is missing in the other plans in Fig. 3. With Hoüel (1787, 80) clearly stating that he used his 'artistic eye' (*l'œil de l'artiste*) in the interpretation of walls on site, further work needs to be done on site to support such claims

Passage to Ġgantija

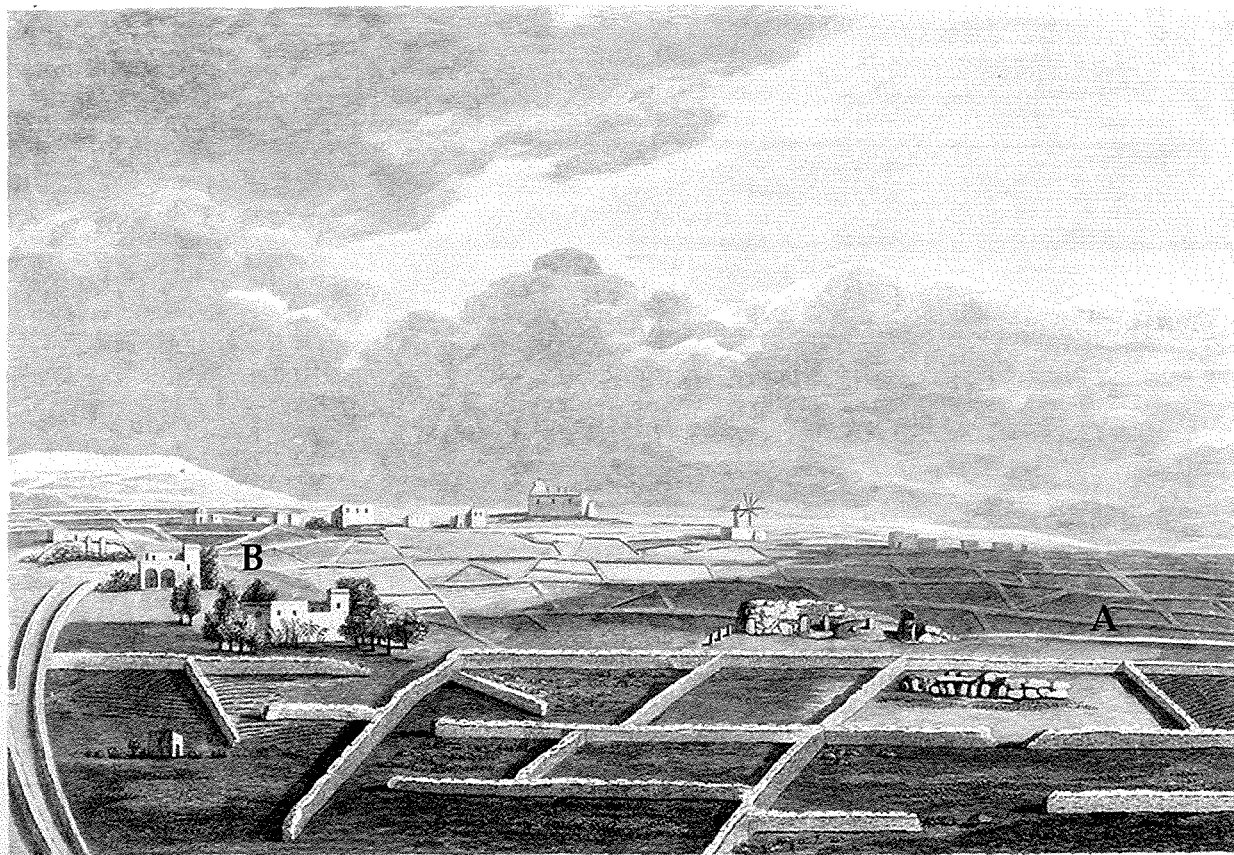
The passage leading to Ġgantija (*passaggio per la Torre del Gigante*) shown in the notarial plan as well as the lithograph given by Smyth (Fig. 4, point A) is a reminder that in the past access to the megalithic complex was from the east and that it was only in the twentieth century that an approach from the west was created (Grima 2004a, 30-31). The passage was already in existence when the 1776 contract was drawn up as no reference to its creation was made there. The presence of such a passage is significant. On one hand it may reveal that by the third quarter of the eighteenth century interest in visiting Ġgantija was such that a path leading to it was already in place. On the other hand, it shows that access to Ġgantija was secured without disturbing surrounding lands leased mainly for agricultural purposes for which a separate access was provided. The balance reached between the rights of land-tenants and access to an area containing ancient remains emerges as remarkable and it was many decades before it was adopted in other megalithic sites. Indeed, when one considers that a similar thoroughfare to Haġar Qim, another megalithic complex, was not available for decades, and led in one case to the injury of George French Angas (1842, 41) in the mid-nineteenth century, and was still the subject of negotiations to secure it in 1908 (NAM-CSG01-1092/1908), the significance of a path already existing at Ġgantija in 1776 stands out in contrast.

Caves

Two separate caves, simply marked as *grotta*, appear in the notarial plan in a landscape later described as having 'various troglodytic grottos' (Smyth 1829, 295) and 'full of large and small natural caves' (Evans 1971, 179). The caves shown in the notarial plan could be natural caves as the southern part of Xagħra is known to have numerous karstic caves, such as l-Għar ta' Ninu (Caruana 1889). The use in prehistory of the caves shown in the plan cannot be excluded particularly as caves in the area such as the Brochtorff Circle, the North Cave, l-Għar ta' Ghejżu and a cave explored in 1954 (Evans 1971, 179, 183) are well known Temple Period sites which made use of underground caves.

Plate XXVA.

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Situation of the "Tempio dei Giganti" and "Avanzi Giganteschi" in Gozo.

Published by the Society of Antiquaries of London, April 1829.

Figure 4. Lithograph of Ġgantija and surrounding lands (after Smyth 1829). A=path, B= buildings and trees.

A third possibility is that they are prehistoric tombs, as the area is known for such features (Zammit 1927, 3; Malone *et al.* 1995). Judging by the size shown on the plan, it may be loosely conjectured that the cave along the passage is more likely to be a natural feature in view of its large size. On the other hand, in view of the small size of the depicted opening of the cave to its north, this may well be an ancient tomb, but a more recent date cannot be excluded in view of the fact that it is a prominent feature within a small enclosure.

Spring

The contract clearly refers to a fountain of running water in a man-made underground cave (NAV, Not. Paolo Vittorio Giammalva R292/24 f. 698r) which can safely be identified with the cave (*grotta*) located near the western buildings and described as being under the lands of neighbouring tenants. The plan shows this cave as roughly circular in shape with rectangular

recesses in the north, west and east directions. The cave had an opening to the south leading to a space bounded by a curved wall with a controlled access. To the east of Ġgantija, Pelagio documented another underground space with similar features (MCA, Misc. 55, ff. 143v-144v). The location and dating of these caves remains unknown and both deserve to be located and studied further.

Mention of a spring in the contract is not surprising in an area known since medieval times as Tal-Ghejun (see above). Already at the time, the abundance of water was utilized to support gardens planted with trees, a feature which is documented near the buildings to the west of the lands in the 1776 contract and accompanying plan, as well as in Smyth's lithograph (Fig. 4, point B). The abundance of underground water and springs is still evident today through the presence of reeds and trees at this location.

If Grima (2004b, 341-42) has noted the frequent occurrence of water sources close to Temple Period megalithic buildings, the evidence put forth in the present paper points to the location of at least one potential source of water close to the concentration of Temple Period remains in southern Xagħra (Gozo), in the vicinity of the Brochtorff Circle. It is tempting to reread the local prehistoric landscape visualizing the Brochtorff Circle, l-Għar ta' Għejżu, megaliths at Vella's farm and Ġgantija as linked (Grima et al. 2009, 61) and distributed around an area with hydrological potential and possible accompanying vegetation. Such water source would have been important considering that environments with relative local scarcity of water have been noted at least in the early phases of the Temple Period at the nearby Brochtorff Circle (Schembri et al. 2009, 38-9). An archaeological, geological and hydrological survey of the area is needed before a definite position can be made on this hypothesis, particularly as more than one spring is implied by the plural Tal-Għejjun, the toponym of the area.

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