

# Archaeological discoveries at Marsa over the centuries

Timothy Gambin

## Introduction

Marsa lies at the head of the Grand Harbour of Malta nestled between the sea and the town of Hamrun. The vast floodplain lying behind the inner reaches of the harbour is referred to by locals as il-Marsa tal-Ingliżi and covers the area which is currently occupied by the Marsa Sports Club.<sup>1</sup> This same floodplain is the largest catchment area of freshwater in the Maltese islands. Large valley systems drain into the floodplain and subsequently into the sea at Marsa. Tonnes of sediment are transported across the plain annually making it the fertile area it is.

Today, one does not associate the area around Marsa with rich archaeological heritage. Centuries of heavy industrial and infrastructural development, including shipbuilding and power generating facilities, have greatly influenced the evolution of the area. Added to this one must also keep in mind natural causes, including the abovementioned heavy sediment deposition, which have changed the topography of the Marsa area. Some of this development, such as the nineteenth harbour facilities, has become important in its own right and today one can also refer to the industrial heritage of the Marsa area. However, these relatively recent additions were built over an area that, as shall be communicated in the course of this paper, is extremely rich in archaeological heritage. In some cases, it is these same recent developments that have brought to light some of the archaeological discoveries described below.

The first reference to large manmade structures of some form existing in the environs

of the Grand Harbour can be inferred from a written description of the island penned by Jean Quintin D'Autun. In his 1536 publication he describes two ancient temples that were still extant and visible in the first decades of the sixteenth century, one at the southern harbour (Marsaxlokk) and the other as situated between the castle and the town.

“The foundations can be seen in many places: stones of stupendous height and width. I think that the temple of Juno, as one can see from the remains which still exist, could be considered not only as one among the great, but also among the magnificent temples of antiquity; it is situated about halfway between the town and the castle. The ruins lie scattered through many acres of land; the foundations of the temple cover a large part of the harbour, even far out into the sea, built there on a hilltop, on a plain, and sheltered from winds on all sides by very steep slopes. The name of this place is very difficult to pronounce except by the local Maltese tongue. On the hilltop there is a shrine dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, called “Ta’ Qort”.<sup>2</sup>

This description has, since its inception, been taken to mean that the remains described by Quintinus lay between the castle of St. Angelo and its suburb Birgu. There are, however, a number of difficulties with the placing of these remains in this area. Firstly, the author describes the remains as lying half way between the castle and the town; in early modern times only Mdina was referred to as a town whereas Birgu was not: *burgi insule Meliveti* (1357); *in contrata burgii prope*

*castrum maris* (1420); *suburbia castris maris* (1466).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the very meaning of the term Mdina (from Medina) is town.<sup>4</sup> Added to this one must here consider that, on a peninsula as narrow as that of Birgu, there probably did not exist many acres of space between the castle and its suburb. Also, the sea and mud in the area are not conducive to supporting large structural remains as those described. The bedrock drops dramatically towards the centre of the submerged valley that is today known as Dockyard Creek.

It is highly likely that Quintin D'Autun was referring to an area that coincides with Marsa. There are a series of archaeological remains in the area that fit his description as well other factors, such as place name evidence, that point to Marsa as being the area described in the passage. On the plain of Kordin to the SE of the Grand Harbour there once stood no less than three Neolithic structures. Observed in the early 1500s, these must have constituted a formidable sight similar to other substantial Neolithic sanctuaries elsewhere on the island. It is therefore not surprising that the author of the passage describes the stones as being of "stupendous height and width". The remains that have been somewhat enigmatic are those referred to as "lying far out to sea". However, maps and nautical charts from the nineteenth century show this area as being muddy rather than awash.<sup>5</sup> This seems to indicate that the process of siltation in the Marsa area was not yet complete and may have been even less so in the early sixteenth century when the account was penned, meaning that any structures present in the area would have been visible. It is therefore plausible to consider the structures described in 1536 as forming part of the same structure described by Abela over a century later.

In 1647, Commendatore Abela published the first reference that sheds light on what the abovementioned remains may have been... He describes a *molo di grossissime pietre edificato su la sponda del mare per un tratto di mille e cinquecento passi fatto in tempo de' Romani*.<sup>6</sup> It would seem that the author reached this conclusion based on a fragment of a marble plaque that read *in statione [...] mille [...] quincent pass [sic]*". Only some of the mole was extant at the time that he was writing *E n'appare fin'oggi qualche vestigio delle pietre*

*nella punta del Cortino*.<sup>7</sup> One can be almost certain that the area described in the passage as 'Ta' Qort' coincides with Kordin, Qortin and Cortino (all toponyms used for the area around the present day power station).

During the latter part of the eighteenth century, some of the most important finds in the area were made. Count Barbaro's 18<sup>th</sup> century publication of the *old remains on Jesuits' Hill (a later toponym that coincides with the area of Qortin, Kordin and Cortino)* contains a detailed and accurate description of a *massive complex of Roman warehouses*. This site was discovered in relatively good condition with the arched roof still surviving in parts of the main building. The main edifice was spread over a large area and consisted of a central chamber with corridors on each side. In turn, these corridors provided access to a series of chambers, precisely five on either side. These chambers had roofs that were supported by three arches and each room measured approximately nine by four metres or 36 square metres. Attached to this large complex was a substantial structure that seems to have been in a lesser state of repair and was described simply as *rovine di fabriche*.<sup>8</sup> The roof of this one massive room seems to have been supported by a series of five central columns (or pillars) and one also notes the remains of a smaller room.

The last two rooms and the NE portico were built over excavated chambers, which at the time of their discovery were filled with fresh water. Apertures for the retrieval of water were situated in the corridors of the main buildings. The ceilings of these two chambers differed, one was vaulted (*fatta a testuggine*) and the other consisted of a series of arches built from large stones (*pietre enormi*).<sup>9</sup> The second building of the complex also had an excavated chamber under one of the rooms that was dry at the time of the discovery and contained a significant number of amphorae in good condition.<sup>10</sup> The third large underground chamber was situated under the abovementioned *rovine di fabbriche* attached to the large building. Among some of the explanations given by Barbaro is the possibility of this area being a reutilised tomb.<sup>11</sup>

From the opposite extremity of the main chamber ran a large passage measuring approximately three metres wide and forty-three

metres long that was oriented to ENE, and lay circa nineteen metres (from its end) in the same direction. A second complex was situated off this passage although no direct entrance from the latter can be identified in Barbaro's plan. The entrance to this second complex enjoyed the same orientation of the abovementioned passage. Access to the five rooms would have been via a large vestibule measuring twenty by three metres with each room measuring approximately three by fourteen metres. To the north of these rooms are two narrow corridors that were also accessible from the vestibule whereas to the south are a series of four rooms that are drawn by Barbaro as incomplete. This would indicate that these were probably in a state of ruin when the discovery was made. The narrowest of these rooms measured two and a half metres whereas the widest measured approximately five metres across.

A third complex of buildings, separate from both the aforementioned structures lay to the south of the main complex. The entrance to this building was through a vestibule that measured eight by two and a half metres. From here one could access the three chambers that measured approximately nine by four metres. The dividing walls contained pillars rather than columns and these were made from large stones placed one over another. Large building blocks were used for the rest of the structure and the simple architecture of this particular building led Barbaro to conclude that this highlighted the antiquity of the building *manifesta la rimota antichita' dell'edifizio*.<sup>12</sup>

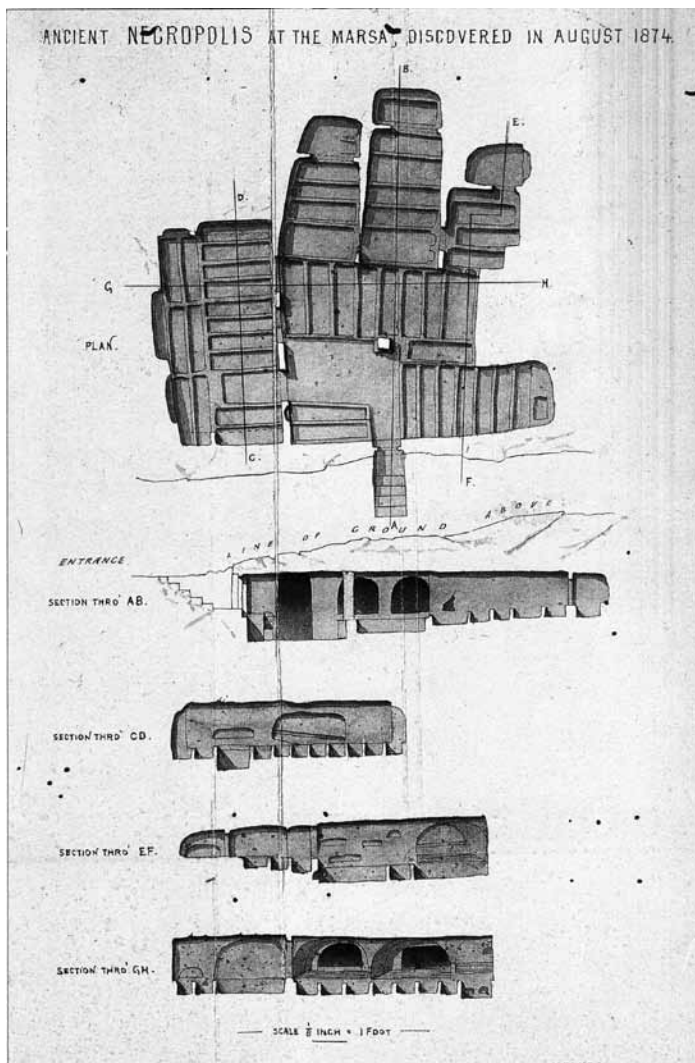
One of the earliest and accurate hydrographic surveys in the area of Marsa was carried out in the second decade of the 1800s by Captain W.H. Smyth and subsequently published in 1823. It shows a series of 'objects' that fouled the seabed in the area at the point off the Qortin headland.<sup>13</sup> These features are clearly marked and may well correspond to some of the structures observed by Quintinus and Abela. Dredging works carried out in the 1860s in the area confirm the presence of port structures present within the mud deposits. Whilst dredging in the area Mr Gabrielli, the contractor entrusted with the removal of mud for the creation of a harbour extension from the area, consistently complained that he had to remove large stone blocks from beneath the

seabed. It is not known exactly to what structure these blocks belonged to but contemporary reports state that many of these blocks had considerable traces of pozzolana on them.

Other evidence pointing to intense human activity in the area includes a series of fishponds discovered around Kordin Hill.<sup>14</sup> In 1865, the government at the time "was informed that Mr Gabrielli has lately met with some further obstructions in his operations of dredging in the shape of two ancient fish ponds, and that he is, in consequence, about to put in a further claim of £2,000 or £3,000 to defray the extra expense of removing the masonry".<sup>15</sup> The contractor may have inflated the sum requested but it does represent a rather large amount of money for the time and reflects the substantial nature of the structures discovered.

Confirmation of the existence of structures at the foot of Kordin Hill (possibly some of the structures described by Quintinus) were to be brought to light in the second half of the nineteenth century when dredging machines working in the area brought to light a number of architectural remains of which only two (partial) marble columns and the torso of a small marble statue were retained. One column measures approximately 165 cm in height and the other measures approximately 105 cm in height and 52 cm in width. A contemporary newspaper reports the discovery of the torso of a statue originally thought to be that of the Goddess Diana.<sup>16</sup> In November 1877 during construction works that were taking place in the same area a whole pillar of identical material to the aforementioned pieces was uncovered from "under six feet of earth".<sup>17</sup> Since its discovery, this column has been kept in a private collection. Although one cannot define the exact nature of the structure that once stood at the foot of this hill there can be no doubt that the discovery of these columns in this area point to the presence of a substantial building at a prominent place that dominates the entrance to the harbour at Marsa.

A large Roman burial complex was discovered in 1874 on the side of Jesuits' Hill and is datable to the second and third centuries AD. This complex contained over 50 tombs and its presence confirms the continued occupation of a site in close proximity to the Marsa Harbour (Fig. 1).<sup>18</sup> It is uncertain as to whether



*Fig. 1. Burial complex at Marsa as drawn and depicted soon after its discovery in the late 19th century*



*Plate 1. Possibly the same burial complex depicted in Figure 1 which was 'rediscovered' during civil works which were being carried out in the area*

parts of a tomb still visible in a section of rock on the side of the road leading to the power station form part of this same complex. The same uncertainty surrounds another discovery, this time datable to the 1960s when part of a catacomb complex was uncovered during works near the power station (Plate 1). In 1888, Caruana describes very interesting discoveries in the Kortin area. These include burials within dolia, placed lip to lip, with a body inside (Fig 2). In itself this discovery is very important. Dolia are usually used as storage jars, buried up to their rim within warehouses. Here it seems that these had been dug up and reused for burials. Caruana states that many of these dolia burials were discovered in the area of the gasworks that were being developed in the area.

Nearly a century after the great harbour extension other work on the island's infrastructure contributed to the discovery of further structures that were probably part of the harbour complex. In April 1939 "during the excavation of a trench for the laying of foundations in a field at Race Course Road, Marsa, at a depth of about ten feet from the surface, remains of a Roman building were uncovered".<sup>19</sup> The limited information available contains a description of a floor



covered with clay tiles and of rectangular pits covered with plaster and cut into the bedrock. The area contained “a great quantity of potsherds of the Roman type” as well loose tiles and plaster.<sup>20</sup> It is not possible to precisely define the use of the building but it seems to be related more to industrial activity rather than to storage facilities.

In the mid 1950s further remains were unearthed in Marsa. During the laying of foundations for a new school workmen uncovered a building that “covered an area of at least 170 feet [51 metres] in length and 100 feet [30 metres] in width and consist of the lower courses of walls in ‘opus quadratum’. The walls uncovered so far appear to belong to large rectangular rooms or enclosures and the quality and workmanship of the Globigerina limestone blocks with which the walls are constructed show that the building originally constructed on this site must have been of some importance”.<sup>21</sup> Very large quantities of pottery, including “amphoras, flagons and storage jars” were retrieved from this site. What is of interest here is that some of the pottery from this site showed signs of being water worn and was encrusted with marine growth.<sup>22</sup> This is interesting because such remains would indicate that these structures were once submerged.

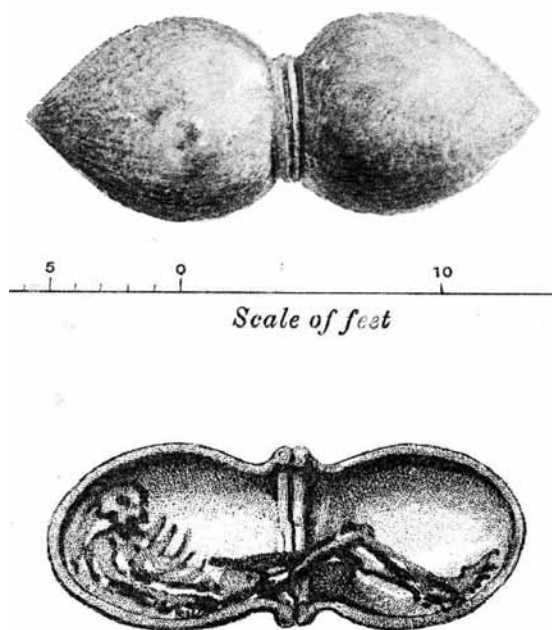


Fig 2. Dolia burial as discovered in situ during the late 19th century

One can look at two possible explanations: firstly that the land on which these structures were built subsided over the centuries and lay for a period (until the silting up of the area) below sea level; alternatively, some of the ceramic material from this site originated from the great harbour works mentioned above from which “numerous pieces of earthen amphorae, urns and water jars, were also being continually brought up from the deep”.<sup>23</sup> The mud was dumped in a variety of places in and around the area so it could well be that some the ceramics discovered in this site originated from the spoil of the harbour dredging in the 1860s. Despite the uncertainty regarding the origin of the ceramic deposits from this site I believe that there can be little doubt that the structures described in the brief report constituted the remains of a *horrea* or Roman warehouse complex. It is similar in dimensions to the *horrea* at Myra except that the latter is slightly larger.

Further ancient buildings were discovered in the area in 1959 when “during building operations along the north side of Racecourse Street, Marsa [...] several lengths of heavy masonry, buried in levels containing nothing but Roman sherds, came to light [...] they seem to represent the remains of massive warehouses”.<sup>24</sup> Although the brief report states that “detailed plans and drawings were taken for record purposes” these have since been lost and thus at this point in time it is difficult to comment further on the nature of these remains.

More recently, the 1993 excavations at Xatt il-Qwabar uncovered structural and other remains datable to the Middle Ages. However, the most significant find in Marsa in recent times occurred during the construction of a storm water channel near Xatt il-Mollijiet in 2005 (Fig. 4). The remains of stone foundations are similar to the structures uncovered in the early 1950s and may well be another section of the structure described above. It is highly likely that only a small part of a large warehouse complex has been investigated and that the rest is still buried in the surrounding environs. This site can, and indeed must, be considered as one of the most important archaeological sites in Malta that has yet to be fully investigated. From the few stretches that were uncovered



Plate 2. Architectural features related to the Roman port complex which were uncovered in 2005

in 2005 it was evident that the archaeological deposits are not only substantial but also, due to the anaerobic conditions of the sediments, very well preserved. Such a site deserves further attention that would involve various stakeholders contributing to a long-term project aimed at achieving a better understanding of Malta's Roman past.

#### Notes

- 1 The place name Marsa tal-Ingliži originates from the recreational use of the area by the British in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
- 2 H.C.R. Vella, *The Earliest Description of Malta (Lyons 1536) by Jean Quintin d'Autun*, (Malta.1980), 23.
- 3 G. Wettinger, *Place-names of the Maltese Islands ca. 1300-1800*, (Malta. 2000), 54.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 367.
- 5 *Mediterranean Sea Malta Valetta Harbours and the coast westward to Madalena Pt. Surveyed by Lt. G.R. Wilkinson and Mr J. Millard Mast. Assistant under the direction of Captns Graves & Spratt, R.N. 1860.* (London. Hydrographic Office. 1871, first pub.1861.)
- 6 G.F. Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta: Isola nel mare siciliano con le sue antichità, ed altre notizie*, (Malta. 1647), 16.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 8 C.A. Barbaro, Degli avanzi d'alcuni antichissimi edifi-  
fizi, scoperti in Malta l'anno 1768, (Malta. 1794), 4.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 13 W.H. Smyth, *The Hydrography of Sicily, Malta and the Adjacent Islands, surveyed in 1814, 1815 and 1816*, (London. 1823).
- 14 In the area known today as il-Menqa.
- 15 *Malta Times and United Services Gazette*, 16 March 1865.
- 16 *Malta Times and United Services Gazette*, 21 December 1865.
- 17 A.A. Caruana, *Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiquities in the Group of the Islands of Malta* (Malta. 1882), 90.
- 18 *Malta Times and United Services Gazette*, September 1874
- 19 *Museum Annual Report 1946-47*, 3.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Museum Annual Report 1955-56*, 7.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Malta Times and United Services Gazette*, 8 November 1865.
- 24 *Museum Annual Report 1959-60*, 5.