



Malta  
Classics  
Association

# MELITA CLASSICA

Vol. I

2014

*Journal of the  
Malta Classics Association*

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## From the Editor

Four years ago, the Malta Classics Association was founded with the aim of disseminating and furthering Classical Studies, and especially, the Greek and Latin languages – a daunting task, indeed, considering that the Classics Studies were only limited to University courses, and stood completely outside the curriculum of pre-tertiary education. Ever since its inception in 2010, the Association has successfully striven and has been instrumental in raising awareness of such an important aspect of Education, and its efforts are now bearing fruit. Moreover, the general public's response has been encouraging – membership has steadily increased, the web-site frequently accessed, Classical Studies introduced as a new subject in post-secondary education at the Junior College of the University of Malta, Naxxar Higher Secondary School and Gozo Higher Secondary School, and the public lectures held under the auspices of the Association have always been well-attended.

Inspired by that famous Latin proverb, *verba movent, scripta manent*, the Malta Classics Association has now taken this additional initiative of publishing its own annual Journal, *Melita Classica*, in which both local and foreign Classicists can find an appropriate forum wherein the fruit of their literary endeavours and their researches can be published. In this wise, no constraints are being made on contributors, save that the material submitted pertains generally to Classical Studies and Languages. Contributors are thus most welcome and are encouraged to submit original articles or material for future publications – writing guidelines are printed at the end of this journal.

On behalf of the Editorial Board, I wish to thank all the contributors to this first issue of *Melita Classica*, and earnestly hope that our readers would find the studies offered profitable and enjoyable.

**Fra Alan Joseph Adami O.P.**

**Editor**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### DOCUMENTS ON ĠĦAR IL-KBIR, MALTA: 1588 – 1733

#### *A Critical Appraisal*

The new book *Documents on ĠĦar il-Kbir, Malta: 1588 – 1733* illustrates eighteen Latin documents, falling into the period spanning from 1588 till 1733, which, after being admirably collected by Joseph Borg, have been diligently transcribed, translated and commented upon by university professor Horatio Vella. These manuscripts are all about marriage contracts involving people from ĠĦar il-Kbir.

ĠĦar il-Kbir is considered as Malta's best known troglodytic settlement. It is situated to the north-west of Clapham Junction near the Buskett Forest, within the territory of both the Parish and the Local Council of Siġġiewi, though geographically closer to Dingli. ĠĦar il-Kbir consists of eight partly natural, partly rock-hewn caves which encircle a hollow-like geological formation. Caves extend over two different levels. The lowermost plane is home to five caves, all of which can be accessed from within the large natural cavity that seems to have served as a 'misraħ', or communal open space, which was a favourite rendezvous for the troglodytes. The remaining three caves lie at an upper level. Some of the caves in the complex are partitioned by means of dry-stone walls into smaller enclosed spaces, and the entrance to several caves is partly concealed by a similarly built wall.

This publication is of great importance to the study of Maltese history because it brings us face to face with unexplored facets of our past and, moreover, it helps us giving an objective answer to pertinent perplexities of historical nature. The first, and perhaps the most fundamental, issue is definitely on how cave dwelling has made it into modern times, which subject is rigorously addressed by Professor Horatio Vella in the introduction of the book.

Cave-dwelling is known to have existed in Malta and Gozo from prehistoric times. In fact, Għar Dalam, on the road from Żejtun to Birżebbuġa, gives the name to the first phase of habitation in prehistoric Malta, datable to before 5000BC. The reason why early inhabitants dwelt in caves rather than in houses is that caves were more natural to have than houses which required tools and means of transport to build. On the other hand, caves were readily available in some parts of the country, and with some adjustments here and there they could be easily adapted for occupancy. In addition, caves provided an ideal coolness that secured a normal residency and, because of the softness of the stone, could be further excavated to suit the needs of the inhabitants.

That cave-dwelling persisted ever since then cannot be proved. In this regard, Vella states that it could have been resumed for reasons of security as a hide-out from invaders, even in historic times. The inhabitants were either missed by the invaders or, if seen, left to their own devices since their simple lives were not taken as an obstacle.

The continuation of the use of caves as habitations is explained by the fact that, despite the introduction of the building of houses through the discovery of tools and means of transport, family traditions and security attracted residents of several generations to stay on in them. Their isolation from open residences secured their rights of ownership or usufruct, their strong kinship with fellow dwellers, and their religion and customs for many generations. Such cave-dwelling did help in perpetrating the Maltese race and their religious sentiments.

Vella contends that it was this isolation that ultimately brought about society's disapproval of such type of housing, as can be seen from the British upheaval of this concept of habitation by destroying such caves as Għar il-Kbir in 1835, and also from the Maltese expressions, like "ta' wara l-muntanji", that is, "not keeping with the civilized world", which is still very much in use.

Notwithstanding, it would be misleading to ever think that the isolation of these people, especially of Għar il-Kbir, was absolute. Vella, in fact, pinpoints that fields in the vicinity of Għar il-Kbir were owned by some of its inhabitants, and commerce existed with nearby

markets. They had animals which carried them to these villages and back. These people were, therefore, knowledgeable of currency and of what was going outside the caves, and their whereabouts were known to the authorities and visitors who were shown the way to them. The manuscripts showing up in this new publication further prove this point. The fact that these primary sources are notarial deeds of couples going into matrimony, promising and declaring what goods they were bringing into the marriage, shows very well that after all the inhabitants of Għar il-Kbir were not completely cut off from the legal and religious practices of the island.

Vella points out that in his *Della Descrittione di Malta*, published in 1647, the first Maltese historian Giovanni Francesco Abela comes up with the figure of 117 people, forming 27 families, populating Għar il-Kbir at that time. Yet, Vella manifests some kind of reservation in this regard, claiming that the population in Għar il-Kbir could not have been that large. He suspects that such numbers given by Abela are exaggerated, on account of two things; first, unlike what Abela says, the cave is not so large; second, some of the people mentioned in the documents appear more than once in the same texts. By tracing the components of all the families mentioned in the eighteen documents, Professor Vella has discovered that in fifteen of the eighteen marriages interrelationships are commonplace. This attests, therefore, not only to a small population, but also to a closed one.

Vella's eye for detail helps us noticing, for example, that of these eighteen marriages, two involved couples both hailing from Għar il-Kbir, while half of the partners from Għar il-Kbir were males. Apart from the twenty spouses hailing from Għar il-Kbir, seven hailed from Żebbuġ, four from Rabat, while the rest hailed from Lija, Mosta, Qormi, Siġġiewi and the nearby Ħal Kbir.

Furthermore, Vella underscores the fact that three emigrations have taken place within the course of these 145 years: Peter and Joanne Bonello, of Għar il-Kbir (Doc. 1, 1588), moved to Żebbuġ by 1600; Joseph Pace moved to Għar il-Kbir from Ħal Kbir after his marriage in 1610 (Doc. 4); while Bartholomew and Grace Casha moved from Żebbuġ to Għar il-Kbir by 1652 (Doc. 12). I find these last two migrations really baffling since they confirm that 17th-century people could still take

the bold decision to abandon village life, and move to a cave and settle there for good.

It is astonishing how pivotal this publication can be for a serious review on the topography and especially the toponymy of some places in Malta that could have easily fallen into oblivion. The properties referred to in the eighteen documents are listed according to the fields they were to be found in. It can be noticed that some of the plots were bordered by properties of people already mentioned in these documents as contracting marriage or being parents thereof. In this way, Professor Vella reconstructs the division of whole areas within the Għar il-Kbir and the Girgenti quarters.

I am pretty sure that the unidentifiable plots shall give those with a keen interest in topography and toponymy lots of food for thought, since they have quite unfamiliar names like: “Il-Berqx” in “Ta’ Grun Xara” (Doc. 6), “Ta’ Irdum” (Doc. 11), “Il-Ġnejna” in “Tal-Ħaramija” (Doc. 13), and “Tal-Kapitella” *sive* “Il-Bariġja” *sive* “Il-Furanija” (Doc. 15).

This book, like many others, would not have been possible without Professor Vella’s outstanding expertise in Latin palaeography and language. Although Vella has been going through loads of manuscripts ever since his university days as a student, it must have been for him an uphill task having to deal with eighteen Latin documents committed to paper by different persons with different calligraphies. It is no mean feat to have to delve into one kind of script, let alone nine different ones at one fell swoop. In fact, the Għar il-Kbir documents were authored by nine different notaries.

The Latin used in these documents, though heavily abbreviated as can be seen from both the sources themselves and the transcription, is on the whole grammatically correct. As we get closer to the 18th century, misspellings begin to crop up and become standardized. The language is formulaic and legalistic, as to be expected from contracts, which tends to get perfected as these documents proceed chronologically. When it comes to lists of objects mentioned as part of the dowry, Italian and Sicilian are preferred to Latin, as if the notary was not particularly enthusiastic about taking the trouble to translate

details into Latin. The items mentioned here in Italian or Sicilian are spelt differently from one contract to another.

As you might have already noticed, I could not help myself but to make continual reference to Professor Vella's sterling work in this publication of the eighteen Latin documents on Għar il-Kbir, since every word and comma vouches for his exclusive contribution to the composition of this book. If truth be told, I wonder how his name is remarkably – and I would say, inconsiderately – missing on the front cover and the title page of the book. Be that as it may, this work is no less a tribute to Joseph Borg who has spent from his resources in looking for these documents at the National Archives of Valletta, in making copies of them and in eventually publishing them. So, thanks to the resolved commitment of Joseph Borg and the solid prowess of Professor Horatio Vella, the names and, hence, the memory of the Għar il-Kbir people will live for ever.

George F. Vella