
SLIEMA: A STUDY IN URBAN GROWTH

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Sliema, since 1948¹ the largest town in the Maltese Islands, has been in existence for only about a century and a half and has attained its role as a major Maltese settlement less than a century ago (Table Two).

Diagram A shows the geology of Sliema to consist of a limestone rock outcrop that descends down to sea level from heights of about 33 meters. The outcrop has been dissected by eastward-flowing valleys such as *Wied Mejxu*, and *Wied il-Kbir/Wied Ghomor*. The valleys are now deeply entrenched in the country rock. The waters they drain have swept the land of practically all the loose material which now forms the partly inundated, partly reclaimed, tiny alluvial plains at the heads of the three creeks of Msida, Lazzaretto and Sliema and of the three bays of Balluta, St Julian's and St George's.

Lang's map of *Soils of Malta and Gozo*² came much too late to record the type of soil, if any, that covered part of the Sliema peninsula. The

map, however, shows that the land surrounding Sliema has xerorendsina soils which, having been developed in dry, semi-arid climates, have strongly varying structures and textures, and occur mainly in higher land reaches. They are brownish in colour and relatively useful for crop cultivation if well-watered if underwatered, being of calcereous rock origin, they become alkaline and lose their fertility.³ If the Sliema peninsula had good soil and the necessary amounts of fresh water some kind of farming must have taken place prior to town development.

Blouet's thesis⁴ includes a large assortment of diagrams of the Maltese Islands depicting in various manners the successive and, at times, complex local land uses up till 1798. Blouet shows places with the adjective 'XAGHRA' meaning 'waste land'; places with the term 'MANDRE' meaning livestock enclosures; places where 'GIARDINI'⁵ were recorded by famous historians such as Abela; the

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1. The Malta Census in *Abstract of the Maltese Islands*, 1947/48 p. 8, Malta, 1948.
 2. D.M. Lang, *Soils of Malta and Gozo*, London, 1960.
 3. Sir D. Stamp (ed), *A Glossary of Geographical Terms*, second edition, London, 1966, p. 491.
 4. B.W. Blouet, 'The Changing Landscape of Malta during the rule of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, 1530 — 1798' — a Ph.D. thesis, a photocopy of which is to be found in the 'Melitensia' section of the Old University Library; pp. 75, 76, 84, 99-113, 142.
 5. 'GIARDINI' were fields usually situated in small, sheltered valleys served by perennial springs and produced a wide variety of crops.

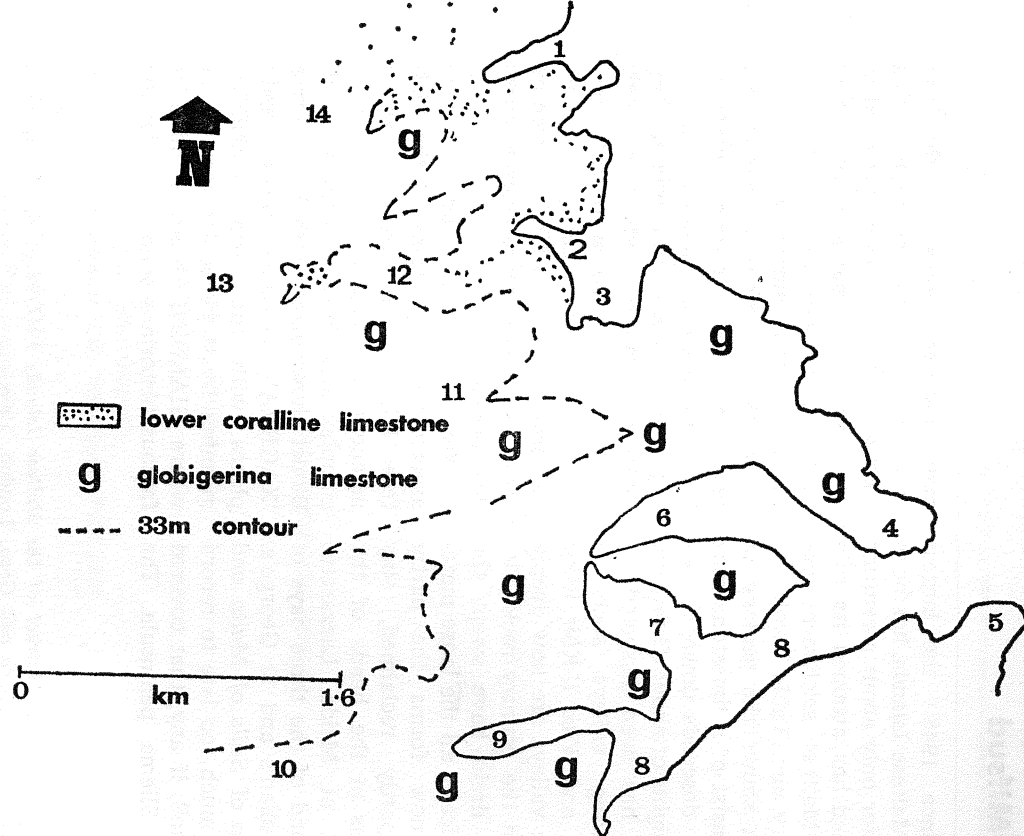


DIAGRAM A
GEOLOGICAL SKETCH PLAN OF SLIEMA

Key: 1. St. George's Bay, 2. St. Julian's Bay, 3. Balluta Bay, 4. Dragut Point, 5. St. Elmo Point, 6. Sliema Creek, 7. Lazzaretto Creek, 8. Marsamxetto, 9. Msida Creek, 10. Msida Valley, 11. Wied il-Ballta, 12. Wied Għomor, 13. Wied il-Kbir, 14. Wied Bejxu.

'CASALS'⁶ visited by Duzzina in 1575; distribution of settlements in the years 1436, 1603, 1617 and 1650; the roads pattern in c. 1650; and the distribution of windmills in c. 1800. In all of these references the Sliema area is a blank. There seems to have been no economic activities in Sliema till after the arrival of the British. Only in three diagrams does Blouet record a passing reference to the area.

In Fig 4.2 Blouet shows that in the early 17 century the estuary of *Wied il-Balluta* used to consist of an 'GHADIRA' — 'a temporary lake'. This would be the flat, U - shaped space at the head of Balluta Bay occupied today by the T junction of the Sliema coast-road and the steep main road that joins Balluta to the Savoy Hill. Fig 4.5. shows that between c. 1650 and c. 1680 the Grand Master gave two plots of land on the Sliema peninsula just north of Dragut Point on long lease. Fig 6.3 is a photocopy of a sketch plan that was drawn as part of a proposal for the construction of a fortress on Dragut Point. The proposal, which seems to have included a scheme for a settlement within the fortifications, was submitted to de Vilhena.

The 'Ghadira' referred to in Fig 4.2 by Blouet would have scared away would-be settlers because of the dangers of *mal aria* i.e. water-borne, - disease - infected air that would be brought about by stagnant water after rains. The two applicants who were granted land in the third

quarter of the 17th century (Blouet's Fig 4.5 mentioned above) are, as yet, unknown. They may not have succeeded in developing their plots of land since their venture does not appear to have attracted other settlers. The town-fortress plan quoted in Blouet's Fig 6.3 was partly shelved due to lack of funds — only Fort Tigne was built.

Other sources, apart from Blouet, show that the Sliema area remained a complete wasteland till well into the 18th century. A map of Malta by a French cartographer, Echelle, c1700 found at the National Malta Library introduces details such as the Aqueduct (1610 — 1614) and the country churches dedicated to St Julian and St George overlooking the bays of St Julian and St George respectively. On this particular map the Sliema peninsula appears as an empty, hilly region.

An interesting problem is why Sliema developed after Valetta considering that physically speaking, the two peninsulas have many characteristics in common.

1. Both the 'Sciberras' and the 'Sliema' peninsulas are severely deficient in the supply of fresh water — one can note the absence of windmills in Sliema in the map referred to above and the many efforts by the Order to supply water to the City of Valletta.
2. Both peninsulas were rugged and dissected by deep, narrow valleys that, especially in Valetta, cut

6. 'CASAL' is the old Maltese term for village, 'HAL' having been reserved for large settlements.

TABLE ONE: ACREAGE OF THE HARBOURS

Harbour	Area (Km ²)	Area (Hectares)	Length of Shoreline (Km)
Grand Harbour	2,199	217,554	15,553
Marsamxetto	1,391	153,094	10,459

SOURCE: *The Statistical Abstract of the Maltese Islands*, Malta 1952.

TABLE TWO: CENSUS POPULATION OF THE SLIEMA AREA

Census Year	Sliema	Gżira	St. Julian's	Msida
1842	(with B'Kara)	—	(with B'Kara)	—
1851	582 (includes St. Julian's)	—	(with Sliema)	—
1861	800 (includes St. Julian's) +	—	(with Sliema)	—
1871	1600	—	607	—
1881	3,685	—	607	—
1881	3,685	—	924	1,658
1891	8,237	—	1,597	2,149
1901	12,015	—	2,388	2,893
1911	14,129	—	4,304	3,627
1921	15,215	—	3,514	3,373
1931	19,730 (includes Gżira)	(included with Sliema)	4,894	3,627
1948	24,294 (Sliema overtook Valletta which city in 1948 had a pop. of 18,666)	6,925 (new census district constituted from part of Sliema)	9,122	6,064
1957	23,399	8,545	8,285	6,587
1967	21,000	9,575	7,394	11,437
1972	21,572	10,040	8,108	12,132
1977	20,123	9,884	8,043	12,051

+ Richardson, M. (1900) 'Aspects of the Demography of Modern Malta', Durham Univ., U.K., p.250, claims that "the population of Sliema in 1861 was only 300".

SOURCES:

Censuses of The Maltese Islands, 1842 - 1967, Malta.

Malta Blue Book.

Demographic Review of the Maltese Islands, 1972, Malta 1977.

Abstract of Maltese Statistics — Malta.

transversally across the peninsula and have produced very steep roads: stepped streets are common in Valetta.

3. Both Marsamxetto and the Grand Harbour are sheltered from the prevailing MAYYISTRAL (MISTRAL, N W wind) and both are exposed to the more violent GRIGAL (GREGALE N E wind)⁷. It is only inland from *Ras Hanzir* that the Grand Harbour is fully protected from the effects, direct and indirect, of the 'GRIGAL'. In Marsamxetto Harbour, only the creeks known as Sliema and Lazaretto (L-AZZARETTO) are sheltered (Diag. A)

Though the physical properties of the two peninsulas may be of equal value, from the economic point of view, the Valetta site is superior. The following points prove this statement.

(1) The major part of the approximately 218 hectares of water in the Grand Harbour (Table One) is deeper.

(2) Although with the exception of the uppermost part of the Creeks all of the approximately 153 hectares of water in Marsamxetto Harbour is more than 7.32 meters deep yet this harbour has only about three fourths the size of the area and shoreline length of the Grand Harbour.

(3) Settlements were discouraged from the Sliema peninsula by the absence of adequate protection from corsairs and by the presence of the Lazzaretto quarantines on Manoel Island.

(4) *Ceteris paribus*, in the late 1560s it was easier for the Order to build a town on Sciberras next to the fortified southern sides of the Grand Harbour where, incidentally, a dockyard already existed and only needed expansion and fortify Dragut Point by a fort rather than build a town on the Sliema peninsula and have to fortify both its flanks.

During the 19th and 20th centuries three factors revolutionised the Sliema landscape. First, the British, in complete control of the Mediterranean and engaged in empire building in Asia and Africa, brought previously unknown prosperity to these Islands especially to the middle-class merchants. Even under the Order many merchants used to live in Valetta and would seek summer residence outside the City. With the increased trading possibilities under the British, prosperity multiplied and the demand for vacational lodgings in quiet, secluded spots increased rapidly. Under the Knights the route from Valetta to Rabat was the most popular site for summer residence.

7. Marsamxetto cannot be protected by a breakwater but the British found it possible to construct one upon submarine banks off the points of St Elmo and Ricasoli though the effects of swell have, on occasion, proved dangerous in both harbours to ships moored as far as 1.5 Km from their mouths. Harrison and Hubbard, *Valletta and the Three Cities Malta*, 1945 p. 84.

Note, for example, *Dar il-Leuni*⁸ built at Hamrun during the grand-mastership of de Vilhena, San Antonio Gardens at Attard built by de Paule, and the small hunting lodge and stables at Boschetto Gardens built by La Valette and later fortified by Verdalle, the gardens themselves being greatly enlarged by Lascaris.

In 1856 two important events in the history of local transportation brought about a change in the direction of movement of annual migration from the Valetta area to summer residences. The first omnibus service in Malta was set up between Valetta and Lija. Its route earmarked a ribbon-like extension of lower-income group residential buildings and of industrial enterprises that gradually engulfed the summer villas of the past century. Well-to-do summer vacationers were gradually forced to go elsewhere rather than stay in the overcrowded traditional summer resort areas.

Also in the same year the Government set up regulations regarding *Id-Dgħajsa tal-Passiġġieri* — a paddle-rowed Maltese boat service that was set up in the two harbours to carry passengers between Valetta and Sliema and between Valetta and the Three Cities.

So far Sliema seems to have grown very little (Table Two). It was as yet very poorly served by roads. Only

the Order's forts, a small church and a few holiday houses seem to have been built until 1856. Surrounded by the sea on three sides and beautified by the forts Sliema offered a favourable alternative to the increasingly congested Hamrun region for purposes of vacation. *Id-Dgħajsa tal-Passiġġieri* provided a pleasant journey across the Harbours during the summer when the sea is usually easily navigable. Hence-forth the population of Sliema started growing because with the summer vacationers came the permanent settlers. Table Two shows that in a decade (1861 — 1871) the Sliema population grew from 300 to 1,600.

Id-Dgħajsa tal-Passiġġieri was succeeded in 1882 by *Il-Laneċ tal-Pass*. These *laneċ*, being larger and faster, shortened the trip between Valetta and Sliema and between Valetta and the Three Cities. Between 1881 and 1891 the Sliema population nearly trebled from 3,685 to 8,237 (Table Two).

Other developments in public transport in Malta indirectly helped Sliema to grow. The Railway Service, set up in 1883 between Valetta and Mtarfa via Hamrun, Santa Venera, B'Kara, Attard and Rabat resulted in further residential and industrial congestion in the Hamrun region and pushed the affluent people to the quieter Sliema region.

8. The planning consultants Harrison and Hubbard, said about *Dar il-Leuni* that Prior to the 18th century the land now occupied by Hamrun was open country traversed by the Wignacourt Aqueduct, and a road linking Valetta with the interior of the Island. During the course of the century several country villas, set in spacious gardens of baroque design, were built alongside this road, by members of the Order. The most charming of these is *Dar Il-Leuni*.....". *op. cit.*, p.93.

The second factor was population over-spill from the Five Cities from 1850 to 1950. By 1861, 56,355 persons were living within the five walled cities of Bormla, Birgu, L-Isla, Floriana and Valetta — an area of about 3.238 square kilometres. This produced a population density within the Five Cities of 12,910⁶ persons per square kilometre⁹. Overflow into areas that lay on the periphery of the Five Cities was inevitable. Hamrun, Paola and Sliema were immediately effected. Table Two shows the rapid rise in the population of Sliema between 1851 when, together with St Julian's Sliema had a population of only 582 and 1901 when by itself the town housed 12,015 people. A layout plan for Sliema dated 26 October 1865¹⁰ shows that the village of Sliema then consisted of a sparse communication network of ten roads of which four were named Sda. Fontana, Sda. Marina Tigne, Via Torre and Sda. Reale. Buildings stood scattered along these roads, none of which roads was more than half built up. Palazzo Sliema in Via Torre dominated the whole area and stood overlooking the sea in the whereabouts of the present Preluna Hotel. Another sketch plan, dated 13 March, 1906¹¹ shows that the ten roads of the 1865 plan had by then been built on all sides; many more streets had been laid out and some of them built

up. Sliema had now grown into a Y-shape along the coast with Fort Tigne forming the foot of the 'Y'.

The third and the last factor that has revolutionised the Sliema landscape came into effect during the last two decades and is not yet complete. Sliema has today become an important commercial centre expressed spatially by the multi-storey shop and office blocks. The Hotel Preluna is now the symbol of the new Sliema and has replaced the town's churches as the dominant of the skyline. To make room for the expanding retail and office land-uses the Sliema inhabitants are leaving town. Table Two shows that, having reached its population peak by 1948, Sliema has since then been losing its population. By 31 December 1977 the town's population had fallen to 20,123. The decline is expected to continue. The question is, who are the Sliema citizens that are leaving their hometown and, where are they going to?

Suburbanization of a town's population usually takes place in a piecemeal fashion. Urban dwellers only move as little as possible away from their hometown primarily in order to keep in close contact with relatives who have stayed behind and to make use of the town's specialized services. As the outward migration movement gathers momentum the demand for empty land for residential develop-

9. Adapted from the *Census of the Islands of Malta, Gozo and Comino*, Malta, 1863.

10. Sketch Plans filed at the Lands Office, Department of Public Works, Beltisseb, to which Department the author is very grateful especially to the Director, Architect M. Busuttill B.Sc., BE & A., A & C.E.; and to Mr. Conti, the Chief Draughtsman.

11. Sketch Plans filed at Beltisseb, *op. cit.*

**TABLE THREE: A COMPARISON BETWEEN HOUSEHOLDS
& DWELLING AMENITIES IN MALTA, VALLETTA & SLIEMA**

Locality/ Census Year	PRIVATE HOUSEHOLDS				PRIVATE DWELLINGS			
	Total No. of House- holds per locality	% of Total No. of House- holds per Locality living in Kerrejjas	Percentage of The Total No. of Household per Locality Having:—		Total No. of Private Dwellings per Locality	Percentage of The Total No. of Dwellings per Locality Having:—		
			water- closet	bath		piped- water	electricity supply	drainage service: sewer or cesspit
1957								
Malta	69970	2.81	92.01	23.28	64471	75.31	75.27	91.24
Valletta	4811	17.23	99.30	30.16	4456	87.81	82.07	100.00
Sliema	6388	0.41+	99.48	61.10	5983+	62.63+	59.50+	99.80
1967								
Malta	71380	1.77	93.74	45.99	80072	94.67	94.86	96.41
Valletta	4171	14.55	87.46	42.36	4259	98.52	98.15	99.58
Sliema	5993	0.10	99.34	76.21	6581	98.78	98.88	99.85

+ includes St. Julian's

SOURCES:

All data in this table has been compiled from the 1957 and 1967 Censuses of the Maltese Islands, namely:—
Census 1957 — The Maltese Islands: Report on the Population & Housing, Malta 1959. Table H IV pp. 185 — 191;
 Table H V pp. 199, 200; and Table HX1c pp. 260, 261.
Malta Census 1967 — Report on Housing Characteristics Malta. Table H13a pp.396,397; Table H13b p.404; Table
 H15 pp.413-415; Table H24a p.454; Table H24b p.455; Table H26 p.457.

ment on the periphery of the town keeps increasing. Land values of peripheral land rise accordingly and only the higher and upper-middle income groups can afford to purchase empty peripheral land and build houses, or to rent speculatively — built suburban houses¹². Sliema, therefore, is probably losing its wealthier inhabitants. By the same arguments these upper-and upper-middle income groups citizens should be settling in areas peripheral to Sliema. Hence, the host suburbs for Sliema's higher income emigrants are most probably places like Is-Swieqi, St Andrews, The Village, Upper and Lower Kappara. One may not tell how many of these suburban residents of Sliema originate from that town before the 1980 Census of the population of the Maltese Islands has been collected and analysed. Two points may, however, be made.

First, that, judging from the advertised high prices for houses and land in the Sliema suburbs and from the general outward appearance and upkeep of these areas one cannot but assume that the families who live there come mainly from the upper — and mid-upper income groups. Secondly, it may be noted that Swieqi alone has about 216 registered voters in the latest edition of the electoral

register for the Maltese Islands¹³. Taking these voters to be mainly married couples with one child per couple being below the voting age the Swieqi population should number about 400. The populations in these new Sliema suburbs are therefore quite substantial albeit their being lost amongst the official population figures of the parishes to which these suburbs still belong.

A town that is losing its richer citizens should be expected to be getting poor. Table Three shows that Sliema has not, in the past, attracted any significant number of low-income dwellers. For example, in 1967 while out of the population of Malta 1.77% were common-tenement dwellers¹⁴, and while 14.55% of the Valletta citizens lived in common-tenement houses, in Sliema only 0.1% of the population lived in *Kerrejjas* in 1967. Similarly, Sliema is shown to lead in the rate of availability of domestic amenities per household; namely water closets and baths. It is a pity that the outward migration of the town's higher-income residential groups may lessen the town's advantageous position in this field.

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12. See, for example, W. Bell *The City, the Suburb, and a Theory of Social Choice* in Greer, Setal (eds), *The New Urbanization*, New York, 1968, p. 132-68.
 13. *Electoral Register for the Maltese Islands, April 1978*, 7th Electoral District — Malta 1978.
 14. In the introductory annotations of the *Population Census of the Maltese Islands 1881*, the term KERREJJA (common-tenement house) is thus defined "The Kerrejja usually is an old large house having each room, large or small, let to a distinct family", p.5.