



HAMRUN'S

Hidden Heritage

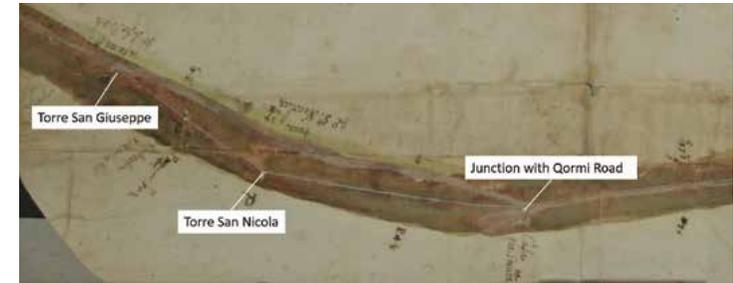
By Reuben Grima and Cheryl Deguara

A casual visitor to Hamrun may be forgiven for thinking that the history of this locality began in the 1880s, when the bustling town that we know today took shape. The streetscapes along the main artery of the town, Saint Joseph High Road, still preserve the iconic vistas that were formed in the building boom of the late nineteenth century. Yet behind these familiar façades, there lies a much longer story of urban growth, which is today largely forgotten.

Casa Leoni is the best known of the early modern villas that took advantage of the abundant supply of water provided by the aqueduct to irrigate their sumptuous gardens.

Top right: Early 17th-century plan of the route of the aqueduct, from manuscript AOM 1034 (not to scale) compared to present-day streetscape (based on PA Geoserver base map).

Right: Early 17th century schematic view of the underground system that carried water from the Torre di San Giuseppe (visible on the right), to Valletta (visible on the left). Torre San Nicola is visible to the right of centre of the schematic view. In the section drawing below the schematic view, Torre San Nicola is shown in the centre (Reproduced from AOM 1034, by kind permission of the National Library of Malta).



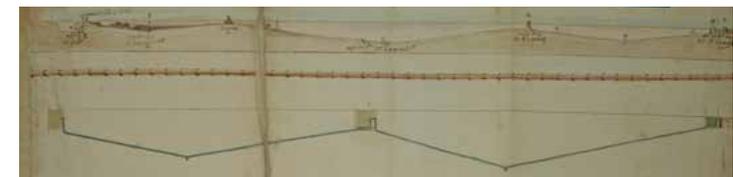
Hamrun straddles a ridge that runs roughly east-west. To the east, the same ridge curves northeast to terminate in the Floriana-Valletta peninsula. To the west, it leads to the lowlands of Santa Venera, Mriehel and Attard. The spine of the ridge afforded the gentlest gradient connecting the new city of Valletta to the interior of the island, making it the natural corridor of communication between them. The origin of the road along the axis that we know today as Saint Joseph High Road is lost in time. It is clearly depicted on several early views and maps, such as the monumental cycle of wall-paintings by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio recording the siege of 1565.

Centuries later, the same topographic advantages offered by the ridge were to determine the route of the railway inaugurated in 1883, even as the urban explosion of Hamrun was gathering momentum. Apart from road transport and the railway, however, this natural corridor was exploited for another purpose that was no less vital, which was the provision of water to the new city of Valletta.

The Wignacourt Aqueduct

The Wignacourt Aqueduct is one of the most remarkable infrastructural projects witnessed in early modern Malta, and one which was to have a decisive impact on the urban development of Hamrun. The engineering of the aqueduct was closely dictated by topography. Completed in 1615 after overcoming several reversals, it tapped a number of springs in the Rabat-Dingli highlands to secure a supply of fresh water for Valletta (Pace 2016).

Although the natural corridor presented by the axis of Santa Venera, Hamrun and Blata l-Bajda was the most favourable route, it was not without its challenges. Water was carried by gravity above or near the ground surface as far as Torre San Giuseppe in Santa Venera, where the aqueduct arches end and the gradient dips more steeply towards Valletta. From this point, the water was carried to the city in sealed underground pipes, which had to rise and fall with the topography, effectively forming an inverted siphon.



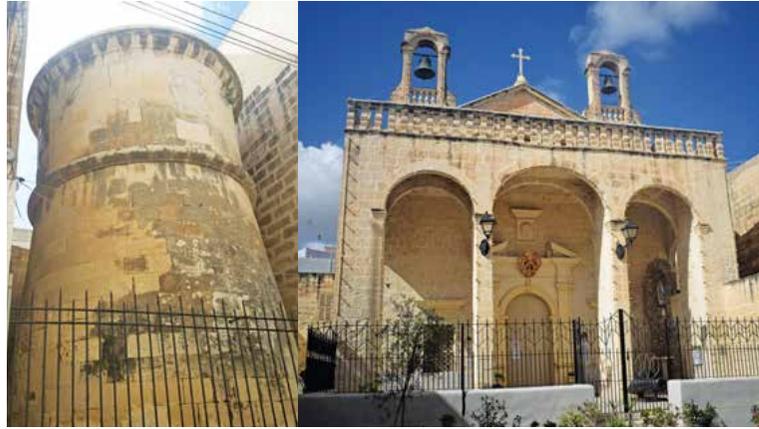
From Torre San Giuseppe, the route of the aqueduct descended and rose again on the high ground behind the present day parish church of Hamrun, before descending once more and rising to Sarria, in what is today Floriana. In order to prevent airlocks and regulate water flow, at the apex of each of these high points the water was allowed to vent or pour out of the first siphon at normal atmospheric pressure, before entering another inverted siphon formed by closed pipes, that carried the water downhill again under pressure, to rise again to another opening at the next high point in the system.

In order to have a manageable water flow, the outlet of each stretch of sealed piping needed to be at a height only slightly less than that where the water had entered it. For this reason, the Torre San Nicola was built on the hill of Our Lady of Atocha, and the Sarria Tower was built at Sarria. A sealed vertical pipe was built into each of these towers, with an opening

at the summit. A little understood fact is that the height of these towers, even their very existence and purpose, was closely dictated by the height of the Torre San Giuseppe, as is very clearly explained in a near-contemporary source attributed to 'Cavalier Poncet', who was one of the first persons responsible for the management of the aqueduct (Menchetti 2013).

The creation of the aqueduct transformed the landscape along the axis of what is today known as Saint Joseph High Road. The availability of an abundant and reliable supply of water encouraged the creation of a string of gardens and country villas during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The best known today is Casa Leoni, built by Grand Master Vilhena in the early eighteenth century.

A no less palatial but lesser known villa and garden was that built by Bali Carneiro in the late seventeenth century, and used by the

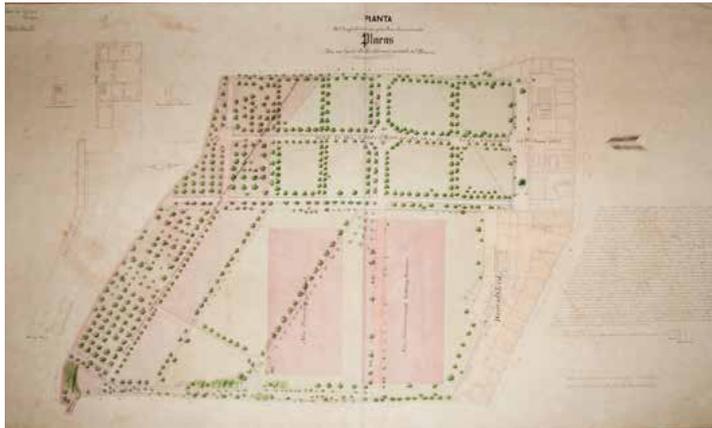


Above: Torre San Nicola once dominated the surrounding landscape, but today it literally stands in the shadow of the surrounding late nineteenth-century housing.

Left: Nineteenth-century overlay showing the extensive gardens of Blacas Palace, and the scheme to parcel these into a public piazza, a housing block, a school, and the railway station and workshops (Reproduced from NAM, Plans Section, Descriptive Plans of Crown Property in Malta, 1862, Vol.1, Tent. No.28, by kind permission of National Archives of Malta).

Lower left: Alberto Pullicino: 'Valletta from the countryside in front of Floriana'. Blacas Palace is visible in the centre. 18th c., oil on canvas (Reproduced by kind permission of the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Restoration sponsored by ART 5 0 Trust).

Below: The main block of Blacas Palace today.



Top left: A handsome portico defines the façade of the seventeenth-century church of Our Lady of Atocha. Top right: The baroque church of Porto Salvo today. The contemporary villa to its right has been integrated into the more modest and dense fabric of the nineteenth-century town.

Bali de Blacas in the eighteenth century. It was still referred to as the Blacas Palace in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Blacas Palace is conspicuous in several paintings and drawings dating from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Recent research (Deguara 2019) has shown how with the urbanisation of Hamrun in the 1880s, its extensive gardens were carved up to accommodate Piazza Fra Diegu, a block of housing, a school, a train station and workshops, and the convent of the Little Sisters of the Poor, which still includes the main block of the seventeenth-century palace.

There were also several other villas and gardens on a more modest scale, which have been largely lost as a result of urbanisation since the late nineteenth century. Some examples still appear on the early twentieth-century survey sheets, such as the villa and formal garden that stood in front of the Church of Our Lady of Atocha (aka Atocia or Attocia). The garden was replaced by housing before the Second World War, but part of the main villa block is intact.

The Church of Our Lady of Atocha, popularly known today as Il-Madonna tas-Samra, was built on a hilltop in the early seventeenth century, on the site of an earlier church dedicated to Saint Nicholas, which gave its name to the Torre San Nicola. The church lies at the heart of the earliest known urban core in the locality, which flourished with the arrival of the abundant supply of fresh water secured by the aqueduct. During the Maltese uprising against the French (1798-1800), one

of the insurgents' improvised gun batteries was placed on this hilltop.

The distribution of water from the aqueduct to feed private properties was carefully managed and regulated, and was also a source of income. A key source on the operation of the aqueduct is a manuscript held at the National Library, containing the memoirs of the knight Fra Anna Giuseppe de Beaumont Brison, *Soprintendente delle Fontane*, dated 30 November 1747. He records that some daily allowances of water for private individuals were granted against payment.

The area around the Torre San Nicola is well documented in the archival sources as a node for water distribution to gardens in the vicinity. As the tower was at a high point in the hydraulic system described above, it was a convenient point for the controlled distribution of water to irrigate gardens on the surrounding lower ground. The Beaumont Brison manuscript records the following:

Dalla Torretta di S. Giuseppe sino alla Torre posta nella co[l]lina di S. Nicola oggi della Beata Vergine d'Attocia nella quale Torre rotonda in mezzo vi e un sfiatore, e nel piano di detta Torre rotonda vi sono una chiave di Bronzo che serve per dare l'acqua nei bisogni alli ter[r]reni e giardini del vicinato (fol.14).

Water storage was an essential element of water management. Rock-cut underground cisterns, or *gebbie*, were required for this purpose, and were an integral component of this hydrological system. These allowed water to be stored when supply was abundant, to be used in times of scarcity.

Scarcity and abundance followed different temporalities. Demand was less during the night than during the day. Supply was scarcer in summer and more abundant in winter. Some years were dryer than others. For all these reasons, the flow of water through the aqueduct was carefully nursed and distributed. As Beaumont Brison explains:

Poi quando l'acqua è abbondante e che le piogge [h]anno abbondato nelli tempi favorevoli si può dare senza pregiudicio della città, una e due piazze daqua al giorno... alli particolari che la chiedono... (fol. 48).

Formal town planning in the 1880s

The suburb of Hamrun took the form of a modern town in the 1880s, as a combination of socio-economic forces resulted in the creation of several modern suburbs around the harbour region. Key among these was the intensification of activity in the Royal Navy dockyards which drew in workers from rural areas, resulting in demographic growth in the harbour region (Deguara 2019). An added attraction of the new town was that it was well connected to the capital by the new railway.

The landscape of the locality went through its fastest transformation yet in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Many of the gardens and villas that had characterised the locality until the early nineteenth century now made way for denser housing development. Hamrun continued to grow between 1915 and 1958, but expansion has been much slower since.

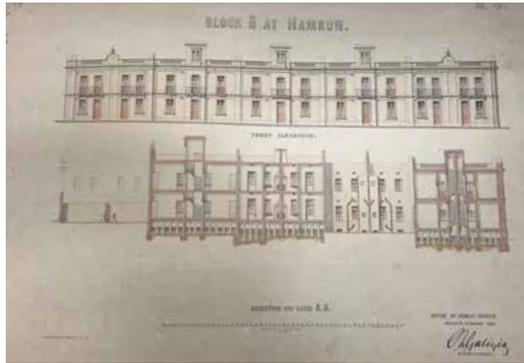
Many features of the pre-1880s historic landscape still survive, such as the route of Saint Joseph High Road and Qormi Road, and a number of villas and gardens which were incorporated into the fabric of the new townscape, in whole or in part. The most outstanding example, the Blacas Palace, was referred to above. Some of the buildings that replaced its grounds have themselves become significant elements of the urban heritage of Hamrun. Most notably, the railway station and workshops, and a housing block with a very distinctive typology on Piazza Fra Diegu, designed by the indefatigable Superintendent of Public Works Emanuele Luigi Galizia, and still practically intact.

Another villa stood on the east side of the baroque Church of Porto Salvo on Saint Joseph High Road. Many elements of this palace were lost when it was integrated into the nineteenth-century urban fabric, but several features remain clearly legible today, such as the distinctive cornice that surmounted the



Left top: One of the lesser known works of Emanuele Luigi Galizia, this modest but elegant housing block on Fra Diegu Square is still preserved almost entirely intact.

Left middle: Emanuele Luigi Galizia's original drawings of the housing block in Piazza Fra Diegu, dated 1883. (Reproduced from Roll 123, Public Works Records & Archives Office, by kind permission of the Director General, Works & Infrastructure Department).



building, the monumental corbelled balcony supports, and two decorative pilasters, making this a remarkable document of the urban transformation of Hamrun.

Many of the streetscapes that were created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are still largely intact today, as confirmed by a study of the drawings that exhaustively record the planning and of every street over the period from 1887 to 1911 (Deguara 2019). In most cases, the street layout as eventually realised closely follows the schemes in these early plans.

Safeguarding Hamrun's Heritage

Traces of the Wignacourt Aqueduct also survive. The two components of this system in the Hamrun locality that have been scheduled to date are the Torre di San Nicola (given Grade 2 protection status in 1994) and an obelisk commemorating works on the aqueduct by Grand Master de Rohan (given Grade 1 protection status in 2012). The obelisk is presently englobed within the back gardens of the early twentieth-century housing. The

Below: Some of the iconic vistas of Hamrun still present the streetscapes that were created in the 1880s, virtually intact.



water storage systems that were integral to this network remain largely unrecorded. However the archival and material evidence give very good indications of the underground route traced by the aqueduct across Hamrun.

The underground components of the Wignacourt Aqueduct, and the associated water management and storage systems, have to date been much more vulnerable to damage and destruction, as they are largely out of sight and at risk of remaining unreported when disturbed by excavation works.

The ever-increasing pressures that are being witnessed across Malta's historic urban environments have made it more urgent than ever before to create failsafe planning constraints to safeguard what survives of these underground systems. The route of the Wignacourt Aqueduct, and its expansion during the nineteenth century is extremely well-documented, as revealed by recent research (eg. Pace 2016) and widely disseminated in the public domain by the excellent work being done by the Malta Water Interest Group (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/MaltaWaterAssociation/>).

An urgently needed measure is the precautionary scheduling of the entire route, or at least the establishment of an Area of Archaeological Importance that protects a corridor along the route of the aqueduct, on the same principle as the archaeological planning constraints that are in force in Rabat.

A no less urgent measure is the scheduling of several buildings of outstanding importance in Hamrun, which clearly merit Grade 1 protection. According to the data presently visible on the Planning Authority Geoserver, none of the following appear to have been scheduled to date: the seventeenth-

century church of Our Lady of Atocha (Tas-Samra); the villa that survives at least in part across the road from the same church; the eighteenth-century church of Porto Salvo; the adjacent villa that has been integrated into the nineteenth-century fabric on Saint Joseph High Road; the seventeenth-century Blacas Palace; the railway station and workshops; and the housing block designed by Galizia on Fra Diegu Square.

The revision of the protection of Torre San Nicola from Grade 2 to Grade 1 should also be seriously considered. The scheduling of these outstanding buildings would also benefit the surrounding streetscape through the recently announced measures to better protect the setting of scheduled buildings (PA Circular 3/20).

Another serious weakness in the protective measures presently afforded by the planning framework is that the Urban Conservation Area in this locality is for the most part limited to the corridor formed by Saint Joseph High Road. Many of the back streets just outside this corridor boast a largely intact streetscape which was formed over a century ago.

Unless protected in time, these streetscapes will be left vulnerable to the ravages that have already destroyed the legibility of comparable streetscapes in Sliema and Gzira, which were not protected in time.

Many residents and community leaders in Hamrun are immensely knowledgeable and fiercely protective of the rich kaleidoscope of urban heritage of which they are the proud stewards. It is time that this heritage also becomes more widely recognised and appreciated beyond the locality, and that it finally begins to receive the serious and effective protection that it deserves. ■

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References: Cheryl Deguara, *Urban Streetscapes in Transition: The Case of Hamrun* (unpublished Master's dissertation, University of Malta, 2019); Francesco Menchetti, *Architects and Knights: Italian Influence in Malta during the Late Renaissance* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2013); Mario Pace, *Padre Tomasucci's Subterranean Aqueduct* (unpublished Master's dissertation, University of Malta, 2016). *Archival sources:* National Library of Malta (NLM), AOM 1034, *Disegni e Pianta dei Condotti della fontana per la Valletta, con Diverse Annotazioni, Opera del Cav. Poncet*; NLM, Libr.768, *Memorie del Soprintendente delle Fontane Beaumont Brison*, 1747.

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