

Institute of Tourism Studies

A Taste of Malta:

Exploring St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings.

A tour through their hidden little gems

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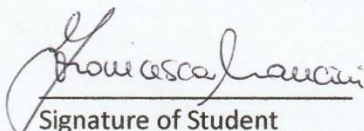
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A TOUR THROUGH THEIR HIDDEN LITTLE GEMS.

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Abstract

The aim of the research is to demonstrate the archaeological, cultural and naturalistic importance of St. Paul's Bay and its environs.

The area, although rich in history and with abundant archaeological and naturalistic sites, still seems not to be given enough attention from a tour guiding point of view at the present day. It is instead mostly addressed to locals and to tourists visiting Malta only as a summer resort with recreational and leisure activities.

This research has been focused on the cultural and naturalistic significance of St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings (Naxxar) through the analysis of the sample of sites listed below, which are pregnant with archaeological, historical and naturalistic value and located within the area of interest:

- Tal-Qadi temple;
- San Pawl tat-Targa's cart ruts;
- Salina catacombs;
- Salina salt pans;
- St. Paul's Bonfire's church;
- Wignacourt tower;
- Simar Nature Reserve.

The analysis has been conducted through bibliographic searches.

The result of this analysis has then been condensed in the proposal of a guided tour in the area which is able to link the said sites to each other generating an organic and consistent narrative of the area of interest. Therefore, both the analysis and the tour are a contribute to the enhancing of the image of St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings as a cultural destination oriented to the niche tourism sector.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this long essay is to demonstrate the rich archaeological, cultural and naturalistic heritage that St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings boast.

As a local council, St. Paul's Bay is located in the north east of Malta. It borders to the north with Mellieha, to the west with Mgarr, to the south with Mosta and to the east with Naxxar. St. Paul's Bay's territory consists of Burmarrad, Qawra, Bugibba, Wardija, Xemxija, San Martin, and part of Bidnija and Mistra.

The total land area of the locality is approximately 15.7 km² (Borg, n.d.:14) with a population of over 23,000 that almost triplicates during the summer months, when locals and tourists lodge in the numerous hotels found in the area (localgovernment.gov.mt, n.d.).

Today, although rich in history and with abundant archaeological and naturalistic sites, the area of St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings seem to be quite neglected from an academic point of view. Even though several studies on some of the sites present in its territories and its surroundings have been carried out (see amongst all: Evans, 1971; Trump, 1972; Buhagiar, 1984, 1986; Ventura and Tanti, 1994; Mercieca, 2003; Spiteri, 2013), the area in discussion may not be considered to be exhaustively investigated.

This incomplete academic overall knowledge on these territories, together with the absence of a planned project of further investigations and excavations, give us an incomplete picture of the whole area in discussion, with the result of an incoherent and not well promoted image of the area from a tour guiding point of view.

Nowadays St. Paul's Bay is mostly addressed to Maltese residents and to tourists visiting Malta as a summer resort, with a number of accommodations and facilities which have made the area an ideal starting point for visiting the different parts of the islands and for sea sports and activities, as well as a popular and highly frequented spot for relaxation and entertainment. Nevertheless, the area could have much more to offer to both tourists and locals.

This research will be showing the cultural and naturalistic importance of St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings through the analysis of a sample of sites, which are pregnant with archaeological, historical and naturalistic value and located within the area of interest.

The result of this analysis will be then condensed in the proposal of a guided tour in the area which will be able to link the said sites to each other generating an organic and consistent narrative

of the area of interest, therefore contributing to the enhancing of the image of St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings as a cultural destination.

The tour proposed will be stated in the appendix (p. 43).

The sites, which will be analysed in this essay, are the ones chosen for the final proposed guided tour and they are listed below according to the sequence planned for the said tour:

- Simar Nature Reserve, San Pawl il-Baħar
- Wignacourt tower, San Pawl il-Baħar
- Church of St. Paul's Bonfire, San Pawl il-Baħar
- Cart ruts at Naxxar Gap at San Pawl tat-Tarġa, Naxxar
- Tal-Qadi Temple, San Pawl il- Baħar
- Salina Catacombs, Naxxar
- Salina Nature Reserve, Naxxar.

All photos belong to the author except where otherwise stated.

2. Literature Review

2.1 - Tal-Qadi Temple

The prehistoric site was excavated in 1927 under the supervision first of Upton Way and later of Zammit. The results of these excavations were recorded by the latter and a plan of the temple was suggested in 1952 by Evans (Micallef, 2001:37).

The typical four-apsed temple can be dated to the Tarxien Phase and it was still in use during the early Bronze Age period (Tarxien Cemetery phase) (Micallef, 2001:38, 40).

Due to the little archaeological remains, it has always been problematic to determine the orientation. Whilst Zammit and Evans suggested the temple was probably oriented towards the west (Micallef, 2001:37-38), other scholars such as Trump stated it could have been facing east-north-east (Trump, 1972:160) instead.

This atypical orientation according to Micallef might be related to the alignment of the main axis with the setting of the moon (Micallef, 2001). Micallef, in his scientific and astronomical investigation published in 2001 on the deciphering of the engravings of the enigmatic Tal-Qadi Stone found on site (Micallef, 2001:43-44), concluded that the item could have been a moon calendar used by the Neolithic temple builders to read the intervals of days between the different moon phases.

The Tal-Qadi Stone acquired more popularity in 2007 thanks to a Maltese television documentary entirely dedicated to it (The Tal-Qadi Stone, 2007) and still fascinates scholars and enthusiasts of all kind to this very day. Recently, Wirth proposed the theory where the Tal-Qadi Stone is a star map (Wirth, 2016), where the crescent represents a proto-Phoenician boat and the asterisks show constellations used by the Neolithic people to navigate the sea.

2.2 - Cart ruts at Naxxar Gap at San Pawl tat-Targa

The cart ruts, according to Trump, have been one of the many fascinating problems posed to the prehistory of Malta at least since the 17th century (Trump, 2008:3). The scholar, together with Zammit (Zammit, 1928) and Gracie (Gracie, 1954) amongst others, contributed to the field work which resulted in measurements and a mapping of these cart tracks both in Malta and in Gozo. Evans' review in 1971 (Evans, 1971) of the subject was generated on the base of the previous data collected.

Nevertheless, the studies carried out have not yet generated a general common agreement of the basic questions around the cart ruts, namely their dating, purpose and formation. An attempt in that direction was made in the 1990s when Ventura and Tanti investigated San Pawl tat-Targa's site (Ventura and Tanti, 1994). The same site was used for archaeological experiments in 1955 under the supervision of Evans for a BBC television programme. Such investigations provided some useful information, such as the intensive use of such paths for prolonged times and many journeys, perhaps making use of slide cars with runners in order to create such deep grooves into the hard coralline rock surface.

At tat-Targa, the tracks connected the settlement of Mosta and Naxxar with the lower fields in *Wied il-Għasel*, and most likely, they would have formed a 3.5 km rut system leading to the port at Salina Bay. In the last case, the wide road network would imply that the cart ruts could have been used for different purposes and would represent perhaps one of the oldest extant road systems in the Mediterranean (Ventura and Tanti, 1994:236).

Despite these important partial results, the cart ruts' enigma seems far from being deciphered and still open to discussion.

2.3 - Salina Catacombs

The Salina hypogea were first mentioned in 1772 by Ciantar (Ciantar, 1772:196-197) who referred to the 1721 discovery of several tombs with skeletons and a gold Byzantine coin in the area.

The site, which had been partially damaged by a post-Romans quarrying, was then forgotten and left in decay until it was rediscovered and excavated by C.G. Zammit and Upton Way in 1937 (Buhagiar, 1984:1). Unfortunately, there was no proper record of the finds at the time (Bonanno, 2005:333). Furthermore, since then much part the hypogea has never been protected by means of precincts or gates, resulting in vandalism and mutilation of the site throughout the decades. Consequently, the Salina catacombs lost a lot of precious archaeological information.

An analysis of the site was conducted by Musgrave in 1979 (Musgrave, 1979) and then by Buhagiar in the 1980s (Buhagiar, 1984, 1986). The conclusions attest that the hypogea, perhaps solely Christian (Buhagiar, 1984:12), may be dated to the late Roman period and in use also during the Byzantine time. Moreover, due to the fine carved decorations, one of the five small hypogea in Salina can be considered 'one of the most impressive Paleochristian monuments in Malta' (Buhagiar, 1984:8).

Despite the fact that the academics denounced the urgent need of a full scale archaeological excavation and of a better protection of the site, since it is only partially explored, not much progress since then has been done regarding the Salina Hypogea.

2.4 - Salina Nature Reserve

Salina Nature Reserve forms part of the Natura 2000 network's site of Is-Salini Special Area of Conservation (SAC), which incorporates also part of the Kennedy Grove (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014a:10, 36).

The Salini National Park, opposite Salina Nature Reserve, was analysed in 2010 in a survey aimed to seek a potential monetary value of recreational parks in the Maltese Islands (Pace Parascandalo, 2010).

The Salina Nature Reserve was investigated instead during the 2007-2013 Rehabilitation project co-financed by EU (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b). Moreover, the technical data and main ecological characteristics of the site can also be found in the ERA online archives (Era.org.mt., 2018).

The academic studies on the cultural heritage in the site, such as the Salina salt pans, are quite incomplete, above all due to the lack of historical sources on the subject, as pointed out by Mercieca in his 2003 research about the history of salt production in Malta (Mercieca, 2003). Mercieca stated that although the *Saline nuove*, or the Salina salt pans, have their first reference in Matteo Perez D'Aleccio's painting in Grand Master's Palace in Valletta executed between 1570-80 (Mercieca, 2003:127), the first literary evidence of them is a notarial document of 1611 (Mercieca, 2003:128). The Burmarrad or *Ghallis* salt pans, built by and property of the Order, were technologically advanced but expensive to maintain (Mercieca, 2003:129).

The 1742 expansion and improvement project provides the first analysis of the complex, which has remained almost unchanged since that date (Mercieca, 2003:131-132). The said project enhanced both the quantity and the quality of the salt produced, so that in the mid-18th century the Maltese white shining salt crystals were successfully exported all over Europe. (Mercieca, 2003:131-132, 134).

2.5 - Church of St. Paul's Bonfire

The former church of St. Paul's Bonfire was first mentioned in 1436 during the visit of Bishop Senatore de Mello (Teuma, 2003:175). This shrine stood close to the present church, presumably where the Wignacourt tower was then erected (Farrugia Randon, Azzopardi & Calleja, 2000:92).

According to tradition, the devotional place was built where St. Paul and his companions were warmed up by the islanders with a bonfire after they came ashore due to the shipwreck that occurred at *Tal-Għażzenin* off St Paul's Bay (Fiott, 1997:153). Both Quintinus in his 1536 *Insulae Melitae Descriptio* and Monsignor Pietro Duzina in his 1575 pastoral visit referred to the church as the sanctuary erected where St. Paul was shipwrecked (Teuma, 2003:175).

Ferres stated that until 1610, the coat of arms of the noble families of Inganez and Bordino, who financed the rebuilding of the church previously, were still visible in the sanctuary dedicated to St. Paul's shipwreck (Ferres, 1866:345).

The church was mentioned again during the reign of Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt (Teuma, 2003:175). The latter dismantled the old church and rebuilt it anew nearby, incorporating it also to the Collegiate of St Paul's Grotto in Rabat, as part of the programme of increasing the Pauline heritage and cult for the Order gaining popularity amongst the Maltese (Farrugia Randon, Azzopardi & Calleja, 2000:92).

Consecrated in 1617, with valuable paintings probably by Cassarino (Randon, Azzopardi & Calleja, 2000:93, 95), the church was destroyed by aerial bombings in March 1942 and rebuilt on the Wignacourt design in 1956 (Farrugia Randon, Azzopardi & Calleja, 2000:95).

2.6 - Wignacourt Tower

The Wignacourt tower was first mentioned in 1609 (Spiteri, 2013:13) when Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt proposed the erection of a chain of coastal towers in Malta in order to secure the islands from the enemies landing to the council of the Order of St. John. Up to that date, the northern and the southern regions of Malta offered an open flank to the defence of the better fortified and more populated main areas and cities such as Mdina, Valletta and the Grand Harbour area (Teuma, 2003:191-192).

Wignacourt tower was the first military outpost to be erected in Malta in 1610 (Farrugia Randon, n.d.:4), and, when the Garzes tower in Gozo was dismantled during the British period, it eventually became the oldest surviving coastal tower in the Maltese islands (Teuma, 2003:191).

The first description of the tower is given by de Wignacourt himself in a letter of 1609 (Farrugia Randon, n.d.:3). Spiteri refuses the former attribution of the design to Vittorio Cassar (Spiteri, 2017:107).

The structure presents the typical early 17th- century squarish layout with scarped thick walls and corner turrets, two barrel-vaulted chambers built *a prova di bomba* for ammunition and the garrison, and an artillery platform on the roof, then enhanced by a battery seaward in 1715 (Spiteri, 2017:107).

Restoration works were carried out between 1973-76 and 2014-2015 (George, 2011) and the site has been entrusted to Din l-Art Ħelwa since 1970 (George, 2011).

2.7 - Simar Nature Reserve

Simar Nature Reserve was deeply investigated in occasion of the Malta's Natura 2000 management plan between 2012 and 2014 (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b).

The site, which was created in 1992 and entrusted to BirdLife, is the result of human efforts to restore the disturbed wetland which had been heavily threatened by negligence and pollution in the last few decades (Birdlifemalta.org., n.d.a).

The aforementioned research analyses the high ecological and cultural value of Is-Simar and the importance of its safeguarding for the natural environment and the future generations. Is-Simar is part of the EU Natura 2000 network, a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), a Special Protection Area (SPA) and a Bird Sanctuary (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:17). Its different habitats, such as the coastal lagoon, the garrigue, the steppe and *Mizieb* woodland, are crucial for the numerous species of terrestrial and aquatic flora and wildlife, which are protected by this ecological, sustainable and educational centre for bird watching and nature appreciation (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:31).

3. Methodology

The methodology that has been carried out for this project is the bibliographic research.

Due to the nature of the research, the aim of which was to demonstrate the archaeological, cultural and naturalistic importance of St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings, it was requested to gather the information related to the subject through the study and consultation of all the published materials available on such a subject.

Seven sites within the area of interest have been analysed in this project in order to prove the research question's validity. The sources used have been published books, journals' and newspapers' articles, as well as online information sources such as websites, blogs and report and management plan databases.

Although each site had been the focus of investigations by academics or experts in the field, the available bibliographic materials about the said sites have revealed not to be always complete, such as the case of the Salina salt pans, the Salina catacombs and Tal-Qadi temple.

In general, it has been found out that there is a lack of bibliographic systematisation of the region's archaeological and naturalistic features through this research. This issue has been proved to be the result of an underestimation of the region's archaeological and cultural heritage value, which over the decades has led to a lack of further investigations and protection of the said sites, even though there seems to be some academics' interest in this direction, as in the case of Mercieca (2003).

Nonetheless, recently some efforts have been conducted to enhance the still underestimated heritage of the region. In 2003 St. Paul's Bay's local council published the first guidebook (Teuma, 2003) entirely dedicated to the region, although the publication not always provides reliable information and sometimes leaves historical gaps, created by the lack of documentary sources, to be filled by the author's imagination. In addition, an interesting vlog which promotes St. Paul's Bay and the north of Malta (Flora, n.d.), as well as detailed routes of trekking tours to be held within the northern regions (Borg, n.d.a, n.d.b), is available online.

In conclusion, the bibliographic material analysed has been reputed enough to gain the necessary information from a tour guiding point of view. The lack of literary evidence on the subjects, where possible, has been in fact integrated by the academics with the analysis of the archaeological evidence that had been previously studied.

4. St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings – the analysis of its archaeological, cultural and naturalistic importance

4.1 - St. Paul's Bay's region

San Pawl il-Baħar, the Maltese name for St. Paul's Bay, has effectively been described as a Biblical land enjoyed by faithful walking the footsteps of St. Paul and sun-worshipping tourists:

San Pawl il-Baħar remains a tale of two villages, one of the faith, the other of the sun.
Its emblem depicts the miracle of snake, as well as the blue sea. Its motto is *In Christo Renati Sumus*. In Christ we are born again.
(Fiott, 1997:168)

According to tradition, St. Paul was shipwrecked in 60 AD on the region's shores. The saint's stay in the Island, described in the Act of the Apostles by Luke the evangelist, left considerable marks in the area, such as in the toponymies as well as in places of worship.

Nevertheless, the region has much more to offer to visitors. The region, which bears a number of traces of Neolithic structures and bronze age settlements, seems likely to have been inhabited since prehistoric times (Teuma, 2003:11, 14). One of its bays, Salina Bay, had also a good relevance during the Roman period, being a functional port extending much further inwards Burmarrad Valley (Bonanno, 2005:240; Marriner et al., 2012). In the area early Christian hypogea can also be found together with and the remains of an important Roman *villa*, *San Pawl Milqi* (Bonanno, 2005:298-299, 332-333), both an indication of some Roman settlement and considerable agricultural activities in the area.

Subsequently, due to their distance from the main cities of Mdina and thereafter Valletta, the St. Paul's Bay lands often suffered pirate and Ottoman attacks (Dalli, 2006:198-199, 212, 235-241; Freller, 2010:88-89, 98-99), therefore the necessity of introducing guard duties was of primary importance which was never enough. During the Middle Ages and throughout the following centuries, despite the increasing efforts of providing some defence, such as a guard militia first and watchtowers and batteries later on, the region was mainly left deserted, with a sparse and small population consisting of farmers and fishermen scattered in the area (Zammit, 2007:105-106).

It was not until the beginning of the 20th Century that a village started to be formed, developing from a conglomeration of summer cottages which started to be built in the second half of the 19th

century. It was then in the 1960s that St. Paul's Bay saw the beginning of its development as a tourist centre, which continues till the present day (Zammit, 2007:105-106).

The region was sparsely inhabited till the last century so today, despite the recent destruction and over development suffered within the region, the denser sprinkling of ancient sites still survive and are waiting patiently to be better promoted by the tourism stakeholders for the enjoyment and acknowledgment of the future generations.

This essay aims to be therefore a humble contribution to the promotion of the cultural and naturalistic heritage of this region.

The sites analysed below are presented in this essay in a chronological sequence, starting from the site dating back to prehistory up to the ones dating to modern times.

A background information related to the topography and geography of the territories interested by the listed sites contributes to design an overall coherent picture of the area discussed in this essay.

The sites subject of the analysis are found in three different areas that constitute the region of St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings: Salina Bay and its inner valley system up to the Naxxar Gap; St. Paul's Bay promenade at Tal-Għażzenin; the Pwales Valley.

4.2 - Salina Bay and its inner valley system up to the Naxxar Gap

In the eastern part of St. Paul's Bay there lies the Wied il-Qlejgha Valley system and the Burmarrad Plain which fall partly under the territory of St. Paul's Bay and partly in that of Naxxar. They are comprised within the Great Fault to the south, Salina Bay to the north, Wardija Ridge to the west and the Magħtab escarpments to the east. The main ones consist of, in a succession from south northwards to the coast, Wied il-Għasel, Wied il-Rihana and the Burmarrad plain (fig. 1). Towards the coast there is Salina Bay.

The area is of geological and naturalistic importance, offering a visual representation of the tectonic formation of the Great Fault and of the system of high ridges sloping into valleys and ending into low sandy shores that characterises the northern regions of Malta. Salina Bay presents a variety of habitats, such as the protected saline marshlands, a garrigue and an afforested park. Moreover, the area, rich in watercourses thanks to the water run-off channelled from the escarpments to the lower

valleys, has always provided a fertile agricultural land. This fertile area seems likely to have been inhabited since prehistory and retains high archaeological value.



Fig. 1 - Salina Bay and its inner valley system

Source: <https://www.google.com/maps/@35.9427421,14.4029708,4192m/data=!3m1!1e3>

4.2.1 - Tal-Qadi Temple

The temple is enclosed in an area planted as a garden overlooking the plain of Burmarrad (fig. 2). The trees, shrubs and vegetation have taken over the ruins and partially occlude them from visitors. Nonetheless, the peculiar scenery, which surrounds the scattered remains of the temple, contributes to the sense of charm and mystery of this site, a site which *per se* already bears two archaeological enigmas.

As analysed in the previous section, the first oddity consists in the orientation of the temple. The temple might be facing uphill to the east-north-east (Trump, 2002:160). The theory that this kind of orientation could be representing a celestial alignment of the main axis of the temple, most likely with the setting moon, is indeed fascinating and scientifically supported (Micallef, 2001:43-44).

The second enigma related to the site is represented by the exceptional Tal-Qadi Stone, a globigerina limestone slab decorated with mysterious engravings. The artefact is a unique find for the prehistoric times and for Malta too. Many academics and enthusiasts have tried to decipher its code throughout the decades. Whether the artefact could be a moon calendar or a star map, if not a mere decorative object with no astronomical connections, its evocative power makes the Tal-Qadi temple a site of archaeological importance and peculiarity amongst the Maltese temples.

Nevertheless, today the site is neither protected with a fence system nor well promoted, being even erroneously attributed to the territory of Naxxar instead of that of St. Paul's Bay (Culture.gov.mt, 2012) by a local guidebook (Fiott, 1997:110) and a popular web source (En.wikipedia.org, n.d.).



Fig. 2 – Tal-Qadi Temple

4.2.2 - Cart ruts at Naxxar Gap at San Pawl tat-Tarġa

‘It is generally agreed that the ancient cart tracks found in many localities of the Maltese Islands constitute one of the most intriguing features of the local archaeological landscape’ (Ventura and Tanti, 1994:219).

The numerous cart ruts found at Naxxar Gap were considered by Trump to be the most interesting in Malta (Trump, 2008:36): the reasons being their large number, their disposition and the characteristic features that they hold. They are grouped in three branches and located on a sloping scarp which allows the road connection between the cities of Mosta and Naxxar and the lower valleys towards Salina bay, on the other side of the Great Fault. The two main branches of ruts, to the west of the military pillbox, fork in two ways: one towards the coast of Baħar iċ-Ċagħaq to the east, creating a fascinating sharp bend and in the other one proceeds to the west, descending the ridge and disappearing in the vicinity of St. Catherine’s church (fig. 3).

The site also shows other puzzling phenomena connected with the tracks, such as a depth of 60 cm in a rut, as well as the presence of a water cistern somehow communicating with the grooves, but probably of modern times.

Moreover, San Pawl tat-Tarġa’s cart ruts could also have been connected with the stretches of ruts still surviving near Tal-Qadi temple and Salina catacombs, forming once a unique track system connecting the Great Ridge with the sea at Salina Bay (Trump, 2008:40).

In addition to the archeological features, the site offers the visitor the chance to enjoy an immersion into natural habitats such as the steppe and the garrigue, with an outstanding view over the Islands, the sea and the British fortification of the Victoria lines along the Great Ridge.



Fig. 3 – Cart Ruts at Naxxar Gap.

Source: <https://www.google.com/maps/@35.9427421,14.4029708,4192m/data=!3m1!1e3>

4.2.3 - Salina Catacombs

The clusters of catacombs and rock-cut tombs that form the Salina hypogea are considered to be the most significant antiquities in Salina Bay (Buhagiar, 1984:1) (fig.4). They represent the archaeological evidence that Roman communities had settled in this area (Bonanno, 2005:332). In particular, the presence of richly decorated carvings in one of the five small hypogea suggests a certain level of local wealth (Buhagiar, 1984:1).

In addition to that, a relevant number of Roman lead stock anchors were recovered in Salina Bay, close to Qawra Point (Azzopardi and Gambin, 2012:42; Bonanno, 2005:332). This led the scholars to believe that this bay was a Roman port of some importance (Trump, 1972:132; Bonanno, 2005:332), with the harbour extending to today's village of Burmarrad. According to tradition, the Roman salt pans were located in the marshlands which existed then.

Traces of presumably more ancient cart ruts on site contribute to enhance its archaeological interest. Noteworthy is also the fact that, although small in size, these Paleo-Christian catacombs retain all the most important features of the Maltese catacombs, and can provide a valid alternative to the popular hypogea of Rabat's area.



Fig. 4 – Salina Catacombs

4.2.4 - Salina Nature Reserve

Salina Nature Reserve is located in the inner part of Salina Bay and consists of a protected area of saline marshland (fig. 5), flanked by garrigue and incorporating the ancient complex of salt pans built on a reclaimed island of clay (Birdlifemalta.org, n.d.b).

The area has been entrusted to BirdLife since 2018 after the rehabilitation project (Mtip.gov.mt., n.d.) co-financed with EU funds under the Agricultural Fund for Rural Development 2007-2013 (Birdlifemalta.org, n.d.b).

Today it offers free access to the public to the salt pans and aims to educate the visitors to the salt production, to the environment and to the natural reserve itself, by means of ecological activities, conferences and tours held in the visitor centre by BirdLife personnel.

The site is of great historical and ecological importance, as it protects both the 16th- century salt pans complex and one of the few surviving coastal marshes in the Islands, that have rare endemic flora and fauna species such as the *Maltese Killifish* (Englezou, 2017; Era.org.mt., 2004). Moreover, the protected reserve functions as a safe haven for migrating birds of sea and shore travelling between Europe and Africa besides also being an ideal place for birdwatching (Birdinginmalta.com, n.d.).

In addition to that, one can find the Salini National Park, which is both a recreational park and also an afforestation site on the other side of the bay. Within the Park one can walk along the garrigue habitat and practise birdwatching overlooking the Salina Nature Reserve saline marshland.

Additional historical features in the area are the 18th-century coastal defence, namely the Salina Redoubt and the *fougasse* or rock-hewn mortar (Spiteri, 2017:137).



Fig. 5 – Salina Nature Reserve

4.3 - St. Paul's Bay promenade at Tal-Ghażzenin

The territory is found at the foot of the Wardija escarpment, situated seawards, between the Wied il-Qlejgha Valley system to the east and the Pwales Valley to the west (fig. 6).

The area is known as ***Tal-Ghażzenin***, which seems to be a corruption of the Greek *Thalassanejn*, meaning 'two seas' and then presumably related to the biblical episode of St. Paul's shipwreck (Vehnert et al., 1992:86-88; Theshipwreckmalta.com, n.d.).

On the opposite side of the sea one can find St. Paul's Island, that is of ecological and religious importance, being a site of Pauline pilgrimage traditionally believed to be the location of the biblical shipwreck with some endemic wildlife species (Farrugia Randon, S. and Farrugia Randon, R., 1995:23-24).

4.3.1 - Church of St. Paul's Bonfire

The Church of St. Paul's Bonfire, or *San Pawl tal-Ħġeġġeġa*, is a sanctuary dedicated to St. Paul's shipwreck (fig. 7). Prevailing tradition holds that the site of the former church was the place where all the stranded survivors of the wreck were welcomed by the islanders with a bonfire (Teuma, 2003:112, 175) and where St. Paul is believed to have performed his first miracle of the viper, as recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, 28: 2-6 (Uscbb.org, n.d.; Theshipwreckmalta.com, n.d.)

In the early 17th century Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt planned to revitalize the territory of St. Paul's Bay by reinforcing the Pauline cult and preparing a defence system (Farrugia Randon, Azzopardi, & Calleja, 2000:92). The new church of St. Paul's Bonfire was meant to be the first of a series of devotional places for the locals and pilgrims on the footsteps of St. Paul in Malta leading to St. Paul's Grotto in Rabat and guarded by the newly built Wignacourt watchtower.

Remnants of the fishermen's village that formed around this Pauline area can still be seen in the picturesque *il-Menqa*, a charming boat shelter with traditional *luzzi*, near the shrine.

Although the sanctuary was destroyed by a direct hit during WWII bombings, it was rebuilt anew in the former elegant design in 1956 (Farrugia Randon, Azzopardi, & Calleja, 2000:95).

Today, the site retains all its religious and cultural importance as a primary Pauline shrine, standing by the sea in front of St. Paul's Island, traditionally believed to be the place of the biblical shipwreck that brought both the saint and Christianity to Malta.



Fig. 7 – St. Paul's Bonfire Church

4.3.2 - Wignacourt Tower

The Wignacourt tower was named St. Paul's tower after St. Paul (Farrugia Randon, n.d.:1). In fact, Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt had it built in the location of the old Pauline sanctuary so as to control both friendly and enemy ships thus securing the devotional area from pirate and Ottoman incursions (Teuma, 2003:191-192).

The tower, erected in 1610 (Spiteri, 2017:107), is a gem of military engineering and an important cultural heritage for Malta (fig. 8). It is the oldest surviving watchtower in the Maltese Islands (Teuma, 2003:191), carefully restored and managed by the local non-profit organization Din l-Art Ħelwa (Farrugia Randon, n.d.:7-10), where visitors can find all the typical features of a 17th century coastal outpost (Spiteri, 2017:106-107). In addition, within its walls, there is a fine exhibition of fortification models of Malta by Dr Stephen C. Spiteri (Farrugia Randon, n.d.:9-10, 14-15), thus enhancing the educational and cultural value of the site.

Moreover, the tower's location, overlooks the sea, St. Paul's Island and the typical old fishermen's harbour known as *il-Menqa*, offering a magnificent opportunity to enjoy some Maltese naturalistic and cultural heritage that St. Paul's Bay boasts of.



Fig. 8 – Wignacourt Tower

4.4 - The Pwales Valley

This rift valley stretches from Golden Bay to Xemxija Bay. It lies between the two horsts of Wardija to the east and Bajda to the west (fig. 9), and presents similar geological formation and topographic characteristics of the aforementioned *Wied il-Qlejgha* Valley system (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:44).

The name seems to derive either from the Latin *palus*, for ‘marsh’, or from the Arabic *bulus*, for Paulo, referring to St. Paul (Farrugia Randon, Azzopardi, & Calleja, 2000:67).

The site retains cultivated fields and a high ecological value, boasting of a bird sanctuary and a variety of protected habitats, such as wetland, steppe, garrigue and important woodlands on the two bordering escarpments. Amongst the latter outstands *il-Ballut tal-Wardija*, which contains one of the few copses of Holm Oaks that dates back from prehistoric times and contains some of the oldest trees in Malta (Allied Newspapers Ltd, 2011).



Fig. 9 – Pwales Valley

Source: <https://www.google.com/maps/@35.9427421,14.4029708,4192m/data=!3m1!1e3>

4.4.1 - Simar Nature Reserve

Simar Nature Reserve is found in the Pwales Valley and on the Bajda Ridge escarpment, bordering Mellieħa's local council (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:4).

Created in 1992 and managed by BirdLife (Birdlifemalta.org., n.d.a), the site represents a pleasant ecological oasis in the increasingly chaotic and over-built country and offers a rare opportunity of immersion in the greenery, thus experiencing the great variety of flora and fauna hosted in the area (fig. 10). Besides the Phragmites reed beds (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:5), the Maltese Pyramidal Orchid and the Maltese Spider Orchid (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:4) are found in the area, together with the threatened Maltese Killifish (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:4), the Painted Frog (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:4) and a wide array of birds. Amongst all the rich avifauna, which frequents or resides in the area, birds of sea and of shore which breed and shelter in the area, such as herons and moorhens are found (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:5). The ornithological value of the bird sanctuary is therefore very high (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:5).

The wetland reserve forms part of the SAC/SPA area of Is-Simar (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:132) which not only retains a great variety of habitats but is also rich in fertile soil as well as in archaeological remains, so that it offers a variety of features for visitors. In fact, in the site of Is-Simar one can find saline marshlands, garrigue, steppe and woodland, as well as part of the agricultural land in the rift valley and part of the Xemxija Heritage trail with its prehistoric and classical remains on Bajda Ridge (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:110). Rural features as the corbelled stone hut known as *il-girna*, rubble walls and St. Anne's rural church enhance the locality (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:100), which is close to another SAC, Il-Ballut tal-Wardija (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:4).

The wetland reserve, which hosts an educational centre and three hides, can be considered to be the ideal site for the promotion of eco-tourism in Malta. The numerous scientific and recreational activities, such as photography, birdwatching and guided tours held by BirdLife arise ecological awareness and natural environment interest amongst the school children and the general public (Natura2000malta.org.mt., 2014b:117) and implement the sustenance and preservation of nature reserves of such a kind.



Fig. 10 – Simar Nature Reserve

5. Conclusions

The aim of the research to demonstrate the archaeological, cultural and naturalistic importance of St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings has been achieved through the analysis of the proposed sites.

The research methodology chosen has been the bibliographic research. Although some sites have not yet been completely excavated nor studied, as the case of the Salina hypogea, the Tal-Qadi temple and of the Salina saltpans, the bibliographic material analysed has been reputed enough to gain the necessary information from a tour guiding point of view. The lack of literary evidence on the subjects, where possible, has been in fact integrated by the academics with the analysis of the archaeological evidence that had been previously studied.

The archaeological evidence shows how this region in the north of the Island was inhabited since prehistoric times (the megalithic temple of Tal-Qadi), and eventually played a key role for the Romans as a busy naval hub, to the extent that it was on its shorelines that St. Paul's shipwreck is believed to have taken place in 60 AD. St. Paul's Bay became thereafter an important place of Christian worship (the Church of St. Paul's Bonfire, The Salina early Christian catacombs) and eventually witnessed the undertakings of the Knights of the Order of St. John, who built coastal fortifications (Wignacourt tower) and the Salina salt pans for a prosperous salt production.

Besides that, the research analysed also the naturalistic importance of St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings, presenting sites such as the Salina Nature Reserve and the Simar Nature Reserve. Both the former and the latter, with their variety of natural habitats and significant protected flora and wildlife species, offer the visitors a full immersion to the nature and educational centres. In addition, the naturalistic significance of the area has been further demonstrated by attesting the ecological value of every site analysed. They are all found in the area of the system of ridges and rift valleys originating from the Great Fault and leading to the sandy shores, creating a variety of landscapes and naturalistic features which contribute to the ecological value of the region.

In view of all the points above, we can finally claim that St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings have a great potential to be developed as a cultural destination, where next to the summer resorts and recreational infrastructures can be found space for the development of a more sustainable niche tourism. The latter would be oriented to the many petite but important archaeological, cultural and naturalistic heritage sites that the regions have to offer to the most attentive and curious tourists. Sustainable tourism can constitute a valid alternative out of the ordinary mass tourism circuits and therefore can be crucial in small nations as the Maltese Islands.

As final considerations, in view of such a desirable program of valorisation of the region's cultural heritage together with its promotion there should be a better preservation of sites such as the Salina catacombs and the Tal-Qadi temple.

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Appendix

A taste of Malta: exploring St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings. A tour through their hidden little gems

The tour proposed covers the area of St. Paul's Bay and part of the bordering Naxxar, stretching from the Pwales Valley up to Salina Bay.

The meeting point would be at Simar Nature Reserve whilst the tour would end at Salina Nature Reserve.

This tour is thought to be held on the first Sunday of each month, in respect of the openings of the sites which are part of the tour.

The target audience would be both locals and foreign tourists of average cultural and naturalistic knowledge and interest of any age, families and elderly people included. The main aim of such a tour is in fact to make participants aware of the ecological and cultural value of the sites scattered in this northern region of Malta, offering an easy and attractive *taste* of some of the sites the area has to offer them.

The tour, as it is planned, can be held in half a day and include the provision of a transport service which would take the participants from a site to the next one.

The tour would start in the morning and end at lunchtime. A final tasting of Maltese traditional food in one of the local Maltese restaurants, the Ta' Cassia Salina Restaurant, is proposed to the participants as an additional service. A gastronomic experience is thought to be an ideal complement to the discovering of the Maltese heritage on which the tour is based.

The following list shows the sites chosen for the tour:

- Simar Nature Reserve, San Pawl il-Baħar;
- Wignacourt tower, San Pawl il-Baħar;
- Church of St. Paul's Bonfire, San Pawl il-Baħar;
- Cart ruts at Naxxar Gap at San Pawl tat-Tarġa, Naxxar;
- Tal-Qadi Temple, San Pawl il- Baħar;
- Salina Catacombs, Naxxar;
- Salina Nature Reserve, Naxxar.

These sites are chosen for their significance within the theme of the tour, that is an immersion in the ecological and cultural heritage of St. Paul's Bay and its surroundings. Every site retains its own peculiarity and it is used to narrate the history of the region from prehistory up to modern times. Altogether, the sites aim to provide an interesting foretaste of the main important features of the Maltese culture and heritage on a local and smaller scale to the visitors. Therefore, the tour offers a pleasant and refreshing alternative to the most popular and often overcrowded Maltese destinations, such as Valletta, Mdina and the three cities above all to both the locals and foreign tourists.

Due to the nature of the tour, which also provides walks into the countryside and nature reserves, it is recommended that participants wear comfortable shoes and suggested that they take binoculars as well as water and some snacks.

Simar Nature Reserve – meeting point

The tour starts from a nature reserve created in modern times. Simar Nature Reserve is an oasis which lies between the Pwales Valley and Xemxija Bay.

Following a brief introduction to the region and the tour, where the interesting geology and topography of the territory which surrounds Simar reserve is also demonstrated, the visitors can explore a variety of habitats distinctive of the Maltese Islands, such as coastal pools, garrigue, steppe and woodland. Nowadays these habitats are endangered and therefore these precious remnants are carefully safeguarded.

Simar Nature Reserve works as an important educational centre and as a safe haven for the numerous flora and fauna species which thrive within the area. The participants of the tour are invited to walk around the coastal pools and experience birdwatching together with the trained BirdLife personnel of the reserve.

Wignacourt Tower, San Pawl il-Bahar

Following a short ride by coach, the visitors can visit the second site of the tour, the Wignacourt tower in St. Paul's Bay promenade at *Tal-Għażżenin*.

The tower is the oldest surviving watchtower in the Maltese Islands and dates back to the time of the Knights of the Order of St. John. The site therefore offers the visitors the chance to experience a first foretaste of the legacy which was left by the Knights Hospitallers regarding fortifications.

By means of military outposts and batteries, the coastal defence had played a key role in protecting the Islands from the enemy landing and attacks. In a northern region such as St. Paul's Bay, far away from the main walled cities, it had always been of crucial importance.

The visit to the tower integrates the history of the region in the Middle Ages and the following centuries with the original and recreated features used by the garrisons back in time. These are found within the two storey tower, together with a fine exhibition of fortification models of Malta.

From the roof, Wignacourt tower commands an excellent view over the sea and St. Paul's Island. It also offers the chance to observe and enjoy the many Maltese cultural and natural features of this typical and still charming little corner of Malta, especially the fishermen's harbour and the statue of St. Paul on St. Paul's Island.

The second floor is reached via a spiral staircase, whilst the roof through a steep flight of steps. Children are not allowed to visit the open roof and people with mobility difficulties may find it difficult to access the upper part. Nevertheless, the visit includes a museum exhibition held in the ground floor, as well as a panoramic walk around the battery at the foot of the tower.

Church of St. Paul's Bonfire

After a few minutes' walk, and passing by the fishermen's picturesque boat shelter, the visitors can approach the third site of the tour, the church of St. Paul's Bonfire.

This Pauline sanctuary, although heavily bombed during the WWII, was rebuilt in the original Wignacourt 17th century design and retains all its spiritual significance today.

The visitors can be introduced to the millenary prevailing traditions that recount the St. Paul's shipwreck episode occurred on these shores in 60 AD. The Pauline cult is strongly connected with the history of the Islands, because the saint is traditionally believed to have brought Christianity to Malta. The region itself was named after the biblical episode narrated in the Acts of the Apostles. In fact, St. Paul is the patron saint of the country.

The Pauline worship was enhanced by the Order of St. John, in particularly by the Grand Master Alof the Wignacourt, who had the new elegant church rebuilt close to the site of the older shrine.

The visitors have therefore the opportunity to have an insight of a significant part of the Maltese culture, the religious traditions, by exploring this important pilgrimage heritage site.

Cart ruts at Naxxar Gap at San Pawl tat-Targa

The cart ruts found in the territory of Naxxar represent the fourth site of the tour which is reached by the group by an approximately 10 minute ride by coach.

This intriguing enigma of the Maltese landscapes brings the visitors back to the ancient times, on the footsteps of these presumably ancient traces of a road network system which perhaps was in use by the Bronze or Classical age people who inhabited this region.

Defined the most interesting cart ruts in the Maltese Islands by the famous archaeologist David Trump, these cart tracks have their own peculiarity, such as branches of ruts forking and changing direction sharply by creating sharp bends, whilst holding also the main typical features of the Maltese ruts.

During the visit, the participants will investigate these features and are encouraged to formulate their own personal opinions on this fascinating matter.

The location, a natural geological gap which connects the Great Ridge with the system of valleys below leading to the coast at Salina Bay, provides a stunning view over the countryside, the sea and the British fortification of the Victoria lines along the Great Ridge. The participants can therefore enjoy the first immersion in the archaeological remains scattered in the area's countryside whilst walking into habitats such as the steppe and the garrigue.

Tal-Qadi Temple

The next and fifth site is the Neolithic Tal-Qadi Temple, which is located in the Burmarrad plain below the Great Ridge.

Visitors are taken to the site by making use of the transport provided and can experience a dip in the prehistory of this region.

The ruins of this temple in the open fields are one of the region's hidden little gems. The temple is enclosed within a garden overlooking the cultivated fields in the plain and partially screened off by the florid vegetation. Nevertheless, the sense of mystery and fascination can still be felt by the visitors, who are led into the actual temple via a scenic although modern staircase made of Maltese limestone slabs.

This secluded temple seems to have had a typical layout of four apses with a central niche, lying on a slope just a few meters above sea level.

Notwithstanding the few scattered remains that survived to weathering and to human activity, the site retains two archaeological enigmas which make it peculiar amongst the other Maltese megalithic structures. The unusual orientation and the mysterious Tal-Qadi Stone will be illustrated to the visitors with the support of visual materials. The participants are invited once again to suggest their own personal theories in an interesting and fruitful exchange of views on the matter.

Salina Catacombs

After a short ride by coach, the participants can arrive to the sixth site of the tour.

The Salina hypogea form an interesting sample of Maltese Paleo-Christians catacombs, which were in use from the late Roman era up to the Byzantine period.

The site, found in Salina's territory close to Salina Bay, allows the visitors to explore all the typical features of such burial places found in Malta.

By appointment and against the payment of an additional fee for the participants, it is possible to organize a special opening of the most evocative and interesting of the five small hypogea on site by Heritage Malta. Such a hypogeum is finely decorated with stone carvings reproducing architectural elements as column capitals and shafts, as well as spiral and Christian motifs, and represents a peculiarity in the Islands scenario.

The site permits the visitors to go back to the ancient Roman times, evoking the busy Roman port in the then longer and deeper Salina harbour and the wealthy Roman community which may have settled in the area and to investigate the cart ruts found on site. Those traces, together with the ones in Tal-Qadi and Naxxar Gap, seem to design a wide ancient road system that followed the contours of the former bay and contribute to enhance the archaeological interest of these localities.

Salina Nature Reserve

The Salina Nature Reserve constitutes the last of the seven sites proposed in this tour.

The participants can reach the site in Salina Bay after a few minutes' walk.

The visitors can conclude their tour experience with a last refreshing foretaste of Maltese natural habitats, the saline marshlands, and can also walk along the historical salt pans created by the Order of St. John in the second half of the 16th century. These are carefully restored and managed together with the protected wetland by BirdLife today.

In the visitor centre on site, the visitors can discover the history of salt production in Malta and the variety of wildlife species which shelter and reside in the area. In the hides located along the walk, participants can also practice birdwatching.

The group can also appreciate other historical and military features which are found in the area, such as the Salina Redoubt and the *fougasse* or stone mortar.

As mentioned above, a gastronomic experience at Ta' Cassia Salina Restaurant, opposite Salina Nature Reserve entrance, is provided to participants as an additional final service. The tasting of fresh Maltese typical products is thought to represent the ideal conclusion of this tour focused on the discovery of the Maltese heritage in St. Paul's Bay region.