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Watering down the threat of climate change

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Historian Lino Bugeja scanning the report by Carapecchia which includes the type of cisterns and their location and the amount of barrels of water each holds. Photos: Matthew Mirabelli.

What do the fortifications built by the knights of St John and climate change have in common?

This looks like a far-fetched question but the fortifications preserved one the main natural sources known to mankind: Water.

Water was a vital element that people looked for before settling down in a particular area.

As an example, one can mention that soon after their arrival in Malta in 1530, the knights built their first hospital in Vittoriosa close to a fresh water spring.

On his part, Grand Master La Valette rewarded the finders of cannonball with several barrels of water.

In his book *The Great Siege: Knights vs Turks MDLXV, Anatomy of a Hospitaller Victory* (Gutenberg Press, 2005), when writing about the Turkish camp, the author Stephen C. Spiteri notes that "water was a serious concern".

"The principal consideration for the Turks was always to access adequate water supplies and this explains why the army encamped near the springs in Marsa."

This source was also used to replenish the fleet.

Dr Spiteri underscores the fact that "malnutrition and related diseases are said to have incapacitated a significant portion of their soldiers, as did dysentery and other ailments inflicted by the poor water supply".

According to rambler and historian Lino Bugeja, the main threat to Malta in the wake of the global climate change is "an acute water shortage".

"Last November, in a lecture organised by the Strickland Foundation, Martin Scicluna viewed water shortage as a major concern because of a depleted underground water supply. "The Water Services Corporation has raised the alarm about the rate of water extraction that is already beyond sustainable yields," Mr Bugeja said.

Mr Bugeja believes that the recent announcement by the government that it will soon start repairing and restoring the island's fortifications could not have come at a more opportune time.

This ought not to be a cosmetic exercise but rather one that will identify the thousands of wells and cisterns and their restoration for immediate use, Mr Bugeja said.

The historian of the Great Siege of 1565, P.G. Vendome noted that Vittoriosa had an adequate water supply to cater for the thousands of people from the countryside who sought refuge within its walls.

"During WWII, when Vittoriosa was completely cut off and there was no piped water, I used to fetch water from a well on Is-Sur tal-Kurdara which lies on the land front along the French curtain," Mr Bugeja recalled.

When the architect Romano Carapecchia arrived here in 1707, he was summoned to undertake a survey of all the public water cisterns within the fortifications in Valletta, Floriana and St Elmo and Cottonera including Fort St Angelo and Fort Ricasoli.

"Carapecchia was again commissioned to carry out a detailed description of the water storage facilities by Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena (1722-1736).

"The detailed report illustrated with superb drawings was presented to the Grand Master on January 20, 1723.

"The report which is preserved at the National Library in Valletta reveals the vast amount of water that can be stored in these reservoirs."

Mr Bugeja hopes that the government will take the necessary steps to reactivate these underground stores for everyday use as a tangible proof of its intentions to minimise the water shortage.

"This project would be a high 'watermark' in the history of architecture and engineering in Malta," Mr Bugeja quipped.
