THE FORM and FUNCTION OF MISRATAH'S COMMERCIAL CENTRE

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Introduction

With the advent of impressive oil revenues since 1961 the Government of Libya has wisely embarked upon physical planning at national and regional levels. Among the many plans being prepared by everseas consultants at the present time are master-plans for the coastal oasis towns of Tripolitania, including El Khums, Zliten and Misratah. (1) Of these Misratah constitutes a challenge of particular interest to the town planner as a result of its early evolution as an oasis market town through to the grandiose expansion of the Italian period. In its ground-plan Misratah illustrates many features of the larger cities of the Arab world which are so often the heirs of different cultures, with a European-style town grafted awkwardly on to a traditional type of Arab town (Figure 1). This arrangement poses many problems for the rationalisation of traffic flows and land use, and in the installation of piped water, electricity and sewerage. The research upon which this paper is based was carried out in 1966 at a time when it was already clear that Misratah was on the verge of great changes. The aim was to examine traditional town-country relationships before they become totally obscured, and

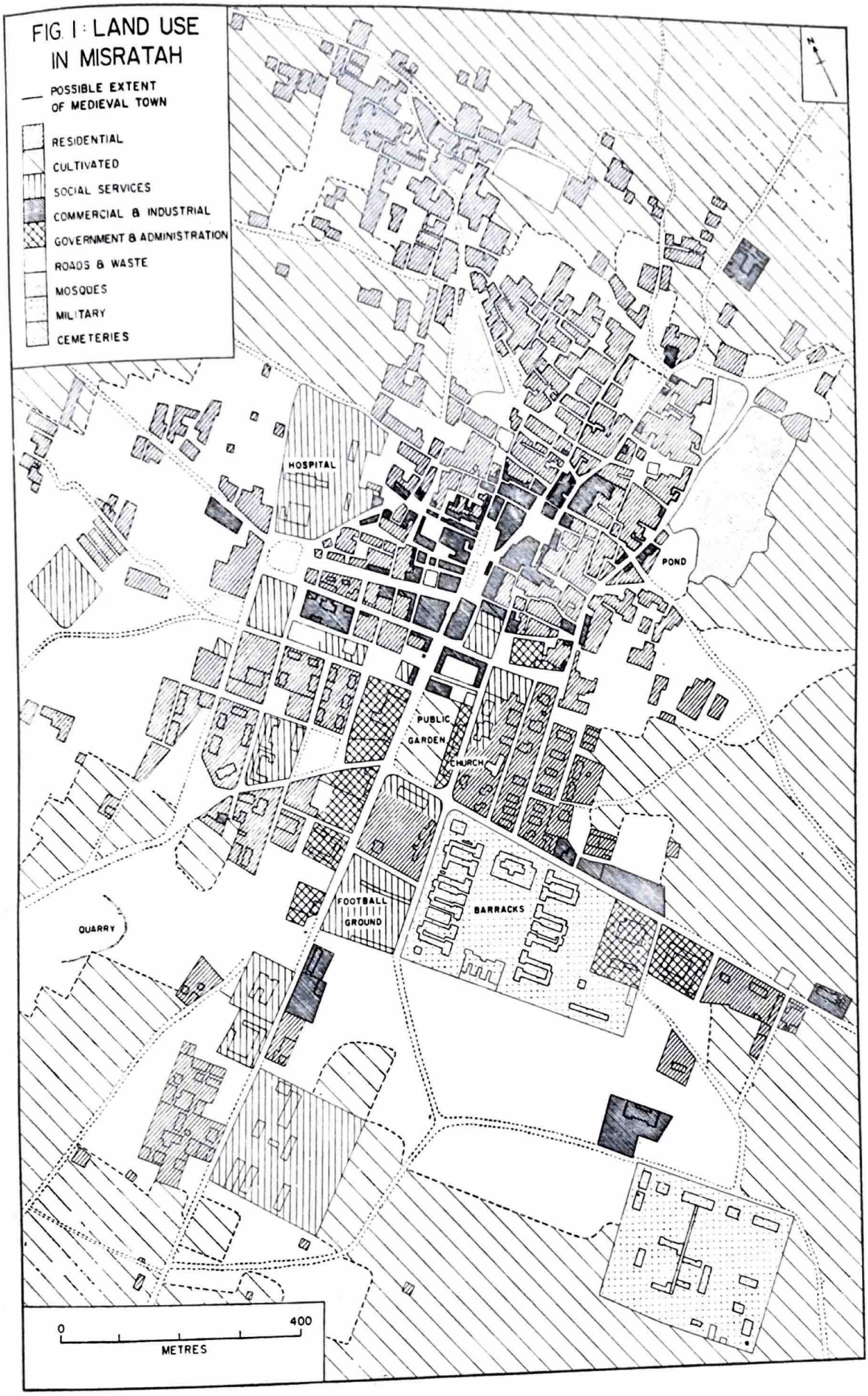
these functional relationships are clearly reflected in the form of the town's commercial heart.

At first sight the layout of Misratah has little to commend it. The street-pattern has clearly developed piecemeal, and on the fringes of the town there is much wasted land. Social facilities such as schools, post office and hospital are scattered inconveniently throughout the new town, but worst of all, there appears to be little to bind the old and the new towns together. It is hoped however that this paper will show that close examination of the central area of Misratah reveals much that is functionally sound, and a focus of interest in the shops and markets which give the town a sense of coherence and unity. When it is remembered that this central area has grown organically with no conscious planning it is remarkable how well it has been adapted to the needs of an oasis market. This is not to say that it will not require replanning in the future to fulfil its functions as a regional and route centre of growing importance.

The morphology of Misratah

To understand the layout of the centre of Misratah and its relationship to the rest of the town, reference must be made to how the town has grown and expanded.

The origins of Misratah are obscure and in any case not relevant to the theme of this paper. The important fact is that probably as early as the thirteenth century there was a very small own functioning as a local market and engaged in some form of inter-regional trade. The oldest mosque in the town (Al Ali) dates from the late fourteenth century, by which time the population may have been four or five hundred. It is not possible to reconstruct the medieval town with any certainty, but an attempt has been made in Figure 2. Dwellings and market place would doubtless have been within muezzin-call of the mosque, and the market place may well have been on the fringe of the town as in many small towns and villages of Tripolitania today. It is quite likely that the site of the present livestock


FIG. 1 : LAND USE IN MISRATAH
POSSIBLE EXTENT OF MEDIEVAL TOWN
RESIDENTIAL
CULTIVATED
SOCIAL SERVICES
COMMERCIAL & INDUSTRIAL
GOVERNMENT & ADMINISTRATION
ROADS & WASTE
MOSQUES
MILITARY
CEMETERIES
N
HOSPITAL
POND
PUBLIC GARDEN
CHURCH
FOOTBALL GROUND
BARRACKS
QUARRY
0
400
METRES

market is the site of the old market place. A description of Misratah in 1821 suggests that there was already an old market somewhere near this point, being "half occupied by a pool of green and stinking water".(2) The occurrence of seasonal flooding in basin-shaped market places which have been created by the combined action of man, animals and wind is well known in North Africa and generaly indicates markets of great antiquity. The medieval town was probably limited in the south-east by the ancient cemetery and pond, and between them by an area of stony ground whose slightly greater elevation would have discouraged well-sinking. The alignment of the present-day east-west through road suggests that it follows the line of the most ancient caravan route which would have turned south-west to avoid the dune formations which extend far inland west of Misratah (Figure 3). Finally, medieval Misratah may have had a small Jewish community since some very old tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions have been found near the town.(3) If this was so, the Jews would probably have inhabited much the same part of the town as was later to become a Jewish quarter.

If this reconstruction is substantially correct, it explains why later commercial activities have developed on the south and south western margins of the old town. The market place itself would have been a focal point, but it was also at the point where the east-west route and the route from the south, skirting the pond, would have met. It is certainly true that from the sixteenth century onwards Misratah's residential area expanded north and north-west rather than to the south and south-east (Figure 4). One reason for this could be the existence of a shallow "perched" water table underlying the older parts of the town which was not available in other directions.

From the middle ages onwards, Misratah was a trading centre of some importance, though its fortunes fluctuated with those of its main trading partners. Under its old name of Thubactis the town carried on flourishing trade with Venice, Genoa and several North African ports. Wool, olive oil and salt were exported via Gasr Ahmad in return for silk and general merchandise. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were a period of decline and

obscurity but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was a revival of trans-Saharan trade, particularly in slaves, and Misratah found itself highly favoured as a collecting centre since Turkish taxes could be more easily evaded than nearer Tripoli.(4) But these activities appear to have had little impact on the townscape apart from an increase in private houses. If any craftsmens' shops, stores or markets were built, they have not survived; possibly they were in Yidr or Gasr Ahmad rather than Misratah. Most of the commercial buildings in existence today appeared after the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The spate of building which occurred in the nineteenth century south and south-west of the town was the result of two factors. First, Misratah was becoming a market centre dependent upon wealth generated locally rather than upon transit trade largely as a result of the increasing sedentarisation of semi-nomadic cabilas east of the town. Weekly marketing of vegetables and livestock was becoming more important than seasonal markets. Secondly, Misratah became the headquarters of a Mutasarifiya in preference to El Khums and efforts were made to attract economic as well as administrative influence to the town by building new shops and markets. This deliberate policy may have ensured the supremacy of Misratah over neighbouring Yidr. During the nineteenth century therefore several streets of shops and workshops appeared around Maidan Ghardabiya, and a covered fruit and vegetable market was constructed. Building adjacent to Maidan Nasser occurred about a hundred yars ago and included several small suks such as Suk Az-Zait and Suk Al-Attara. Later in the century large blocks of shops were built adjacent to what was to become the Italian town. By the turn of the century commercial activity was already highly concentrated around Maidan Nasser. A notable feature of these developments was the continued separation of residential and commercial functions with the latter at that time still concentrated in peripheral areas. Some houses of Turkish style did appear among the commercial buildings, but they were very few.

Effective Italian occupation was short-lived in Eastern Tripolitania, but in spite of this the Italian period (1922-1939) had

FIG. 2 MEDIEVAL MISRATAH

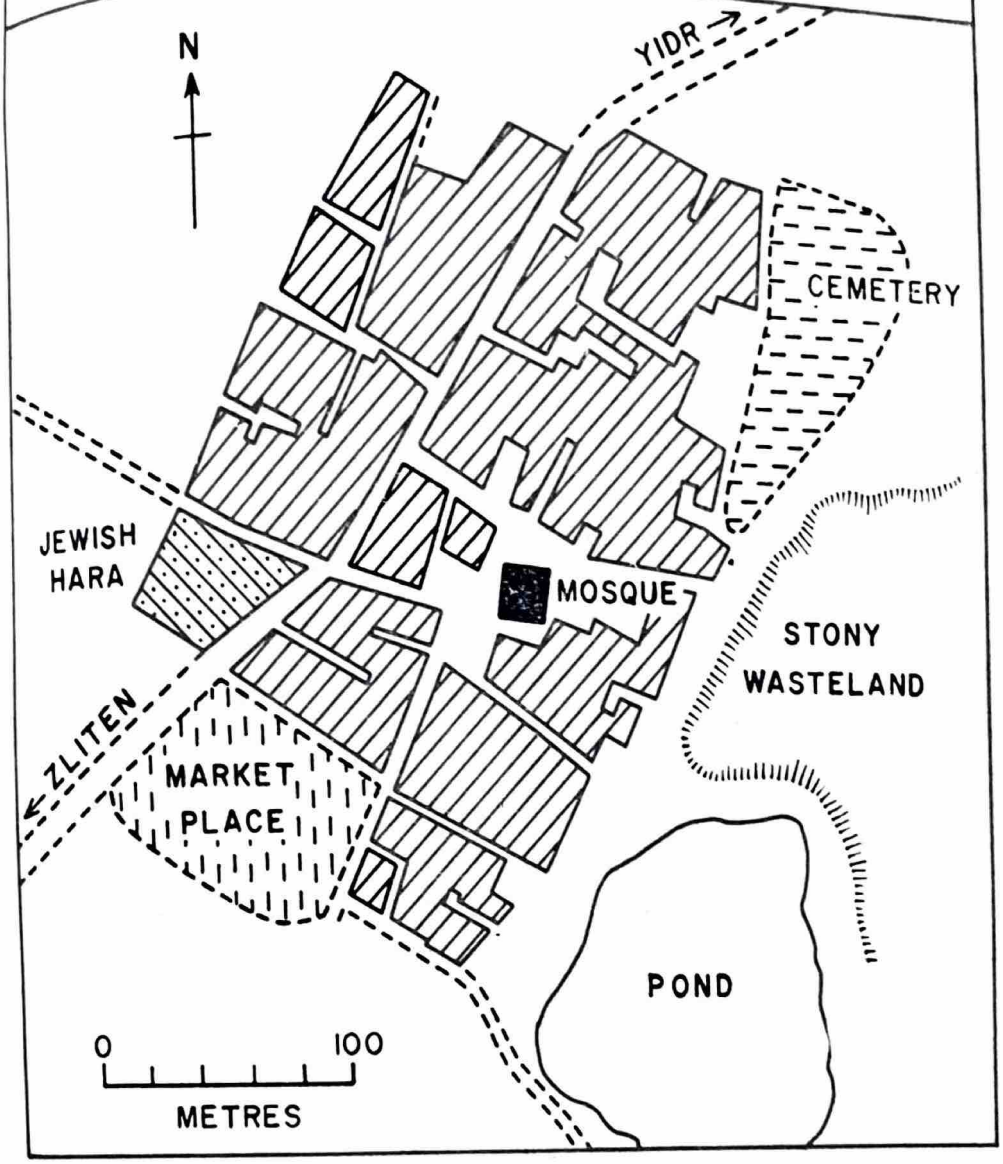
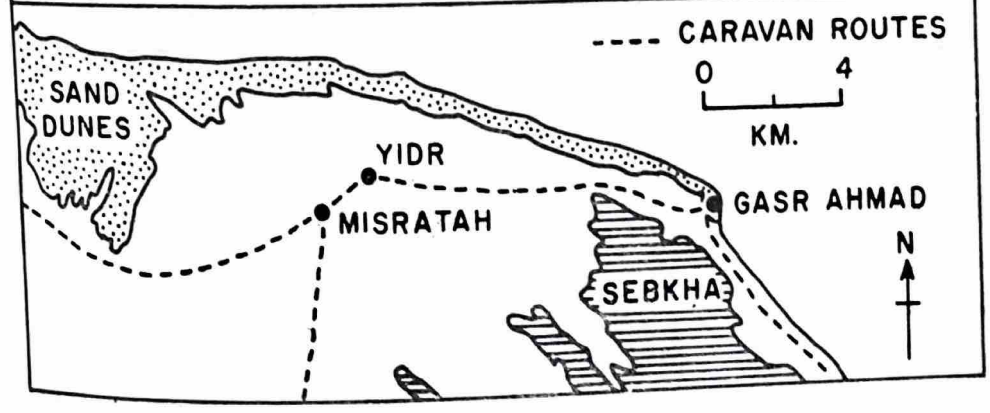


FIG. 3 ALIGNMENT OF THE OLD CARAVAN ROUTE



an enormous influence on the make-up of Misratah which was designated as a provincial capital and a regional economic and social centre for huge new demographic estates at Dafnia, Kararim and Tummina. Thus a great deal of building occurred, most of which did not affect the commercial quarter, except that a fish market was added. This building did however have one highly significant result in that it shifted the town's centre of gravity to the south-west and had the effect of leaving the shops and markets at the geographical centre of the built-up area. Since independence much building has continued in and around the "Italian town", thus firmly establishing the centrality of the commercial area with its shops and markets.

Misratah's commercial functions

Before turning to a detailed analysis of the centre of Misratah, its commercial functions must be outlined and consideration given to the nature and extent of its hinterland.

Market days are held in Misratah three times a week on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. The only market town which is any kind of a rival to Misratah is Zliten lying nearly fifty kilometres to the west, but field investigations showed that visits are made to Misratah by people living within a very short distance of Zliten. There are also a number of farmers who visit markets in both towns, a practise made possible by the fact that in Zliten, markets are on Sundays and Wednesdays. Small local markets are held within Misratah's sphere of influence at Tawargha on Mondays and Thursdays, and at Zawiyat Al Mahjub on Fridays. There is thus a staggered arrangement of markets within the region which leaves Misratah without competition on Tuesdays and with no serious competition on Thursdays.

Figure 5 is an attempt to delimit Misratah's hinterland, defined as the area from which people visit the market habitually though not necessarily frequently. The area covered is surprisingly extensive, taking in the whole of the Mutasarifiya of Misratah and extending beyond to the three small oases of Hun, Waddan, and

Sawknah in the south, to Sirte in the east, and Bani Uid in the west. Calculations based on figures published in 1967 suggest that the hinterland thus defined would embrace a total population of approximately 105,000.(5) The configuration of this hinterland is virtually unaffected by competition from other markets except Zliten in the northwest. In many ways the flow of goods to and from such markets on the margins of the great deserts is more akin to that of a sea-port, with distance playing a less decisive role than in regions with an even spread of population.

Figure 5 also indicates the frequency of visits to the market in Misratah. Three zones can be identified, corresponding very roughly with three contrasting forms of land use. First, the vast outer area stretching as far as four hundred kilometres to the south, characterised by a fairly poor nomadic economy with a few tiny oases engaged in small-scale irrigated farming. The population is scanty, the most important contribution to the market being livestock and their products, particularly camels and wool. Next comes a middle zone where some settled population occurs and including a region of medium densities of population around Fani Ulid. Throughout this zone are a scattering of farmers who make the journey to Misratah at least once a week. Livestock are still important, but there is also a shifting cereal cultivation, olives and dates in some parts, and occasional patches of irrigated agriculture. The third zone is by far the most important, comprising the oasis of Tawarghah. Possibly two-thirds of the population served by Misratah inhabit this zone. Here, irrigated agriculture is the chief concern but livestock, dates and olives and cereals remain important, so that the amount of activity generated for the market is outstanding. Within this zone most families are represented at two or three markets every week.

One of the functions of Misratah therefore is to act as a market and exchange centre for the goods of these three complementary regions. But more detailed consideration of the inner zone shows that there is marked local specialisation within the oasis itself which leads to intense demand for the exchange of goods, and this local trade is probably more important than the former.

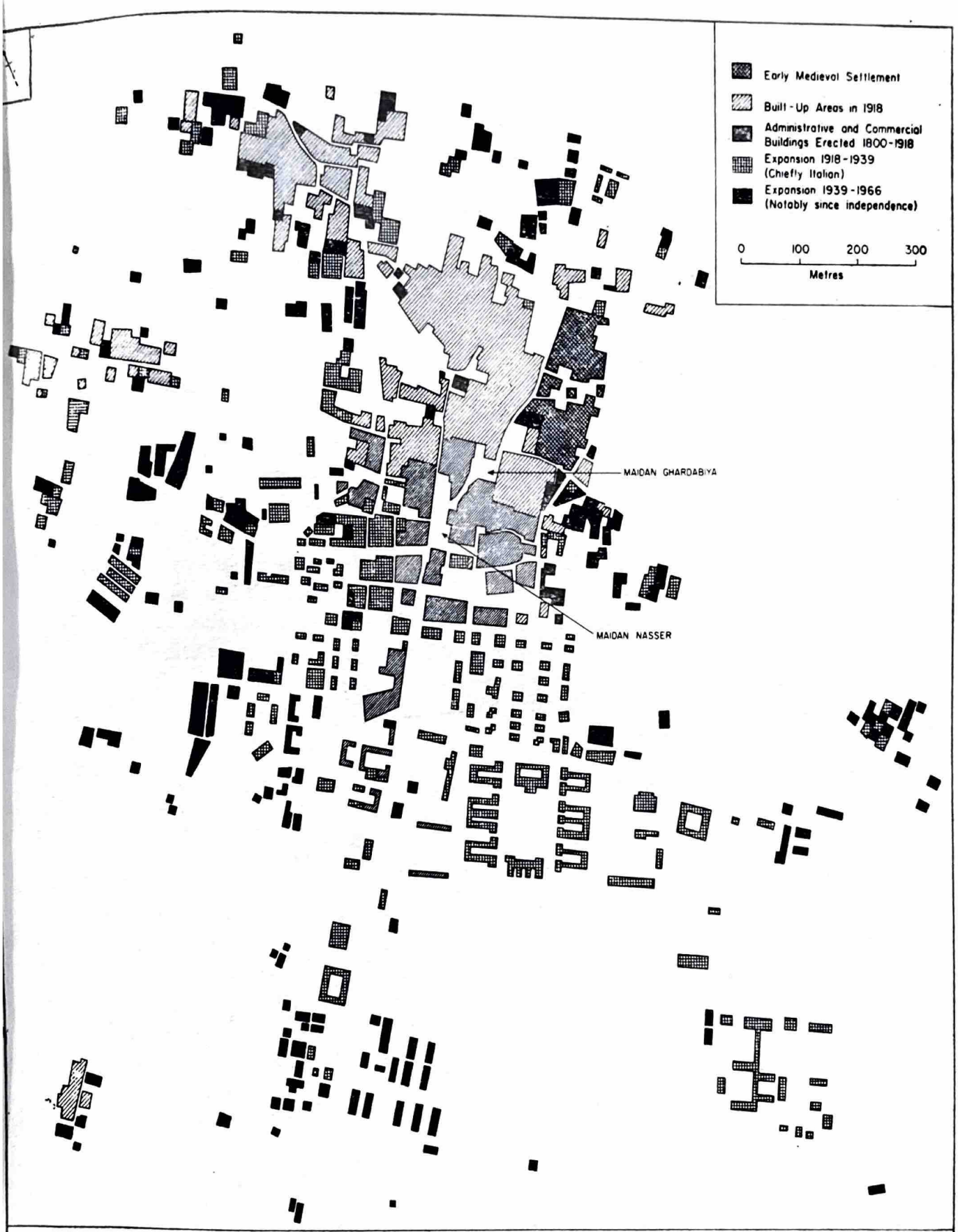


FIG. 4 : EXPANSION OF MISRATAH TO 1966

In 1960 there were 6,700 holdings in Misratah oasis, 3,900 of which were exclusively devoted to dry cultivation of barley and wheat. (6) The remaining 2,800 holdings had at least some irrigated land, but the proportion engaged in growing any one crop was surprisingly small. Thus less than 30% of the holdings grew sorghum, red peppers or broad beans, less than 30% grew melons, fodder crops, onions and tomatoes, while maize, groundnuts and potatoes were grown on less than 10% of the holdings. These figures reveal considerable scope for buying and selling agricultural produce even among farmers engaged in largely irrigated cultivation. Crop returns of the Mudiriyas of Al Mahjub and Al Zuruq, which lie west and east of the town respectively, reveal regional specialisation in crop production still further. Some examples are given in Table 1. Groundwater resources are more plentiful and less saline in the west than in the east and crop yields tend to be higher. In Al Zuruq on the other hand camels, goats and horses are more numerous because of the rough pastures available in the Sebkha of Tawurgha. Before the nineteenth century and the sedentarisation of many semi-nomads, Misratah may actually have been situated at a point of contact between agriculturalists in the west and pastoralists in the east of the oasis.(18) Peaches, plums, pears and apples are grown on the ex-Italian estates, and these constitute another branch of production.

The other notable feature of the Misratah oasis is the domestic manufacture of goods for sale in the market, quite clearly related to traditional specialisation among the different cabilas (Figure 6). Goods manufactured within the oasis and surrounding region

Table 1. Production of selected irrigated crops, 1960 (7)

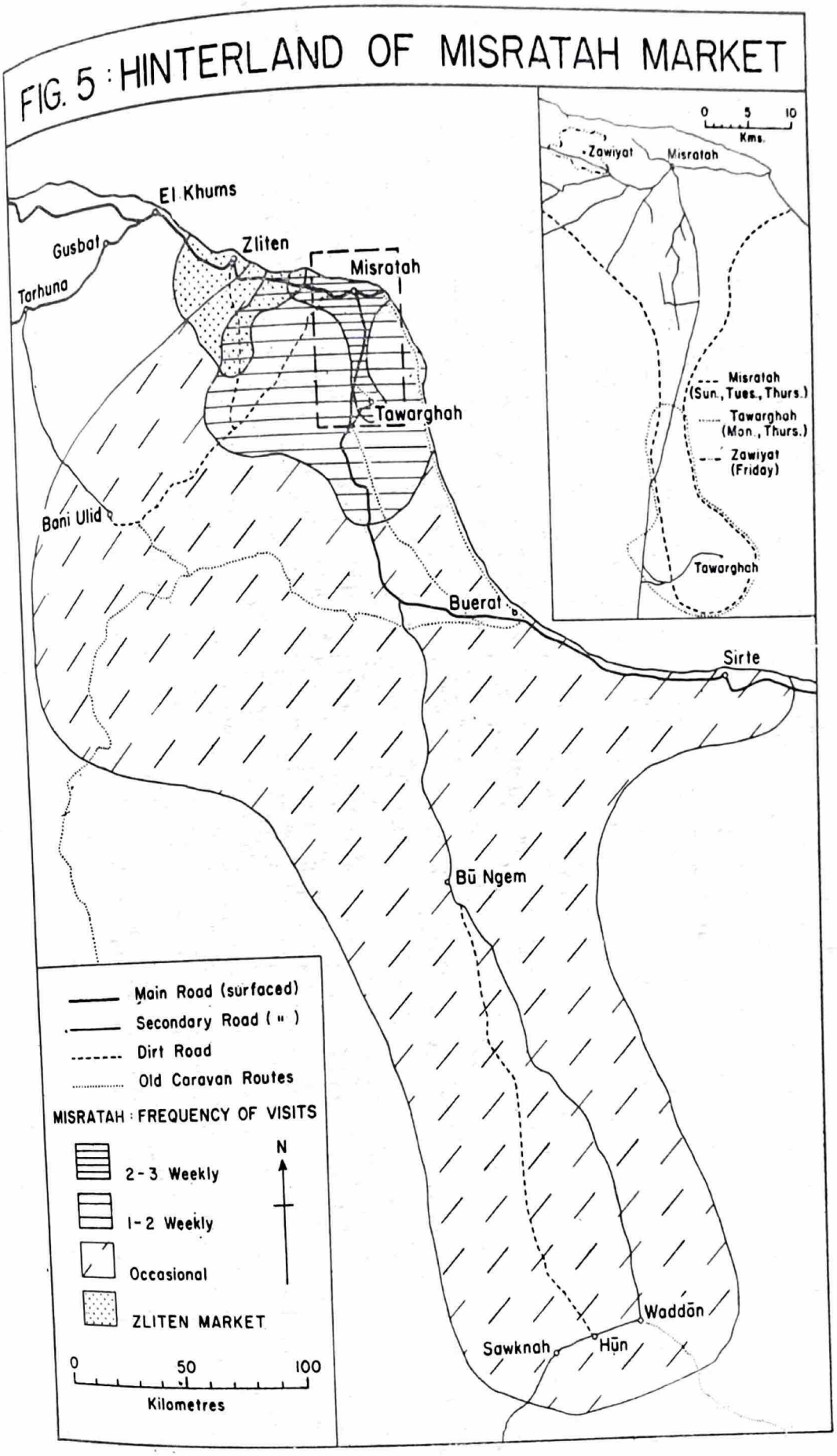
	Al Mahjub (West)	**Al Zuruq (East)**
Fodder crops	36.8%	63.2%
Melons	34.1%	65.9%
Sorghum	94.5%	55.5%
Peppers	73.8%	26.2%
Carrots	89.8%	10.2%

Dry onions	22.2%	77.8%
Potatoes	75.8%	24.1%
Groundnuts	97.6%	2.4%
Cucumbers	2.0%	98.0%
Maize	91.1%	8.9%

are complementary in character and are generally produced only to satisfy local demands, though Misratah's famous "Kalim" and "Forsha" carpets are an exception. With the exception of goatskin waterbags and Tawurgha mats none of the domestic products are made exclusively from local raw materials. Thus many raw materials, notably wood, come from far away in quite large quantities, so that Misratah is not only an exchange centre for finished products but also supplies essential raw materials.

Another commercial function of the town is the sale of imported consumer goods including notably groceries, hardware and drapery. In terms of the circulation of cash this is undoubtedly the most important branch of trade, completely overshadowing locally produced foodstuffs and hand-made goods. This branch is also growing at the expense of others, but it can never replace them since the farmer still has to find an outlet for his own produce in the market place.

All these activities together constitute an impressive focus of interest and it is not surprising to find the centre of Misratah packed with people every market day. A census carried out in July 1966 to count the number of people entering the town on a market day showed that the number exceeded 7,000 or approximately 22% of the total male population of Misratah's hinterland outside the town itself. This census has been described fully elsewhere, (9) but it is important here that it confirmed the overwhelming importance of local trade to Misratah. Only a relatively small number entered the town from the south, which indicated only a moderate yield of people and goods from the extensive desert hinterland beyond Tummina. Secondly, it was found that 25% entered by bicycle, 16% on foot and 17% using animal transport of some kind, and most of these can be assumed to originate within the oasis and not beyond. Although 42% arrived


FIG. 5 : HINTERLAND OF MISRATAH MARKET
0 5 10
Kms.
Zawiyat
Misratah
Misratah (Sun., Tues., Thurs.)
Tawarghah (Mon., Thurs.)
Zawiyat (Friday)
Tawarghah
El Khums
Gusbat
Tarhuna
Zliten
Misratah
Tawarghah
Bani Ulid
Buerat
Sirte
Bū Ngem
Waddān
Sawknah
Hūn
Main Road (surfaced)
Secondary Road (")
Dirt Road
Old Caravan Routes
MISRATAH : FREQUENCY OF VISITS
2-3 Weekly
1-2 Weekly
Occasional
ZLITEN MARKET
N
0 50 100
Kilometres

in motor vehicles many of these lived near enough to be picked up by Peugot van drivers operating a shuttle service.

There are of course non-economic motives for coming to Misratah, since the town is a regional social and administrative centre. Nor do all those who enter on market days go with the sole intention of buying and selling, for market day is still an unrivalled opportunity for the men to meet and exchange news and transact social business. This function is now less significant, particularly among the younger generation, but it is still operative.

The centre of Misratah: its functions and morphology

It is apparent both from Figure 7 and from Table II that there are a large number of business units in Misratah. "Business units" here include any commercial enterprise in which fixed premises of some kind are used, from the stalls in the covered markets to the craftsmens' shops and large specialist stores. A total of 678 such units in a town of perhaps 19,000 persons is surprisingly large. Most of these are small family concerns engaging two or more adult members at some time in the week. Since women do not participate in buying and selling the proportion of the active male population of the town involved on a full or part-time basis is very significant. The absence of alternative sources of employment may have something to do with the number of businesses, but there is also a strong merchant tradition in Misratah which bestows prestige on individuals engaged in trading. A social motive for commerce is suggested by the fact that an unknown number of enterprises are not the sole source of income for their operators, arable or pastoral farming usually providing an additional source of income. Many premises which open only on market days, (some 20% of the retail stores shown in Figure 7), presumably come into this category, though this is doubtful in the case of jewellers and carpet-sellers. Most part-time units are poor general stores away from the two main squares whose takings are generally very low. Some part-time shop-keepers and craftsmen live in villages outside Misratah, maintaining premises in town for use on

market days — another reminder of the symbiosis of town and country in a pre-industrial society.

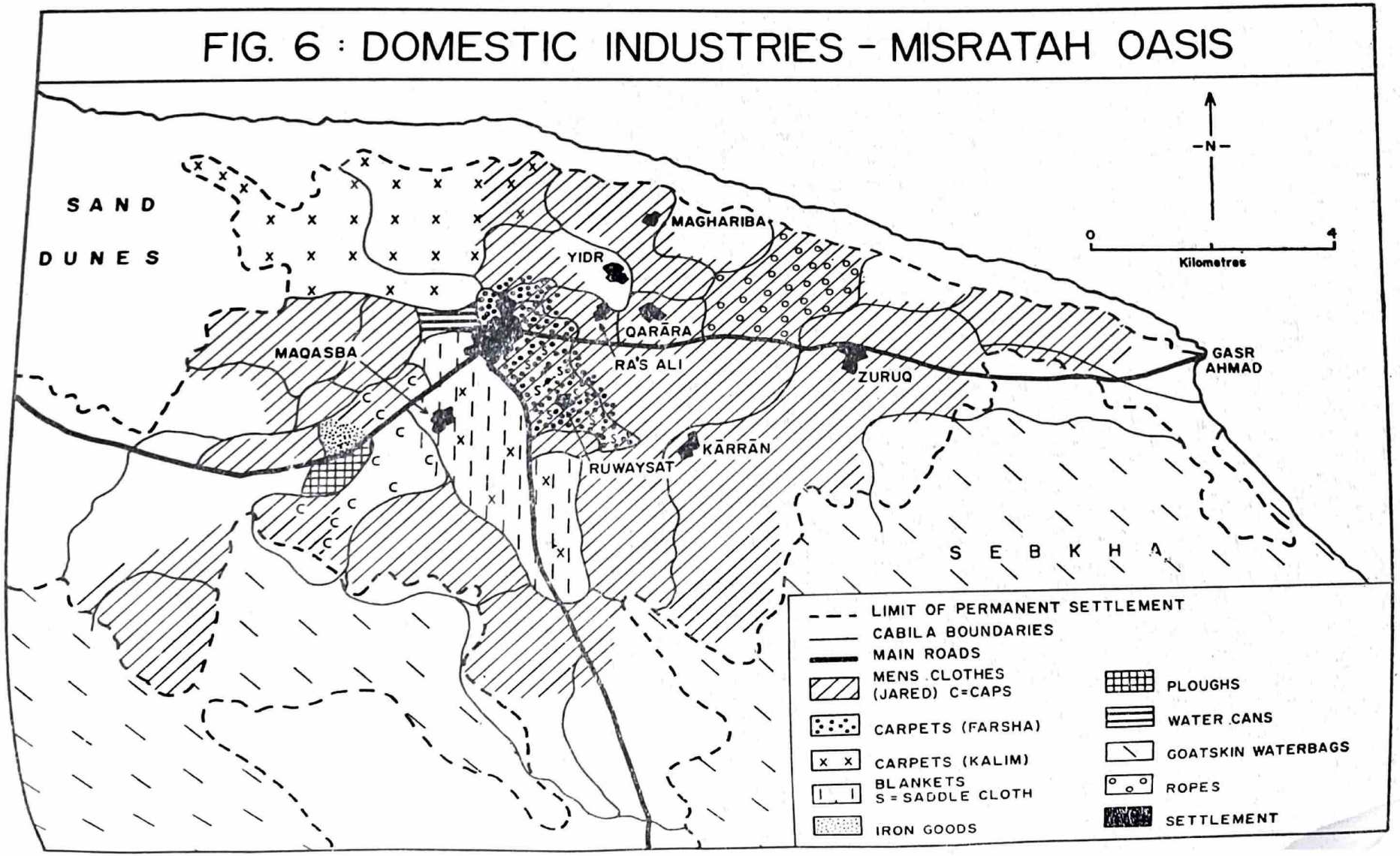
With so many enterprises competing with each other, takings cannot be very high, resulting perhaps in average monthly net profits of around £L40. But the economic incentives for participating in trade are nevertheless real, and several Misratah merchants have accumulated sufficient capital to establish shops in other parts of Libya; Misratan merchants can be found in Benghazi, Tripoli, Derna and Tobruk.

Table II — Retail stores in Misratah, 1966

General stores	135	Building materials and paint	13
Drapers	65	Cafés and restaurant	12
Grocers (+ 4 wholesale)	45	Motor vehicle accessories	7
Grain and seeds	37	Raw wool	6
Hardware	33	Watch and clock repairs	6
Jewellers	26	Electrical goods and radios	5
Barbers	24	Public scribes	4
Butcher's shops	21	Lamp repairs	3
Carpets and mats	20	Photographers	2
Paraffin and oils	19	Pharmacy	1
Bicycle sales and repairs	19	Stationer	1
Clothes and shoes	15	**TOTAL**	**518**
Stallholders :			
Greengrocers	60		
Butchers	35		

The list shown in Table II cannot be regarded as definitive. There may well be other units which were never discovered, but a further weakness is that of definition. How much drapery must a tailor sell to be classified as a draper? or how much hardware can a grocer stock before he becomes a "general store"? These difficulties arose largely from the low degree of specialisation,

FIG. 6 : DOMESTIC INDUSTRIES - MISRATAH OASIS



general stores, drapers and grocers all exhibiting a high degree of overlap. Only on the fringe of the commercial centre, near the new town are European-type shops found — a stationer, photographer and a number of shops dealing in electrical goods and radios.

The number of craftsmen (Table III) in Misratah was undoubtedly in excess of the present number sometime in the past. Their hey-day must have been before the influx of manufactured goods, when caravans still passed through the town — and the last caravan was seen in Misratah in about 1911.

Table III Craftsmen in Misratah, 1966

Tailors	18
Blacksmiths	13
Cobblers	12
Ploughwrights	7
Tinsmiths	7
Coppersmiths	4
Leatherworkers	4
TOTAL	**65**

Originally most crafts were pursued by countrymen who came into the town on market days, making use of rented premises to carry on their work. As with domestic industries, most crafts were the prerogative of a particular cabila. Examples are cobblers (Maghariba cabila), tinsmiths (Awlad Bayu cabila), blacksmiths (Haddad cabila) and ploughwrights (Balabla cabila). Today these crafts, as far as they survive, still remain firmly in the hands of these cabilas. Tailors do not belong to a particular cabila, but their is not strictly a traditional trade. Thus the grouping of craftsmen pursuing similar activities (Figure 8) seems to have been largely a social arrangement arising out of cabila specialisatons, and cannot be attributed to complex historical factors such as the guild system, as in the large towns and cities of the Arab world. Besides craftsmen, the grouping of jewellers, carpet sellers

and paraffin and oil merchants is significant. The jewellers are located in a small suk which could be locked at night for security purposes, and carpet sellers have to be together under cover to bid for carpets when they come in from the villages. Paraffin and oil lamp sellers are apparently the modern successors to coppersmiths and tinsmiths who once worked together in Suk Az-Zait.

Besides trade carried on in fixed premises and the sale of farm produce in open markets, a number of other enterprises are carried on in the open air on market days. Some of these are shown on Figure 9. In July 1966 nearly 250 open-air traders were counted on a market day, the most numerous being raw wool sellers, grain and alfalfa merchants, and the sellers of Tawurgha mats. These activities require large open spaces of the kind available in the centre of Misratah, while others are more like pavement traders, selling cloth caps or general merchandise, but all contribute in their ways to the centrifugal effect of the commercial heart of the town.

It has been stated that the light industries of Misratah, though small, are among the fastest growing in Libya.(10) While industrialisation lies outside the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning that it is not local manufacturing whch has put local craftsmen out of business, but imported goods. Even the woodwork shops shown in Table IV have not greatly affected the carpenters since the latter are concerned primarily with making ploughs and not with the requirements of the local building industry. With the exception of bakeries, several of which appear on Figure 7 as

Table IV Light industries in Misratah, 1966

Woodwork	24
Bakeries	8
Concrete blocks	8
Garages	6
Engineering	5
Flour mills	5
Charcoal	2

FIG:7 SHOPS, WORKSHOPS, LIGHT INDUSTRIES

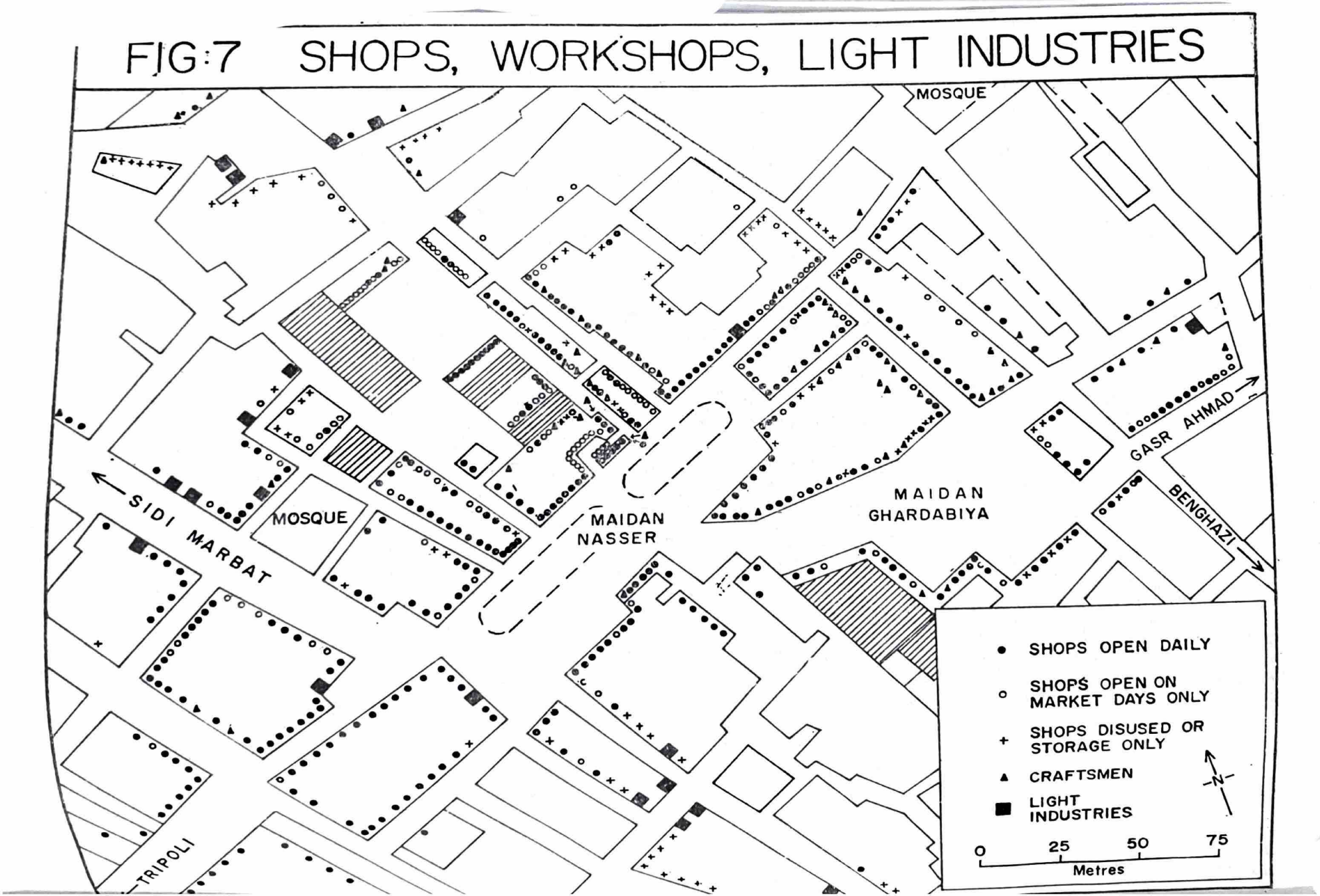


FIG. 8 : SELECTED TRADES AND CRAFTS

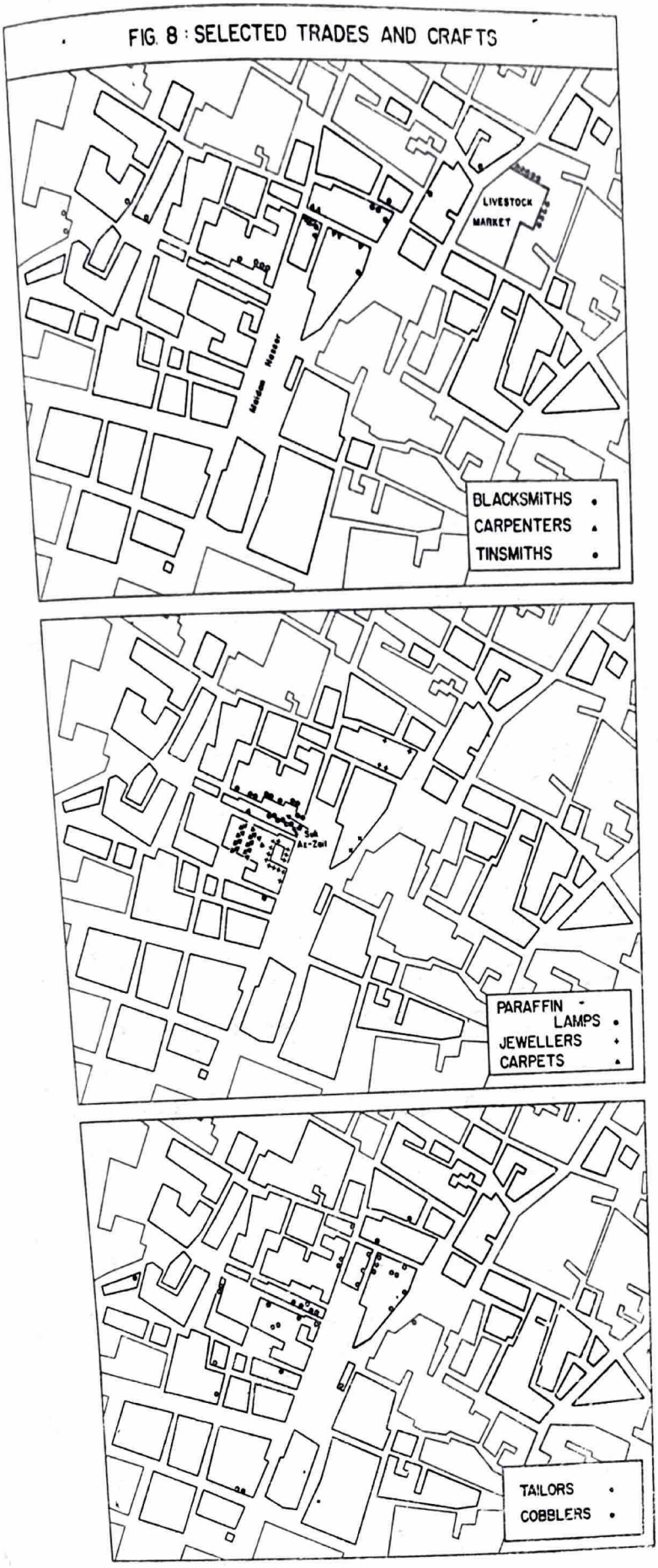
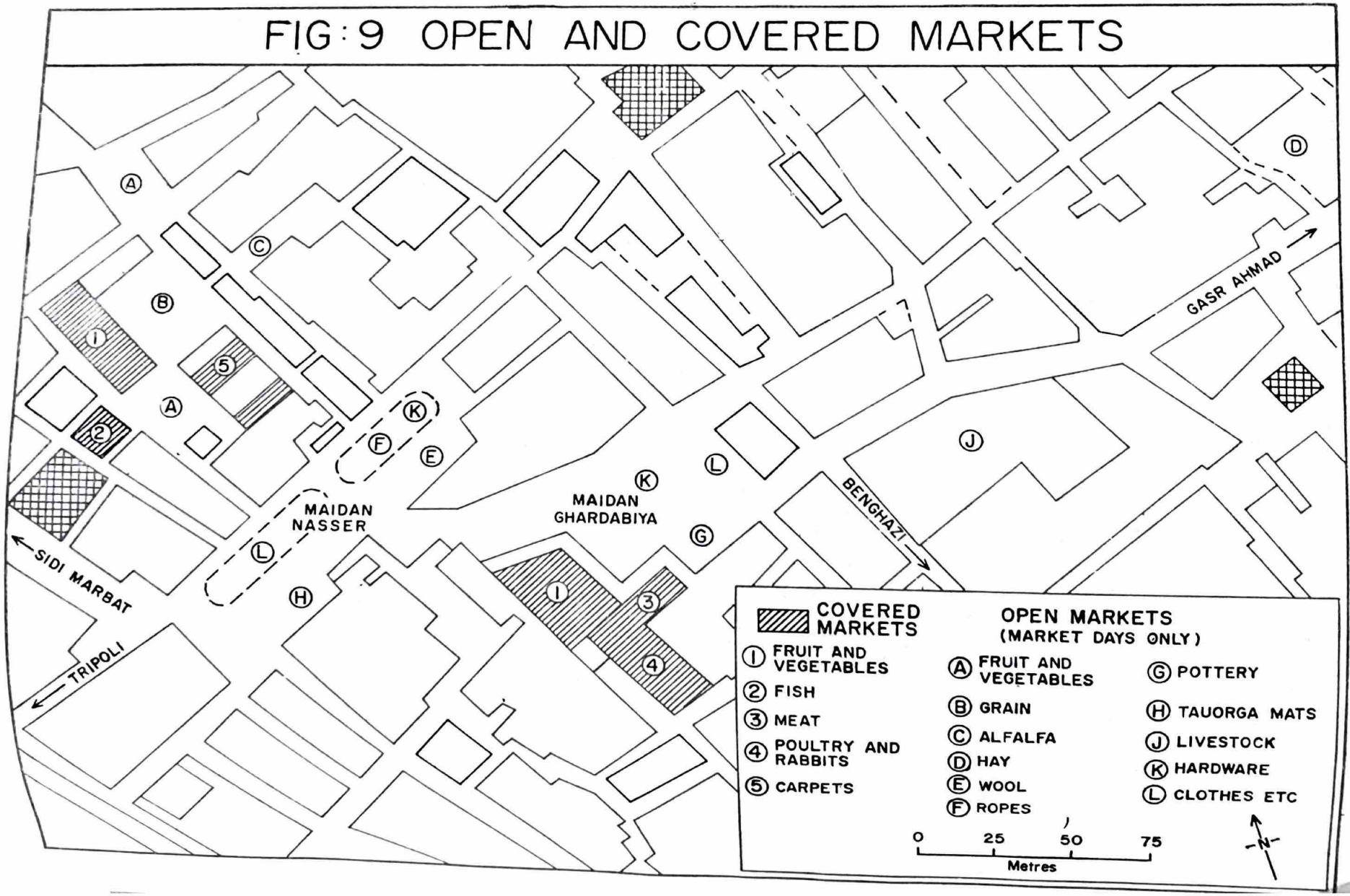


FIG: 9 OPEN AND COVERED MARKETS



Olive presses	2
Slaughterhouse	1
Generator	1
Floor tiles	1
TOTAL	**63**

being in or near the centre, light industries have favoured more peripheral locations where property is larger and cheaper; thus the roads to Gasr Ahmad, Tripoli and Benghazi all have their share. But industry does not distinguish between market days and non-market days, and for this reason a central location would be a distinct hazard on market days when traffic is severely impeded by pedestrians and open-air traders and their goods.

There are two main squares in Misratah, Maidan Nasser and Maidan Ghardabiya. Of these, Maidan Nasser is undoubtedly the most important. Its north-east to south-west axis is situated astride internal routes between two broadly complementary sectors of the commercial centre of the town. A complex of shops, workshops and markets lie to the north-west of Maidan Nasser including the grain market and flour mills, fruit and vegetable markets and the fish market, (Figure 7 and 9). This sector also specialises in carpets, jewellery, paraffin and oil, and alfalfa. Maidan Ghardabiya itself is the centre of a second complex south-east of Maidan Nasser, containing notably the livestock market, numerous butchers, blacksmiths and hardware merchants besides another covered fruit and vegetable market and poultry market. Maidan Nasser also lies between several streets of traditional stores and workshops in the old town, and several modern shops and services in the new town (bicycles, banks, cafés, post office etc.)

Thus on market days the square is crossed and re-crossed more frequently than any other part of the town. Within a radius of 100 metres of the centre of Maidan Nasser are situated a large proportion of the shops and craftsmen, and most of the covered and open markets in Misratah. It is also an important junction for east-west and north-south through routes on non-market days.

Types of shop vary considerably, but around Maidan Nasser they tend to be larger and better constructed than elsewhere. Some twenty-eight square metres of floor space is typical and concrete floors and iron shutters are almost standard. In the vicinity of Maidan Ghardabiya however shops are older and floor space more restricted, fifteen square metres being typical, while wooden doors and earth floors are quite common. These differences account for the slightly higher rents in Maidan Nasser much more than any advantages resulting from centrality or favourable location.

The present layout of Misratah's commercial centre has emerged over the last one hundred and fifty years largely as the result of initiatives taken by successive administrations, but also involving some private enterprise. The centre is compact, embracing a whole range of economic functions. The emphasis throughout is on small business units and individual buying and selling, though there are exceptions. But these traditional ways will change during the next decade : shops will replace stores; imported goods will overwhelm many domestic products; and marketing methods will be improved and rationalised. Indeed, NASA's ambitious schemes for the ex-Italian estates may usher in co-operative buying and selling and possibly the local processing of agricultural produce. All this implies change, but it may not be necessary to give a totally new heart to Misratah to fulfil these functions — the present centre could be adapted and expanded for the purpose. Such cautious replanning would have the advantage of preserving a sense of continuity in the centre, which more than any other part of the town has helped create a feeling of community in Misratah.

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