In the summer of 1929, the Maltese archaeologist Sir Themistocles Zammit led an exploratory excavation in government-owned fields in the valley of Għajn Tuffieha (probably apple-tree spring) (Wettinger 2000: 191), Mġarr, wherein passes the eponymous perennial spring. There, with the help of eight workmen, he uncovered, through a series of exploratory shafts, several structures dating back to the Roman period in Malta, as well as several mosaic pavements and paved passageways. The finds were of such importance that on July 1930 the investigation on this site resumed, leading to further discoveries. (Plate 1)

No detailed accounts of the excavations survive, but it is clear from the notebooks that the remains onsite were soon recognised for what they were: Roman baths, which the authors of this article suggest should be called balneae (Varro, De Ling. Lat. viii. 25, ix. 41) or balnea (Pliny Ep. ii. 17.) - public baths, rather than their previous description of thermae, which denotes larger complexes (Robertson 1971: 390). The term balnea may be preferred to balneae, since the former, listed in Pliny the Younger’s Epistles, is probably contemporaneous to the Għajn Tuffieha balnea.

Zammit dated the site to around the late first to second Centuries A.D. (Zammit 1930: 56), and noted that the site had been extensively damaged by agricultural activities and deep-rooted trees, with very little loose cultural material surviving (Zammit 1930: 58).

The archaeological investigations at the time did not follow the stratigraphic method, as is clear in several passages of Zammit’s notes (Zammit 1929: 23; Zammit: 1930: 32), an all-too standard practice at the time.

The years 1981 and 1982 saw two further seasons of excavations on site involving a joint team from the National Museum of Archaeology of Malta and Coluccio Salutati University of Pescia. (MAR 1981; MAR 1982) Results from these excavations were never published.

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1 The full title of the REBACA project is: European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) Measure 12/323 – Rehabilitation of Roman Baths and Christian Catacombs (REBACA) in Mġarr and Mosta, Malta. The project’s aims are to study, conserve and make accessible to the public the sites of Għajn Tuffieha Roman Baths, Mġarr, and Ta’ Bistra catacombs Areas B & C, Mosta. The beneficiary of the funds allocated to this project is Heritage Malta, the Maltese national agency for museums, conservation practice and cultural heritage. For more information visit http://www.heritagemalta.org/projects/eufunded/current/eafrd.html

2 The authors make up Heritage Malta’s archaeological team working on this project. Suzannah Depasquale is senior curator and the project leader on behalf of Heritage Malta; David Cardona is the curator and director of excavation; Jeremy Azzopardi is the project curator while Francesco Fontanelli, Josef Caruana and Christopher Busuttil make up the team of archaeologists employed for this excavation.
Conservation efforts, mostly consisting of edging and re-bedding, have been directed towards the surviving mosaics (Plates 2-4) and pavements, along with conservation assessment reports in the 1970s, 1990s, and 2011.

Over the past two years the site has been the focus of several studies and of archaeological investigations as part of the 75% EU-funded EAFRD REBACA Project, which includes studies and conservation actions aimed at rehabilitating the site to such a state where it can once again be made accessible to the public.

The studies involved in this project include topographical surveys, ecological studies, hydrology and geology studies, remote sensing surveys using mainly Ground Penetrating Radar and archaeological investigations which, a first for the site, are being fully documented – both on paper and digitally.

As an integral part of the REBACA project, the extensive archaeological excavations of the complex are set to re-investigate the remains uncovered in 1929-30 and in 1981-82, as well as to assess the true extent of the site, hoping in the process to further explore the hydrological aspect of the site. Furthermore, the question of their relatively remote location will be addressed.

The first phase of excavation involved the cleaning of the site from overgrowth and loose run-off material (Summer 2012). This allowed for an assessment and comparison of the visible remains with those seen in the plans of the old excavations. Cleaning also allowed a somewhat better understanding of a number of stone water channels, sometimes running along the northern side of the main passageway of the site. Although these channels were evidently used to transport water from one part of the site to another, both end points of these are still unknown. The only exception is one set of channels that lead to a stone water basin (Plate 5), possibly serving as a water feature. Other interesting features may also be observed including a piece of a lead pipe with an outside diameter of around 4cm, still fixed through the side of one of the stone channels. Also of interest are numerous lime and pottery repairs and linings carried out through the channels’ lifespan.

Nine trenches were opened in specific zones of the site with varying degrees of success. Three (3, 4 & 5) were opened on and beneath a plateau to the north east of the site. These revealed bedrock close to the surface and contained no features except for some plough marks. To the west, another trench (7) was found to be filled with numerous run-off layers containing mixed material including chert, Bronze Age, Roman and modern pottery as well as half a horseshoe. This mixture of material gives a glimpse of previous land use around the water spring during diverse phases but more work is required to understand better how the site was used before and after it was turned in a bathing complex.

Situated below the ridge in line with trenches 3, 4 and 5, is an extension to a trench excavated in 1981 – Trench 2. This extension has revealed a plastered surface running both horizontally and vertically up a rubble wall below the ridge. Further investigations are needed to find the relationship between this plastering and a large door sill just at the end of the main corridor. Prospects for trench 2 look even more interesting due to a group of stones forming a circular feature just to the south of, and possibly cutting into the plastered surface.
With over ten metres in length, trench 1 covers the width of the Natatio, the large swimming pool, and continues over the Natatio’s current southern limit, where a road with different phases of re-layering, leading down to the medieval hamlet nearby, was uncovered. This trench was started to answer a number of direct questions such as, for example, to identify the southern extent of the pool as well as its depth, and months into the excavation, the results have started to emerge. One of the most important features uncovered is a mortared step running along the southern edge of the known extent of the pool (Plate 6). To this step was added various patches of a friable mixture of lime and large pieces of pottery set above a bedding layer of fist-sized stones, all of which form part of the original floor and plaster covering of the pool. Finding these remains within an area of the natatio that was supposedly excavated in 1929 augurs well for what may lie beneath the untouched sections of the pool that may still lie beneath the medieval road.

Excavations will carry on throughout 2013 and volunteers are always needed. Should you wish to excavate with us or keep an eye on our progress you can do so through our excavation facebook page ‘Għajn Tuffieha Baths – Rebaca Project’ or contact the excavation director on david.cardona@gov.mt.

References


Pliny the Younger Epistulae


Wettinger, G 2000 Place-Names of the Maltese Islands ca. 1300 – 1800, PEG Publications, Malta.

Plate 1 - The hypocaust uncovered in 1929 was supported onto small brick arches that have since then disappeared. (Photo reproduced by courtesy of Heritage Malta)
Plates 2 – 4: While corridors were covered with lozenge-shaped tiles, most rooms had a mosaic floor. There are at least six mosaic floors, all of which showing different geometric designs. The three plates above show mosaic floors which were re-bedded and edged in previous conservation interventions.
Plate 5: Water collection was one of the major issues on the site and probably the main reason why the complex was built on this spot. Water was used for the two pools and the various rooms, as well as for water features, like the one here.
Plate 6: mortared step running along the southern edge of the known extent of the pool