



MALTA

Richard England

Monuments in peril

Unesco campaign
for the restoration of historic
monuments in Malta

The Unesco Press

The sheer stone façades of the buildings in the island's capital, Valletta, indicate the strategic defensive position of the Maltese islands which form the fulcrum of the Middle Sea.



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The Maltese islands measuring a mere 316 square kilometres, lie like a scorched leaf floating in the centre of the Mediterranean basin. Throughout their turbulent history in the midst of this seething sea, Malta and Gozo have received a remarkable overlay of cross-cultural heritages and fertilization. This collage of the imprint of man on history is the manifestation of the many peoples who have passed through and occupied these lands through their development in time.

The earliest inhabitants of these islands made up an agrarian society which left outstanding megalithic remains reflecting in their form the female shape of their worshipped deity; remarkably preserved temples belonging to a golden era of building of a civilization which occupied these shores between 5000 and 2000 B.C. Mysteriously eradicated, this culture was followed by a completely different people attributed to the bronze-age period (around 2000 B.C.).

Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks and Romans all occupied this archipelago placed midway between Phoenicia and the Pillars of Hercules. After the Roman conquest of 218 B.C., the next important date marks the arrival of the Apostle Paul in A.D. 60. The spread of Christianity continued, until the period of the Arab Conquest in A.D. 870. In 1090 the Maltese islands were taken by the Normans of Sicily and later by the Swabians, Angevins, Aragonese and Castilians. In 1530, the islands were offered by Charles V of Spain to the Order of St John of Jerusalem, after the Knights had been driven out of their previous headquarters on Rhodes. During three centuries of occupation, the Order not only withstood the great historic siege of 1565 but also designed and built a unique ensemble of rare and refined buildings, numerous in quantity and excellent in quality. In 1798, the islands were briefly occupied by Napoleon's forces while on their way to Egypt, and soon afterwards the Maltese rose in insurrection, and Lord Nelson was asked to come to the aid of the insurgents. The British fleet blockaded the harbours and subsequently, in 1801, Malta and Gozo became part of the British Empire. After many years of British occupancy, independence within the Commonwealth was attained in 1964, and in 1974 the Maltese islands became a republic.

Heritage in stone

Each and every period of occupation and tenure has left its architectural mark on this diminutive land, some in more opulent and marked form than others, but all surviving manifestations bear a common identifiable and recognizable bond. The sole building material available locally is the limestone rock of which the islands are actually composed. From the earliest of times, when man left his caves to roam these parched island territories, he used this natural rock to supplement and improve his environment, in an effort to fashion a life pattern on more comfortable and acceptable standards. This search for comfort, coupled with man's instinctive drive towards creating a sense of order, are the basic factors that have contributed to the final apparent visual characteristics of the land. It is not surprising, thanks to the constant imaginative and organizational utilization of this indigenous material (a globigerina sedimentary rock of the Tertiary period), that the Maltese islands appear almost as a totally man-made environment. The hand of man has etched, carved, hollowed out or built this material into one of the richest manifestations of architecture to be found in the whole of the Mediterranean area. The overall appearance and character is one of stone, stone and still more stone, an imposed and applied masonry order, yet still very closely related to nature and its elements. Each unit, golden in colour, easily cut, dressed and worked, is carefully placed with human tactile gesture to form the totality of this individual sculptural entity. The untutored, rustic, dry rubble-walling etching serpentine patterns over the acrid landscape, together with the Arab-like cubic architectural displays of rugged, almost abstract, townscapes, basking under the violent sun, and the sophisticated nobility of explosive Italianate baroque church domes make up the incredible architectural exuberance that is Malta. Everywhere expressions in stone come together responding to one another, to their surroundings and to the landscape itself. The group-cube organic clusters appear not as buildings but rather as gigantic sculptures cut out and carved from the

huge outcrops of the natural rock which form the landscape. This pattern of urbanization reads more as a negative act, as opposed to a positive one, in relation to the overall visual entity. It seems as if these gigantic outcrops of rock have streets, alleys, courtyards and squares carved into them, leaving groups of stone which in turn have been pierced and hollowed out to serve as dwellings. It is a measure of the success of the connection between the man-made and the natural landscape that the ultimate feeling communicated by the totality is one of stone having been removed rather than added.

The Maltese islands offer an environment of contrasts and contradictions encompassing over 6,000 years of history, tradition, pageant and people. Yet through the unity of the use of this local building material, drawn from the earth that constitutes the islands, there is a strong sense of continuity and homogeneity in this vast manifest overlay resulting from man's basic struggle for survival in an environment with extremely limited and restricted resources.

The islands because of their exiguous scale may be considered as a partial microcosm of the history of man and his resources as related to the total macrocosm of the world itself. Traditional ethnic strategies offer remarkable logical solutions which in today's energy crisis are worthy of study. The relationship between man and his resources has been more successful here than in the world in general. One is aware of a total utilization of existing materials and means, a fascinating demonstration of maximum utilization of minimal resources. In a strange manner the Maltese islands throughout their history have continuously remodelled themselves in response to the specific needs of the islanders at different times. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, the sum of the parts is in reality equal to the whole. Constantly to this day stone is being hollowed out, cut away and built up to be more suited to man's everyday requirements. What is there has always been there. It is merely that some of it has been remodelled.

These globigerina limestone blocks, golden in colour and easy to cut, stand in a quarry where they seem to reflect the clusters of completed buildings in the adjacent townscape.

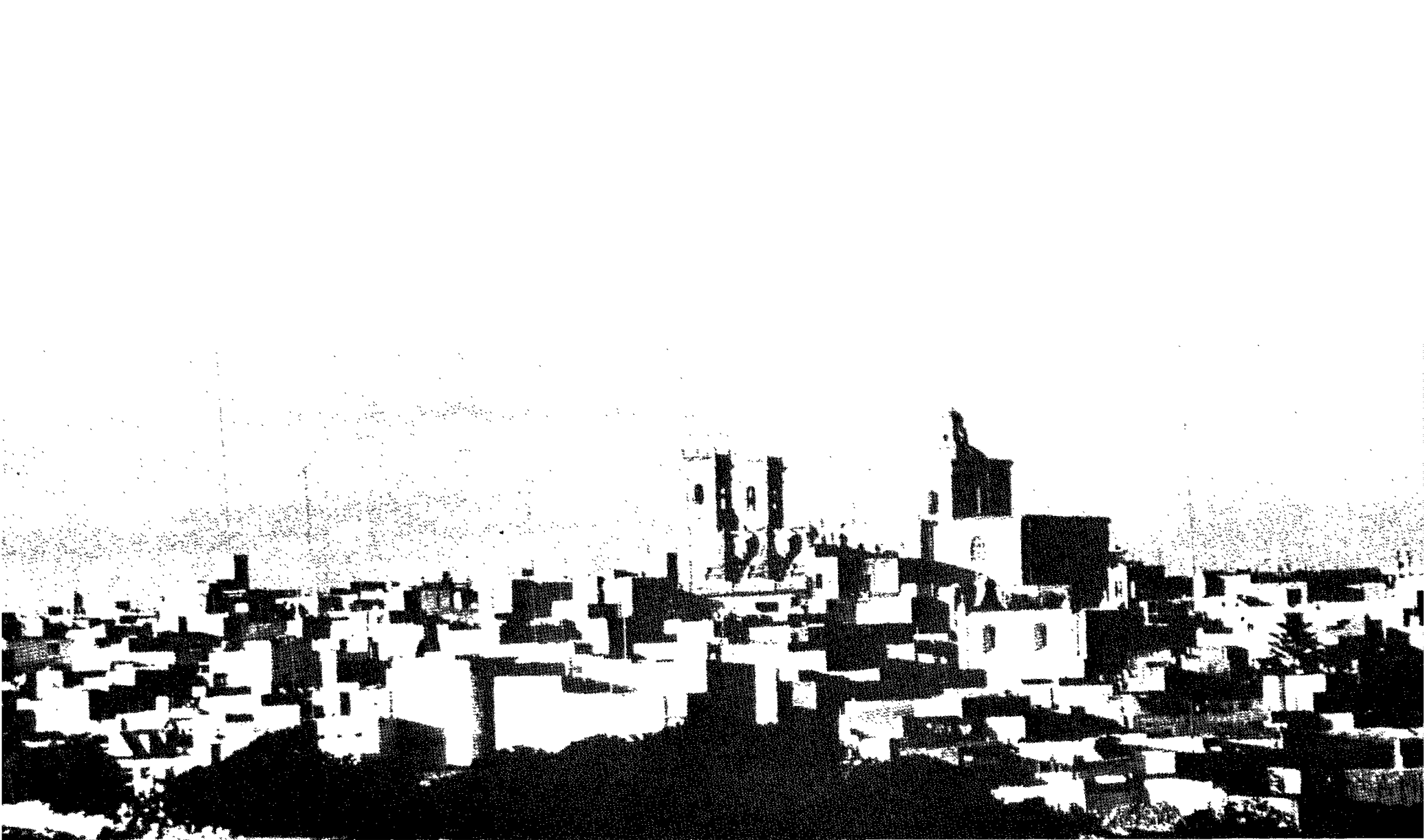




Monuments in peril

From this rich man-made microcosm, the Government of Malta, through its Ministry of Culture, has made a selection of outstanding monuments of extreme artistic and historical importance to be the initial pilot projects in this international campaign launched by Unesco for the restoration and preservation of Malta's cultural and artistic heritage. Despite the high architectural qualities of this stone island, relatively little has been written at the international level about its unique monuments. Among the multifarious architectural expressions spanning many millennia, Malta possesses an absolutely unique system of megalithic temples which are today considered to be the earliest of their type. These remains have perhaps not yet attracted the attention of the world, but without a doubt they express the finest architectural accomplishments of early man. In a much later and completely different order of building, we find a particularly rich heritage in the remains of an intricate defensive system, comprising a remarkable series of fortifications, palaces and great monuments dating from the time of the Knights of St John in the sixteenth, seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The Unesco campaign for the restoration of historic monuments on these islands focuses its attention on four unique complexes from these two great eras, which are among the finest architectural and artistic achievements to be found not only on these islands but, indeed, anywhere on our planet.

The sculptural exuberance of the Maltese islands; Arab-style cube-shaped buildings set closely together are crowned by Italianate churches, expressing the island's geographical position between these two cultures.



The Hal-Saffieni Hypogeum

The greatest architectural works of various civilizations throughout history have always taken the form of religious and other buildings of worship, reflecting perhaps man's respect, trepidation and fear of the powers of the unknown. It seems that the more difficult survival was, the greater the effort man devoted in his attempt to placate his gods. The Maltese islands' most impressive religious buildings are of the neolithic period dating back some 5,000 to 6,000 years. With the recalibrated carbon-dating system, these megalithic complexes have emerged as the earliest free-standing stone monuments erected by man, pre-dating the more famous Egyptian and other Middle Eastern settlements. Man at this period had just established his first deity, a divinity of intellect and reason, explicit and incarnate in the form of a female earth goddess. In his predilection for the cult of fertility and reproduction, together with his understanding of the cyclic nature of time, man modelled his initial interior spaces on the container form of the pregnant goddess herself.

The degree of technical accuracy achieved by these people in their use of the indigenous island stone is prodigious even by today's standards. All the more so, when one considers that these early inhabitants did not have access to metal tools. Both architectural and artistic detailing are of notable quality. These people, long departed and buried in past millennia, were probably the ancestors of the highly developed race which a few thousand years later conceived the computer-calendar of Stonehenge. Their mental as well as physical prowess is however already evident in these examples on the Maltese islands.

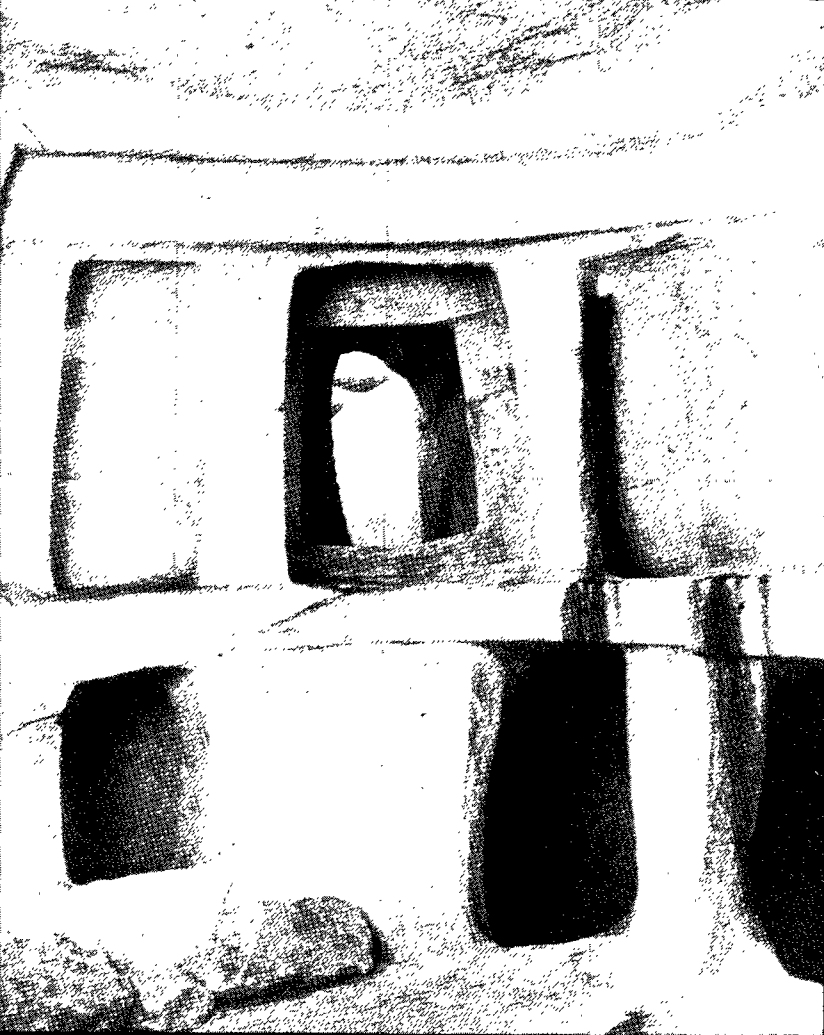
The Hal-Saffieni Hypogeum is an extensive rock-cut labyrinth which honeycombs under the surface to produce a unique example of large-scale subtractive architecture. On a site measuring some 500 square metres, passages, chambers and orbicular spaces meander and evoke the 'body space' of the goddess herself. The feeling within this elaborate infrastructure of cut-out spatial

modulations, expressed in articulate womb-like contained areas, is one of being in some scooped-out wandering organic cathedral. The large chambers, richly decorated with remarkable motifs executed in ochre or black pigment, reproduce underground the architectural characteristics of the megalithic monuments above. These 'tree-of-life', tendril and spiral drawings are the only examples of megalithic paintings to be found in the Maltese islands. The complex is organized on three distinct levels: the entrance at ground level (at present built over), the main floor, and the lower chambers at a depth of over ten metres. Everywhere on the main floor are examples of early man's remarkable artistic achievements. To this day, these spaces reflect their builders' respect and involvement with earth as the great mother. This is a manifestation of the highest order, one of worldwide importance, a witness to the very development of mankind itself.

Today, however, the complex is suffering from the effects of the high moisture content of the underground atmosphere. Extensive algae and lichen growths on the rock surfaces are threatening the whole series of decorative motifs with complete eradication. Highly specialized treatment is required urgently, together with the immediate introduction of artificial ventilation methods in order to be able to control accurately both temperature and humidity grades. Re-integrating the original entrance will greatly improve the site and give a better comprehension of the spatial hierarchy and organization of the complex. This improvement of the site can be brought about by a combination of demolition and excavation processes. It would also be necessary to clear away a number of houses built around the complex. Restoration would then allow the exploration of a unique prehistoric monument as originally set out and conceived by its designers and architects on these islands, three or four thousand years before the birth of Christ.



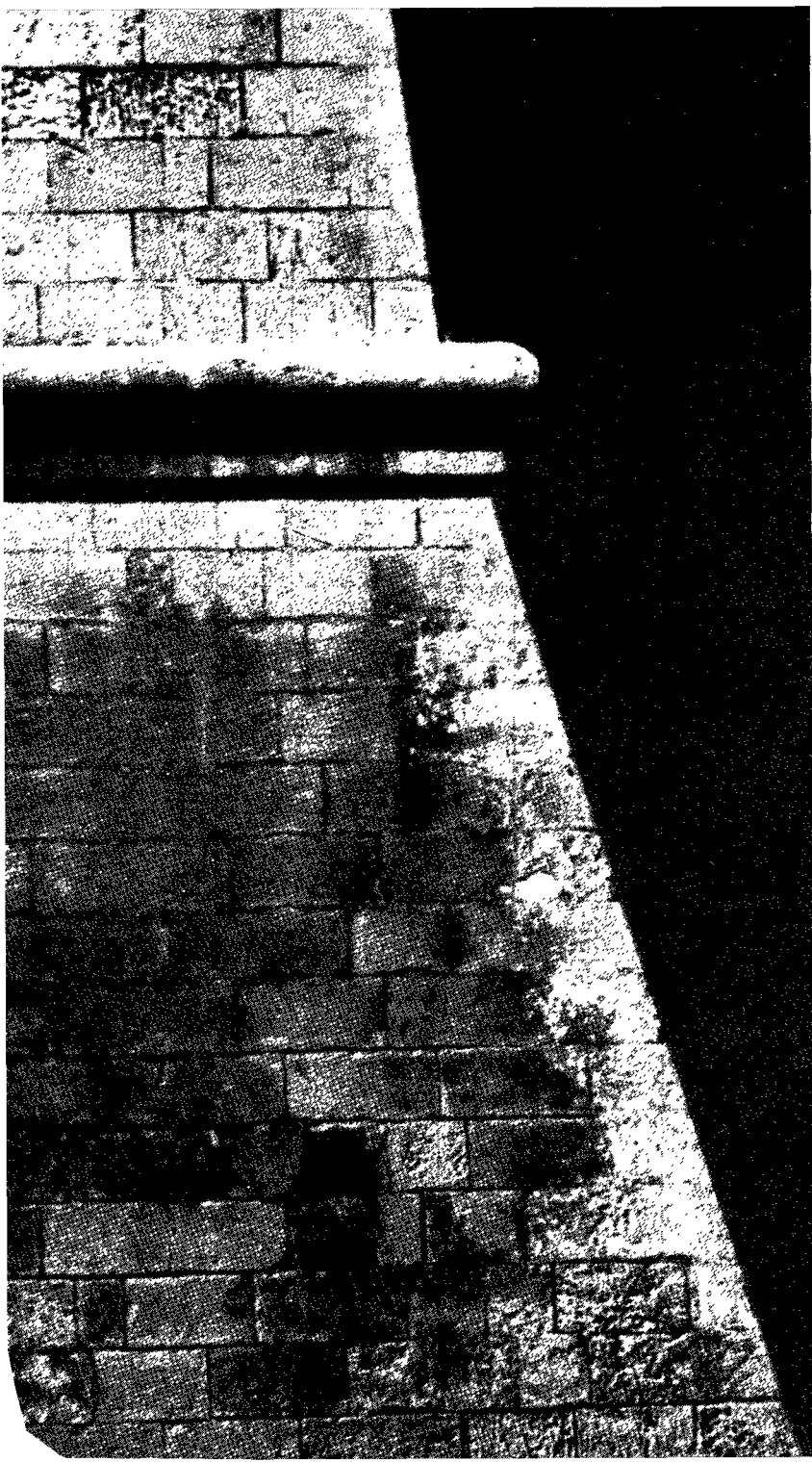
Early man's rock-hewn spaces were initially modelled on the container form of the earth goddess herself. The Hal-Saffieni Hypogeum displays a degree of architectural excellence which is among the most remarkable of primitive man.



In the rock-hewn hypogeum there is little distinction between floor, wall and ceiling surfaces, which give the whole an extraordinary womb-like aspect.
[Photo : Joseph A. Vella, F.R.P.S.]

Earth goddess figurine used as a model for one of man's earliest examples of interior space.





Detail of the military fortifications built by the Order of St John of Jerusalem to defend the islands (note the effect of weathering and decay on the limestone blocks).

Since the Maltese islands are situated in a position of extreme strategic importance in the centre of the historic 'Middle Sea', the works of man in moulding its natural rock have always displayed pronounced characteristics of strategy, defence and protection. Even the introvert bleak fortress-like façades of the houses are a result of the continuous threat of attack or invasion to which the islands were subject throughout their history. Nature had already provided this solitary fortress with a wealth of natural defences in the form of magnificently sheltered harbours, and had further enriched this gift by an endless abundance of easily worked building material with which to augment them.

Most of the defence elements that remain today belong to the period of the islands' occupation by the Order of St John of Jerusalem. The Knights, hospitallers and soldiers of Christendom, arrived in Malta during the early part of the sixteenth century, after their loss of Rhodes. The natural stone available was used by the Order to extend the existing sheer rock faces in order to produce precipices of curtain walls, bastions and counterscuffs of a truly heroic system of military fortifications, a fascinating monument to a powerful partnership of military men and island rock.

This defensive war-machine system was to prove impenetrable during the great siege of 1565, an event of significant importance not only for the Maltese islands but for the whole of Europe itself. The fortress of St Elmo was perhaps the prime witness to this strategic battle between the Order and the invading Turks. Situated on the north-eastern tip of the peninsula where Valletta now stands, the site was of vital importance in denying enemy forces entry into both Marsamxett and the Grand Harbours. Planned by the Spanish engineer Pietro Pardo, who was specially sent over from Sicily in 1552, the initial structure was a star-shaped

fort, an inefficient and ill-conceived building which was reduced to little more than a heap of rubble in the epic battles of the siege of 1565. After the withdrawal of the Turkish forces, the Grand Master turned his attention to the building of the new city which was later to bear his name. Valletta, conceived by Francesco Laparelli as a fine essay carved in cubic prose of dressed masonry, also incorporated the new fortress of St Elmo redesigned (in principle on Pardo's plan) but enlarged and strengthened to a much greater degree. Various additions under Grand Masters Wignacourt and Perellos, together with later British contributions, complete the fort layout as we know it today, a formidable defence system rising proudly, with defiant strength, from the clear blue waters surrounding it below.

Following the Maltese Government's recent successful conversion of the adjacent hospital of the Order (Sacra Infermeria) into the Conference Centre of Dar il-Mediterran, the walls and spaces of St Elmo now cry out for immediate restoration and preservation. This new focus in the city of Valletta must now be extended to incorporate the fort's architectural value: its chapel (a survivor from the original complex), its great central courtyard and the unique panoramic views from its parapets. Here again the ravages of time, man and most of all the natural elements in the form of salt-air corrosion and decay (a persistent problem with all the limestone monuments of Malta), together with partial disuse, have taken a heavy toll. This culture-soaked ambience must be re-used, given a new life and revitalized so as to ensure total environmental preservation and resuscitation, which will incorporate all the varied aspects of such complex and vast spatial entity as Fort St Elmo: one of the great bastions in the history and defence of Christendom.



Aerial view of the fort of St Elmo, showing its strategic position in relation to the two flanking harbours. This system of fortification is the result of a fascinating partnership of military man and island rock.



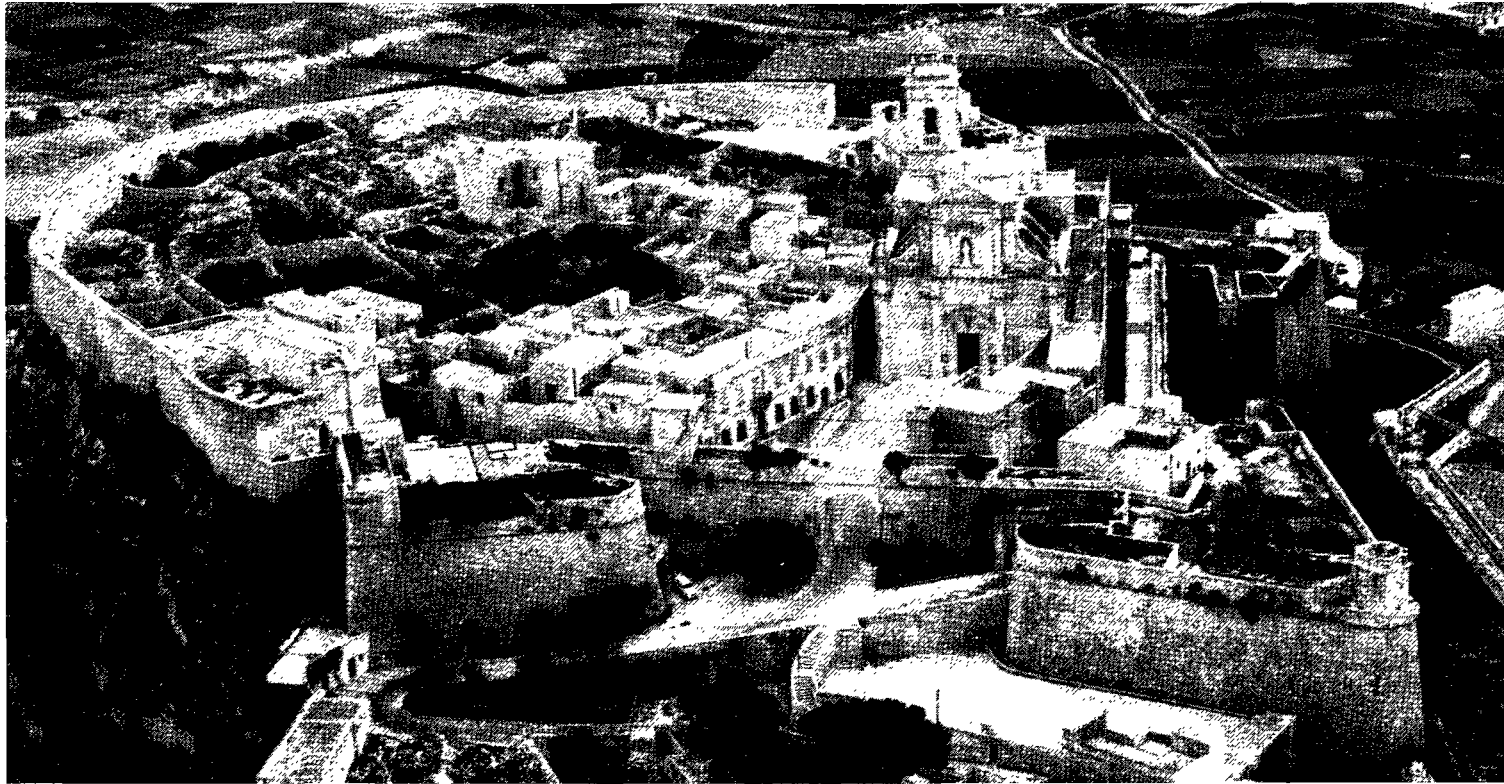
The Castello in Gozo is situated in the centre of the small island on one of its many rising plateaux, a natural citadel whose site has been further emphasized and exploited by sheer fortification and defence walls. Modelled as a sister city to Mdina, Malta's former capital, the Castello provided, throughout the island's history, a protective haven into which the inhabitants of Gozo could retreat when raiding corsairs approached. The original city was completely destroyed in July 1551 by an extensive raid in which the Barbary corsairs of North Africa carried both the surviving garrison and the inhabitants off into slavery. Some 5,000 Gozitans were taken prisoner and the island was almost completely depopulated. By 1565 a second citadel was built on a reduced scale, and at a later date Lapparelli also advised on improvements and additions. Even before the 1693 earthquake which shook the islands, the Castello was already reported to have been in a ruinous state. Many of the houses had been neglected and the fortification lines required urgent repair. The building of a new cathedral in 1711

by Lorenzo Gafa helped to inject a new sense of vitality, but even this project was not completed. It remains to this day uncrowned by its designer's intended dome at the crossing of transept and nave. Today the Castello stands dominant and powerful but silent and virtually empty. Only the immediate area around the cathedral is in fact still intact and inhabited while the rest of the walled area comprises only derelict ruins. Enshrouded by thick prickly-pear growths, only the scantily defined narrow meandering paths and traces of the foundations remain visible today.

Here, again, large-scale restoration and preservation are needed. The Castello offers interesting ground for archaeological excavation. These remains, integrated with restored medieval houses, adequately illuminated and carefully landscaped, would provide an environment of particular interest. This is an area that holds tremendous potential, but a complete programme can only be worked out after professional archaeological investigations have been completed.



*The Castello in Gozo, a natural citadel strengthened
by sheer fortification walls.*







The baroque cathedral dome rising above the surrounding cube-shaped structures of the ancient citadel. [Photo : D.O.I. (Malta)]

Situated in the centre of the island, at a height of some 150 metres above sea level, the ancient Citadel of Mdina floats above the surrounding landscape, like some remembered vision from the past, metamorphosed into contemporary reality. Its majestic silhouette suggests an ethereal dream-like image echoing a pulsating silence. Severe, serene, and homogeneously unspoilt as it stands today, Mdina has a historical and architectural background that is as rich, turbulent and far-reaching as that of the Maltese islands themselves. It was, however, with the arrival of the Normans, that the Citadel of Medina (as it was then known) started to assume growing socio-religious importance, especially with the construction of the cathedral on the site where according to tradition the House of Publius, the first bishop of Malta, had stood 1,000 years earlier. This Romanesque structure, with its free-standing bell-tower, was to survive till the earthquake of 1693.

During the following periods many new buildings of the so-called 'Siculo-Norman' style of architecture were erected. With the coming of the Order in 1530, Mdina, as the island's capital, welcomed the first Grand Master who was immediately to opt for the port of Birgu as the headquarters of his seafaring Order. The citadel was to retain the seat of the Università, the municipal government system of the island at that time, but it was evident that the whole complex was gradually declining. This was further emphasized by the building of the new city of Valletta.

The earthquake of 1693, which destroyed many Sicilian towns and part of the Gozo Gran Castello, seemed to sound the citadel's deathknell by shaking it violently and leaving it a sad witness to many a ruin, including the Norman cathedral, which was almost completely destroyed. However, ill fate and destruction can sometimes produce virile reactions which suddenly turn apparent death

into strong rejuvenation. This vital moment occurred with the rebuilding of the cathedral by the Maltese architect Lorenzo Gafà in 1702. His blossoming baroque dome crowned the surrounding cubic structures and rose in a resplendent powerful thrust completely reshaping the whole city and giving it a grandeur that manifested symbolically the matriarchal domination and power of the Church, not only within the citadel walls themselves, but over the whole of the island.

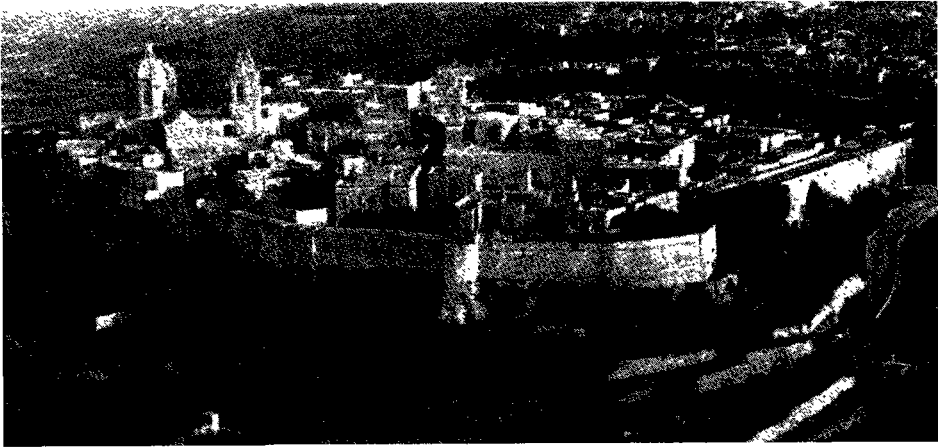
Twenty-nine years after the earthquake, Anton-Manoel de Vilhena took over as Grand Master of the Order and his attention was immediately diverted to the old city which his predecessors had neglected for practically 200 years. His first move was to authorize the restoration of the devastated city by a decree issued in 1722, and to order the demolition and reconstruction of the whole entrance area, a move which was to lead to the complete transformation of the ancient capital. Subsequently the whole of Mdina became a stage-set for this Grand Master who must have felt that this previously neglected citadel offered him possibilities not only for demonstrating power of the Order within the walls, but also for projecting his own identity—an opportunity not readily available in Valletta, too strongly identified with its creator, La Valette. His contributions, through the work of architect François de Mondion, at that time assistant to the French military engineer De Tigne, produced a visual ensemble of the highest quality which not only greatly enriched the citadel but revitalized it into the living environment of grandeur and refinement that we know today.

Perhaps the outstanding architectural masterpiece of this revival period was the unique Vilhena Palace situated just within the city gate. Built in 1730, the building reflects the strong French mannerist influence of its architect and designer. Today it houses the National Museum of Natural History, and was partially restored for this purpose. The back portion of this palace, however, collapsed years ago when a part of the bastion wall system gave way. It is now quite clear that part of this structure was erected on faulty foundations and that rapid measures must be taken immediately to stop the movement and eventual collapse of the rear part of this superb baroque palace.



Mdina is the product of over 1,000 years of building activity, yet despite the obvious variations in architectural expression, from primitive to sophisticated, the whole is held together and unified by the constant presence of the limestone building material used throughout. This aspect of a unifying grammar deserves particular attention, and gives a sense of permanent dignity and complementary serenity which makes the whole citadel an outstanding example of visual townscape. These are the qualities of this citadel and also in particular of this palace. They form environments and buildings whose survival we must ensure for the enjoyment of man, not just today but also in the future.

Entrance gate to the courtyard of the Vilhena Palace which now houses the Museum of Natural History. The back portion of the building is in urgent need of restoration due to faulty foundations. [Photo : Joseph A. Vella, F.R.P.S.]



The survival, preservation and restoration of these particular monuments is a concern not only of the Maltese but of people the world over. In the words of Malta's Minister of Culture, Miss Agatha Barbara: 'It is an internationally accepted concept that the artistic and cultural heritage of one people belongs also to the rest of the world, for this is the basic concept of human civilization; this is the natural bond between all people.' The task of saving and preserving this rich heritage scattered within these small-scale islands is one of considerable magnitude and therefore beyond the financial scope of the Maltese people and authorities. A nation of just over 300,000 inhabitants cannot face alone the burden of repairing and preserving a historical background of such magnitude. Although the work involved will be long, delicate, arduous and complex, these monuments will be saved. Their destruction would impoverish not only man's history but his very culture.

The personal efforts of Malta's Minister of Culture and of Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, Director-General of Unesco, augur well for the success of this appeal. Unesco has undertaken such tasks

before; the immediate precedent one recalls is of course that of the temples of Abu Simbel. The removal of those two great monuments stone by stone was indeed an achievement of the greatest possible order. In the case of Malta, international cultural solidarity is again called for on a large scale to make this campaign for the preservation of the Maltese islands' cultural heritage a success. Architectural and artistic examples of the highest international quality are at stake. Their destruction and loss would make man a poorer creature culturally.

Modern man must today preserve Malta for his children, for it represents a lasting testament of over 6,000 years of human achievement. It is our duty to fight against its decay, desecration and destruction. These monuments are stricken and time is against us. The heritage of this small land is the common heritage of the greater family of man. To save it is the duty of each and every member of that family.

