

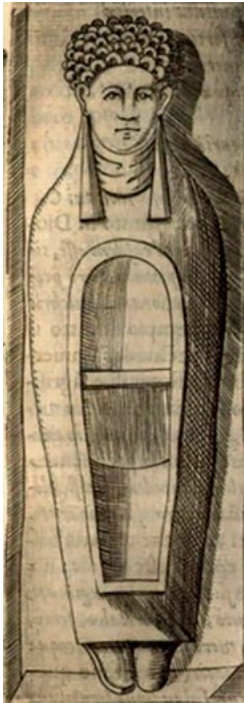


The TRANSFORMATION *of* ANTIQUITIES

*How Malta's Historic
Monuments Evolved*

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*Historic monuments have not always been seen as cultural treasures. In his Ph.D., **Jonathan Borg** explores how Malta's antiquities, once valued primarily for their material use, evolved into symbols of national heritage, shaped by shifting attitudes, politics, and elite influence over the centuries. ➤*



Drawing of the Punic sarcophagus that Giovanni Francesco Abela found and placed in his garden. Source: Giovanni Francesco Abela *Della descrizione di Malta* (Paolo Bonacota, 1647)



View of the Marina with Upper Barrakka Gardens by W. Anderson (1787–1837) showing the Amati Column on a pedestal underneath the long balcony of the Ġnien is-Sultan (now destroyed) Photo by Jonathan Borg at MUŻA – Malta Museum of Art

The Maltese archipelago, steeped in history, is home to a rich array of antiquities. Over the centuries, these ancient objects, initially seen as relics or mere curiosities, underwent a remarkable transformation to become historic monuments – symbols that evoke a deep sense of the past. But how did this transformation take place? What attitudes, behaviours, and sociopolitical contexts shaped the way we view these artefacts today? Jonathan Borg, a scholar with extensive experience in heritage management and cultural conservation, explores these questions in his doctoral research.

Borg's project examines the trajectories of 20 diverse ancient objects, including statues, sarcophagi, inscriptions, coins, ceramics, and glass. By studying how these objects were treated over time, from their initial rediscovery to their eventual recognition as historic monuments, he uncovers the factors that contributed to this transformation. He traces these histories over 400 years, from the early 16th century to the introduction of formal legislation for the protection of antiquities in Malta in 1925. His study is unique in that it focuses on objects rather than buildings, a relatively unexplored area in Maltese heritage research.

WHAT MAKES A MONUMENT?

The word *monument* derives from the Latin *monere*, meaning 'to remind'. As Borg explains, 'an object becomes a historical monument the moment someone recognises it as

a testimony of the past, choosing to preserve and valorise it rather than destroy it.' This transformation occurs when an object is recognised not merely for its physical or utilitarian value but as a testament to history. This doesn't necessarily mean placing it in a museum, but rather showcasing it in a way that highlights its historical significance.

In Malta, as in Europe, this recognition often took time, with objects initially serving practical purposes before being seen as historical treasures. 'Take, for instance, an excavation ordered by the Mdina town council in the early 16th century. The explicit goal was to retrieve marble, which was to be turned into lime for painting town buildings,' points out Borg. The fact that the marble came from ancient ruins was secondary to its utilitarian use.

Similarly, Borg recounts an incident in which ancient coins were melted down to create new objects despite their historical significance. These examples illustrate how objects in the past, even when recognised as old, were often valued more for their material benefits than for their cultural importance.

NOT ALL TRANSFORMATIONS ARE LINEAR

The process of transforming antiquities into monuments is gradual. While some objects were still repurposed or even destroyed, a definitive shift in thinking began to take hold over the last 400 years.

In the 19th century, private collectors of antiquities began to come under scrutiny. Scholars lamented that these private

collections deprived the public from viewing and appreciating Malta's cultural heritage. In this period, much as in the rest of Europe, Malta saw the establishment of the first museums, which played a crucial role in preserving and displaying these collections for future generations. By the mid-20th century, we see the emergence of patrimony – the idea that certain objects represent the collective heritage of a people. This modern notion would form the basis for later legal frameworks designed to protect such historically significant objects.

Despite the growing appreciation for antiquities, Borg emphasises that the process of transformation was not linear. There were instances where objects were destroyed, particularly when disputes arose over their ownership or value. Before the introduction of legal protections, some individuals would deliberately damage ancient objects to prevent them from being sold or taken by the government.

'A key moment in Maltese history came in 1647 when Giovanni Francesco Abela found a sarcophagus and placed it prominently in his garden with a copperplate inscription,' claims Borg. He explains that by doing so, Abela ensured the sarcophagus' memory would not be forgotten, demonstrating the early stages of recognising an object's historical value. 'Writing about it and providing a description was a way of preserving its memory and elevating its significance beyond its original purpose.'

According to Borg, another critical step in an object's transformation into a monument

is when specific actions are taken to reuse that object without destroying it. For instance, the Amati Column, a marble column originating from the Classical period, was re-shaped into a commemoration monument of the Italian Hospitaller Fra Giulio Amati in the 17th century to celebrate his sponsorship of infrastructural works in the Grand Harbour. A century earlier, such an object might have been destroyed, but by reusing it, people began to harness its symbolic value, marking it as an important historical monument. It can now be found and appreciated at the Malta Maritime Museum.

GROUNDING THEORY: A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO RESEARCH

Borg's methodology, based on the principles of grounded theory, allows him to draw insights directly from the data on the chosen objects rather than imposing preconceived hypotheses. 'Unlike traditional research, which begins with a clear hypothesis, grounded theory starts with data collection, allowing theories to emerge organically,' Borg explains. Initially, he conducted a literature review and identified gaps in existing studies. Then, he examined the data without a specific focus, allowing themes and patterns to emerge.

A key advantage of this approach is its flexibility. As Borg delved deeper into the history of these objects, he refined his research objectives, ensuring that his conclusions were not shaped by preconceived ideas. This reflexivity, periodically pausing to reflect on



The Amati Column is a marble column originating from the Classical period, which underwent re-shaping in commemoration of Fra Giulio Amati's sponsorship of infrastructural works in the Grand Harbour. Photo by Jonathan Borg at Malta Maritime Museum



'The recognition of the "passage of time" is one of the attributes for an object to acquire the status of a historical monument.'

Jonathan Borg
Image courtesy of Jonathan Borg

his own biases and interpretations, allowed Borg to minimise the influence of subjective judgments, ensuring that his findings remained rooted in the evidence.

Throughout his research, Borg noticed that the individuals most interested in Maltese antiquities tended to be members of the educated elite. 'In the 17th and 18th centuries, it was local and foreign elites who valued these objects, often as symbols of their own aspirations. Maltese intellectuals, many of whom identified as European and were strongly influenced by Italian culture, saw these objects as a link to a glorious past.' For them, collecting and preserving antiquities was a way of asserting their European identity. Foreign scholars on the Grand Tour (a cultural journey through Europe taken by wealthy young men from the 17th–19th centuries to enrich their education and social status) also played a role, viewing Malta's antiquities as part of the larger Mediterranean legacy.

Religious scholars, too, had their reasons for valuing ancient objects. Inscriptions on certain artefacts

were seen as proof of biblical events, further enhancing their cultural and spiritual significance. Over time, these layers of meaning contributed to the objects being viewed as more than just relics – they became symbols of a shared history.

THE MODERN IMPLICATIONS OF BORG'S RESEARCH

Borg's research has important implications for modern Maltese society. As he points out, 'the government does not operate in a vacuum. Rather, it is shaped by the aspirations and values of the people it serves.' The selection and preservation of monuments are influenced by broader societal trends, as well as political considerations. For example, the statue of Queen Victoria in Valletta is a point of contention for some Maltese, as it represents colonial rule. However, the statue of Grand Master de Vilhena, another foreign ruler, is largely accepted due to the Knights' more favourable place in Maltese history. 'The recognition of the "passage of time" is one of the attributes for an object to acquire

the status of a historical monument,' states Borg.

These differing attitudes toward monuments highlight the complex relationship between cultural heritage and national identity. Borg hopes his study will encourage a more nuanced understanding of how and why certain objects are preserved while others are neglected. He believes that by examining trends in valorising ancient objects, we can better understand how to treat monuments today.

Transforming Maltese antiquities into historic monuments is a fascinating and complex process. Through his research, Borg sheds light on the shifting attitudes and behaviours that shaped this transformation over the centuries. In turn, the biographies of ancient objects reveal patterns in the way Malta's cultural heritage has been shaped by both local and European influences. His work not only contributes to our understanding of the past but also provides valuable insights into how we might approach the preservation of antiquities in the future. **T**