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# FOREWORD

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The Editor

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As Chair of Heritage Malta's Research Committee I feel honoured to have been asked to write the Foreword to this first publication of a collection of research papers showcasing the breadth, and depth, of Heritage Malta's research interests. These papers were presented during a public seminar held at the Aula Magna of the University of Malta Valletta Campus on 13 September 2013. The very well attended seminar showcased this research to an audience which included scholars, academics, students, Cultural Heritage professionals and interested individuals. This seminar also formed part of the celebrations of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of Heritage Malta as the National Agency for museums, conservation practice and cultural heritage.

As I had remarked when addressing the closing session of the conference, this was the brainchild of Heritage Malta's Research Programme Sub-Committee which I chair and which was set up to enable and promote all possible aspects of research related to the sites, museums and collections under the care of Heritage Malta. The members of this sub-committee envisaged this conference as a vehicle for presenting, on as wide a scale as possible, this sterling work which is not usually much promoted at the local level. The high response generated was however not expected. Although we knew that much sound research was going on, we were extremely pleased to note that so many professional staff were willing to show, explain and discuss the scientific work which goes on quietly, but continuously, behind the scenes. This is a true reflection of some of the excellent work carried out by Heritage Malta's dedicated staff.

The nine papers presented in this concise but significant volume ably mirror the previously mentioned wide range of research activities which are a fundamental part of Heritage Malta's work. They also provide a good insight into the research that goes on behind the walls of museums, archaeological sites, conservation studios and scientific laboratories, which is an essential part of Heritage Malta's commitment to the preservation of our past, and its presentation to the world at large, with its diverse and multiple audiences, and their varied desires and needs.

In the first paper in this collection, David Cardona, Curator, Phoenician, Roman, Medieval sites, joins forces with Sharon Sultana, Senior Curator, National Museum of Archaeology, and Lindsay Galea, Conservator of Books, Paper and Photographs, to shed new light on the photographic collection (including negatives) and on the field (archaeological) notebooks, housed within the National Museum of Archaeology. The authors ably illustrate how these information sources can work together to provide today's cultural heritage professional with vital material to permit specific management and conservation decisions to be taken in an informed manner - truly a perfect example of the interdisciplinarity which underpins the field of cultural heritage today.

The second paper in this collection, by Head of Curatorial Affairs, Godwin Vella, and Senior Curator of Ethnography, Kenneth Cassar, vividly illustrates how one of the central museums to Heritage Malta, the Inquisitor's Palace in Birgu (Vittoriosa), has transitioned "From Mausoleum to Museum". The paper emphasises the aims of the long-term rehabilitation of the building, focusing on "the conservation of the multi-layered architectural fabric, the restoration of its sophisticated ambience as at the height of its use as a foremost centre of power in the Maltese Islands, an increasingly engaging visitor experience, and the sensible development of adequate ancillary facilities in line with modern museum needs and visitor expectations." Certainly not an easy task, but most ably discussed here.

This is followed by an equally engaging paper on "The Culture Change in Malta from Restoration to Conservation and Preservation", narrating the history of conservation in Malta, including the role of Heritage Malta, from the pen of Heritage Malta's former Head of Conservation, Joseph Schiro'. The interdisciplinary theme is again taken up by this author, who says: "Conservation is a complex activity. The complexity lies not so much in the intervention as this can usually be executed, especially when there is scientific backing and is done in an interdisciplinary way. But conservation-conscious behaviour should be a collective activity and not a domain limited to the conservator-restorer." The author also quotes the conservation theoretician Muñoz Viñas (2005) who states that it is important "to consider the different meanings that an object has for different groups of people, and to decide not just which meanings should prevail, but also to combine them to satisfy as many views as possible" - which is, or should be, the ultimate aim of conservation, but not an easy task to fulfil.

Next follow three papers with an archaeological theme: “The St Augustine’s Catacombs Complex: Excavations and Preliminary Assessment” by David Cardona, Glen Farrugia and Amanda Gustafsson Azzopardi – from the Phoenician, Roman, Medieval sites section of Heritage Malta; “New Excavations at the Ghajn Tuffieha Roman Baths: A Preliminary Report” by David Cardona, Suzannah Depasquale, Giorgio Schembri, Jeremy Azzopardi, Francesco Fontanelli, Josef Caruana and Christopher Busuttill – from the same section; and “Environmental Monitoring at the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum: an Overview of some Pertinent Factors” by Mario Galea, Principal Conservator, Preventive Conservation Unit, and MariaElena Zammit, Curator, Prehistoric Sites.

The St Augustine’s catacombs project, we are told, saw the light of day as a result of the formation of “a consortium of eight partners from Malta and Sicily [which] started the application process for European funding to conserve eleven late Roman hypogea located in Rabat, Mosta, Ragusa and Santa Croce Camerina, and this included St Augustine’s catacombs ... Funds allocated for the rehabilitation of the catacombs, which amounted to 1.37 million Euros, were utilised to carry out infrastructural works, archaeological excavation and surveys, conservation, 3D laser-scanning and to address accessibility issues while working on a heritage interpretation programme.” The Ghajn Tuffieha Roman Baths, on the other hand, “are currently being re-investigated and conserved as part of the Rehabilitation of Roman Baths and Christian Catacombs (REBACA) project funded through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)... which also includes rehabilitation works of Christian catacombs on areas B and C of the Ta’ Bistra Catacombs in Mosta.” Both of these projects ably illustrate the commitment of Heritage Malta, and its archaeological sections, to the study, research, preservation and promotion of Malta’s rich, but not always well-known, archaeological heritage.

The readers of this collection of papers, and especially those who have Malta’s archaeology at heart, will certainly have no doubt of Heritage Malta’s commitment to this rich heritage – amply illustrated in recent years also by the heavy investment in the preservation of The Megalithic Temples of Malta, which together form a serial UNESCO World Heritage Site (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/mt>). The paper in this volume on the prehistoric Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, another UNESCO World Heritage Site, amply illustrates how complex, delicate and interdisciplinary the conservation of an underground site can be. Focusing on one particular aspect of the dedicated studies and research which have been carried out for decades at this particular site, the authors state in one of their concluding sentences: “This project is providing the necessary tools so that the site may be more easily monitored for potential environmental instability, as well as providing the required scientific quality data that would enable further research in the preventive conservation of such a delicate World Heritage Site.” This is most certainly a statement which emphasises the vital importance of scientific input in conservation today.

The next two research papers focus on the conservation of Fine Art. In the paper on “The Conservation-Restoration of St Paul Liberating Malta from the Turkish Siege of 1427 by Mattia Preti”, by paintings conservator Ray Spiteri, and that on the “Conservation and Restoration of the Filfla Triptych: Challenges and Fresh Observations of a Triptych Panel Painting” by conservators David Bugeja, Anthony Spagnol and Michael Formosa, detailed descriptions are given of two important paintings (on canvas and wooden panels respectively), including the process of their conservation: from documentation, to analysis, to treatment. A running theme throughout this conference, taken up also by Spiteri, is that “The conservator has also to exercise a stringent code of ethics, ranging from tests to establish the safest materials to use, both for the artefact and the conservator, to the use of stable and reversible materials that will not present any future risks to the artefact.” This is reinforced by Bugeja *et al.*, who in their particular case study highlight the need “to first identify and differentiate the re-painted areas from the original ... (as well as) the modifications and additions to the wooden support” greatly supporting the same work ethic.

The above-mentioned papers illustrate how important it is to support treatments with high-level scientific analysis, to inform decisions on materials and methods to be used, whilst also keeping in mind the values and meanings of the objects, or sites, (or indeed buildings and structures) to be conserved and/or restored. Scientists Matthew Grima and Roslyn Debattista, from Heritage Malta’s Conservation Laboratories, in their paper on the “Potential

Misinterpretation of Pigment Composition following Sample Preparation” show how scientific research can help conservators avoid interpretation errors in the analytical part of their work. The authors point out that “quite a large fraction of conservation treatment is focused on paintings, in particular due to their high occurrence and need for continuous care stemming from the different sensitive materials present on them” and that “It is of major interest within the conservation field to examine the constituents of paint layers within particular areas in paintings for purposes of individual pigment identification and an understanding of the stratigraphy, the latter being a visualised vertical perspective of the cross-section of a paint fragment”. These two researchers have thus dedicated part of their research, and their paper, to try to determine whether the preparation of samples for analysis, a crucial step in the analytical process, can in itself introduce sources of error into the eventual interpretation of results. A truly thought-provoking and discussion-stimulating piece of research.

It can be concluded that the papers, though at first glance widely different, also have several common threads. They are certainly a window onto the varied and excellent research being carried out across the various Heritage Malta sections and museums, and it is hoped that they will serve as a stimulus to aspiring cultural heritage professionals to develop an interest in these fields. They are however also a vivid illustration of the intricate interdisciplinarity which forms the foundation of modern-day conservation and of the importance of ethics and values when preserving and presenting cultural heritage artefacts and sites. These go hand-in-hand with time and patience, as well as discipline, training and research, building towards what is today widely considered an important educational and informative area - presenting cultural heritage to the world at large, and preserving it for present and future generations.

I sincerely hope that this compendium of research papers will be read with the same interest and enthusiasm shown by the audience during the conference, and that I myself experienced when helping to edit this book. I conclude by auguring that Heritage Malta will continue to support the sterling research activities of its professional staff, which I hope will also be disseminated in a follow-up volume in the not-so-distant future.

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