

Excavations at Mdina – 2001

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In an unprecedented exercise the Mdina Rehabilitation Committee engaged the Archaeology Services Co-Operative Limited to monitor trenching works during one of its projects. The aim of this exercise, which is being carried out under the supervision of the Museums Department, was not a formal excavation of the city, but intended to avoid damage to the archaeological heritage of Mdina.

Operations by machinery were kept as shallow as possible, deeper investigations performed manually by members of the archaeological team when cultural deposits were detected. All interventions were documented, areas with archaeological remains and deposits surveyed, photographed and preserved.

The results were bewildering. Over a kilometre of trenching was supervised, yielding over 10,000 pottery sherds in over 375 contexts. Cultural periods encountered range from the Roman to the Modern period, remains of the Classical and Medieval periods being particularly well represented.

Although ashlar blocks were already noted when work started at Il-Mina ta' De Redin, substantial remains were found in the northern half of Villegaignon Street. In front of the doorway of Palazzo Falzon a wall perpendicular to the street axis was uncovered and excavations were carried out on its southern part to a depth of three metres. Further down the road, in front of the Carmelite Church, another wall turned up. Two levels linked by a stairway were found to its south; excavations immediately to the wall's northern side came across a number of deposits overlying the now famous limestone fluted column. This was uncovered on the 10th February by Brian Philps, from the Kent Archaeology Rescue Unit, who volunteered help to the group.

Further remains turned up at St Roque Str. and Our Saviour Str., but particularly interesting are finds encountered in St. Paul's Square. Under a number of road surfaces predating the present one, a stretch of wet rubble was encountered. Part of this wall rested on sizeable ashlar blocks belonging to the Classical Period. Remains of two cesspits are suspected to the eastern end of the trench.

Numerous architectural elements were examined and together with a study of the pottery recovered will hopefully lead to a better understanding of the earlier history of the city. Other material finds include plaster, glass, metal, animal bones and organic material.

Mdina's archaeological potential may be viewed as a series of jigsaw puzzles layered one over the other. The nature of our work involves the uplifting of samples from these remains. The piecing together of what has been uncovered is now being tackled by what promises to be a difficult but interesting post-excavation analysis. Difficulties are not few. Some 'pieces' have been lost through the years, while others remain hidden under the buildings of Mdina. Beyond metaphoric descriptions, pottery finds have to be analysed when a satisfactory classification of local medieval pottery is still a desideratum and a similar study of Phoenician-Punic pottery on the islands still being compiled.

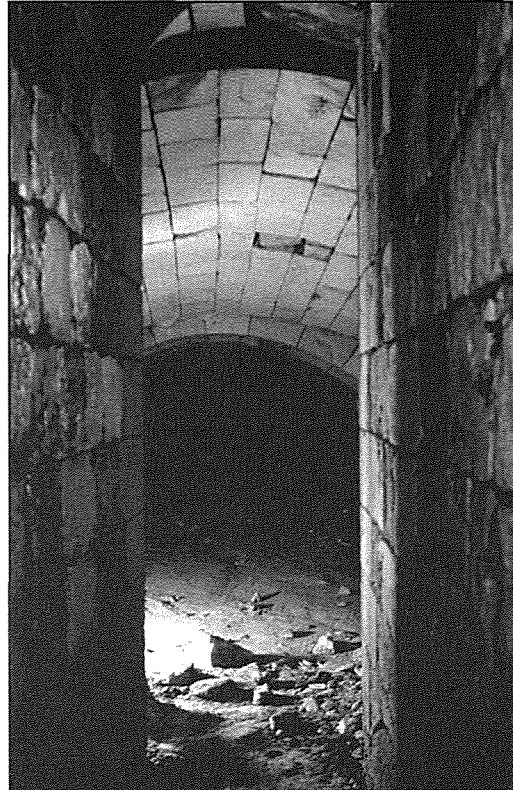
Despite such limitations, the amount of material and the nature of the archaeological record encountered are encouraging. The remains uncovered revealed that the urban layout in ancient Melitae was on occasions very different from what Mdina experienced in these last seven hundred years. Stratified deposits promise to provide useful information on pottery sequences during the periods under study. Interesting finds such as a comb carved from bone and a dice provide rare insights into the daily life of earlier inhabitants of Mdina.

On a popular level, the discovered fluted column has attracted the Maltese community to the delightful achievements of archaeological practice. Beyond, the whole project should be considered as a benchmark for

the future of archaeology in Malta whereby development is no longer seen as a deterrent to the discovery of our past.



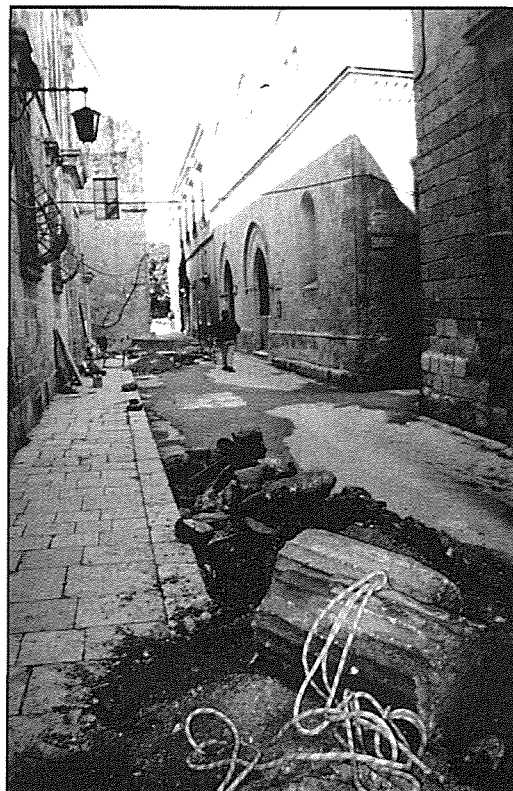
Rubble wall on ashlar blocks, St. Paul's Square



Underground chamber near Greek's gate



Pottery from Villegaignon Street



Classical fluted column. Villegaignon Street