

# European Journal of Archaeology

News, Views & Reviews

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Contact](#)

## Maltese Archaeology: what future?

23 November 2008 – 2:58 pm

### *14th Annual Meeting of the EAA. Keynote Paper by Anthony Bonanno.*

The title of this short presentation is inspired by the title of a conference held almost forty years ago on this campus soon after it was inaugurated. That conference was a tour de force, and since then Maltese History has registered enormous achievements both in teaching and in research: witness the number of graduates and doctorates and the numerous high quality publications of studies ranging from Medieval to 20th century history. It is in light of the achievements made in that sister discipline that I open this small window on the evolving landscape of Archaeology in Malta, in the hope that in it you may glimpse one or two reflections of your own experience in your own respective countries. And as there is no future without a past and a present, I beg you to allow me to give a brief overview of what has been achieved so far and what the hoped-for prospects are for the future.

Up to the end of the 19th century, whatever archaeological activity was conducted on Maltese soil was by antiquarians or dilettanti. The 17th-century ‘father of Maltese historiography’, Gian Francesco Abela, was merely a collector of antiquities and does not seem to have actively excavated; indeed he was critical of those who did so in search of treasure. Dr Antonio Annetto Caruana, at the other end of that chronological spectrum, was a Doctor of Divinity and, occupying the post of Director of the National Library in the last two decades of the 19th century, found himself entrusted with the custody of the national archaeological collection and with the uncovering operations of a number of important archaeological sites, such as the Roman domus outside Mdina and a Roman villa near Hal Kirkop, as well as some minor explorations on known megalithic sites.

What is surprising, however, is that not even in the 20th century were any of the operators in this field professionally educated in Archaeology. Even the great Themistokles Zammit was a medical doctor by profession. His son Charles Zammit was a captain in the army, Frans Mallia a draughtsman at the dockyard and Tancred Gouder a senior clerk at the University, until they were given the opportunity of following ad hoc post-graduate courses in Archaeology, the first two in England while the latter read for a Laurea in Lettere in Rome. Note, on the side, that the choice of country reflected the changing political vicissitudes of Malta before and after the year of independence in 1964. It is in this changing scenario that I entered the stage of Archaeology in 1968. Having just obtained a first degree in Classics at the then Royal University of Malta, I was

granted a scholarship to follow a Laurea in Lettere course in Palermo with a strong bias on Classical archaeology, followed by a PhD course at the Institute of Archaeology in London. While I was still studying in London, the future of humanistic studies at the University of Malta, where I had been awarded the post of Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Classics in 1971, was already being questioned at the highest decision-making quarters. Although after my return from London I could teach archaeology courses, mostly in the evening, the political situation, both national and internal to the university, prevented any substantial progress in promoting Archaeology as a teaching subject. Things came to a head in 1979 when the whole Faculty of Arts, along with that of Science, was suppressed and all hope of reaching that goal was quashed.

The situation was reversed in 1987 when, after a change of government, the Faculty was reinstated and all students in possession of the right qualifications were entitled to follow degree courses in the disciplines of their choice. It was at this stage that I grabbed the opportunity for introducing Archaeology as a degree subject. I was lucky on two counts. On one hand, two students immediately chose Archaeology as a main area of studies for their first degree; they graduated in 1990 and one of them currently occupies the post of Superintendent of Cultural Heritage. They were followed by an uninterrupted, and increasing, intake of students every year since. On the other hand, the university authorities recognised the value of this nascent discipline and instituted another teaching post which was taken up by a highly qualified scholar in Near Eastern archaeology, Anthony Frendo who, together with contributions from colleagues with other expertise from within and from outside the university, made a fully-fledged course in Archaeology possible. In the meantime, at my request, the name of the department was extended to include Archaeology. As a result of the above, all the professional posts involved in archaeological heritage in government and parastatal agencies at the present time are occupied by graduates from our department. The self-propagating stage of the taught discipline was reached in 1999 when the university appointed as lecturer Nicholas Vella, a former graduate of the department who had obtained a PhD from Bristol University. More of our graduates have pursued their studies and obtained higher degrees, including PhDs, both from within our department and from abroad. Some of them are also involved in part-time teaching in the department's archaeology programme.

For the future (and here I return to the question in the title of this paper), my hope is that the university will be in a position to offer more full-time teaching posts to further strengthen the credentials of that programme.

### **Excavation**

From the very start I strongly believed that field experience was an essential requirement in an archaeology teaching programme. It was probably as a result of intuitive foresight, but also of awareness that Maltese archaeology required a new stimulating programme of field research, that a joint excavation project, involving the University of Cambridge (patronised by Colin Renfrew), the University of Malta and the Malta Museums Department, was started in the summer of 1987. The project concentrated its efforts on the island of Gozo and investigated a small settlement site comprising the remains of two huts of the Ggantija phase at Ghajnsielem, and a much larger and complex, originally subterranean funerary site at Xaghra. Year after year, until 1994, under the field direction of Simon Stoddart and Caroline Malone, that project saw the training of our students in the state-of-the-art methodology of excavation and field survey. The results were

spectacular, not only in terms of new insights in Maltese prehistory and a considerable addition to the artistic repertoire of the Maltese temple culture, but also in terms of rewarding training experience for our students who worked along with British colleagues and students from other countries. I am happy to announce that the monumental publication of that excavation is literally in the very final stages and orders can be placed as from now.

Fig. 1. General view of excavations of the subterranean cemetery at Xaghra, Gozo (1987-1994)

Turning our sight to the future of this incompletely excavated site, now that the archive of the excavation has been duly deposited with Heritage Malta and its publication just round the corner, a decision has already been taken by Heritage Malta that excavation should be resumed and extended to the rest of the underground cemetery. We look forward to further exciting discoveries. Whether the site will ever be made accessible to visits by the general public depends on many factors, one of which is the resources of the responsible agency, namely Heritage Malta, which are already very stretched by the present number of sites under its remit. As to the suitability of the site itself for visits as a cultural attraction there are two diametrically opposed views. The first one considers the site to be important mostly for the contents, rather than the container, the latter being now just a gaping hole in the ground with a few surviving megaliths standing, or lying, here and there, which might have to be removed with the resumption of the excavations. On the other hand, I remember Peter Adymann, of Yorvik Centre fame, telling me during a visit while excavations were ongoing, that the site had great potential for presentation to the public, given the right investment which already at that time was estimated to run into a couple of millions of pounds. Whatever the choice, at some stage a decision has to be taken to protect the site (the container) either by means of a cover or by backfilling.

### **Tas-Silg**

At the end of the excavation programme at the Xaghra Stone Circle in 1994 the department found itself without an excavation training site and Anthony Frendo and myself started to look around for a potential site. Our preference fell on Tas-Silg, a multi-period site near the Marsaxlokk harbour, which had been excavated by an Italian expedition from the Universities of Rome and Milan between 1963 and 1970 and which had been left to decay for decades. For ethical reasons we preferred to limit our excavations to the south area, outside the remains of the building of the millennial sanctuary which had been excavated by the Italian archaeologists. This area had already been referred to by them as a 'sacred dump' and we thought of focussing on the scientific aspect, the reconstruction of the changing environment along the different periods of occupation, the diet and the rituals taking place inside the sanctuary, from evidence drawn from the dump outside it. This time we undertook the excavation itself on our own, without involving foreign institutions (though Simon Mason, then from the Museum of London, participated on an individual basis); but for the processing of finds we involved Claudia Sagona, an expert on Maltese pottery of the Classical age, as well as Patrick Schembri from the Department of Biology of the University of Malta, and Chris Hunt from Huddersfield University, for the environmental studies. Again the results were very rewarding, albeit not as spectacular as the Gozo ones had been. We have already published a preliminary report in 2000, together with two

specialised papers, and we are right now in the process of writing up the final report which we hope will be in print in 2009.

Fig.2. Plan of the University of Malta excavations at Tas-Silg (1996-2004). Trenches A-D

The presentation of this site to the public is also problematic, but for very different reasons. It is a multi-period site and preserves deposits and structures of at least six distinct periods, from a late-Neolithic megalithic temple, through a monumentalized Hellenistic sanctuary with a peristyled courtyard, to an early Christian church. Physical anastylosis is not possible, but many structures will need graphic reconstructions to help the visitor read the site. Again, however, it will depend on available resources: ideally, the same foreign government that financed the major excavations of the 1960s and the current ones should shoulder the responsibility of its upkeep, as I understand it is already doing, and its presentation to the public, as promised in a joint communiqué made in 1995.

What we would like to see is that even for this immensely important site, as well as the other two investigated by the Missione Italiana, the excavation archive should be deposited where it belongs, namely, in the country of origin.

### **Zejtun Roman Villa**

Even before completing the excavation of its three small trenches at Tas-Silg in 2005, our department was requested to resume the exploration of the remains of a Roman villa in the grounds of a government school in Zejtun, which had been excavated at irregular short intervals, utilizing visiting English language students, in the 1960s and 1970s. As no records have been traced of those excavations, apart from a plan drawn by Francis Mallia, curator of archaeology and then Director of the Museums Department, the main purpose of this exercise is to sort out the chronology of the different structures by excavating the unexplored areas, including a large cistern at its southern end. A master's degree candidate, with the help of foreign experts, is also striving to sort out the pottery from the previous explorations against the pottery that is being extracted in the current ones.

Fig.3. General view of the University of Malta excavations of the Zejtun Roman villa (2005)

As far as presentation is concerned, the site merits rehabilitation and proper conservation measures and a proper integration in the fabric of the school to which it belongs. I am convinced that both the administration and students of the school will treasure this cultural asset in their grounds and will exploit its educational value.

### **Ghar ix-Xih**

Just a year after starting field operations in Zejtun, we were invited to join forces with the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage and the Local Councils of Sannat and Xewkija in Gozo to

investigate a small recess in an elevated rock terrace overlooking the picturesque inlet of Mgarr ix-Xini. This has meant that our annual four-week excavation campaign had to be divided between Zejtun and Gozo. Our students enjoy the Gozo field experience better because it gives them the opportunity of sharing company with their colleagues away from home, almost as if in a foreign country (both in real and David Lowenthal's terms). No structures have as yet been identified here. The deposits excavated so far suggest that it was originally a cave into which a range of animal bones had been washed, in part calcified in one corner. The cave later lost its roof and the rock-cut recess was used in Classical times probably as a small shrine connected with maritime activities in the inlet below, as suggested by a series of truncated heads and other fragments of terracotta figurines of modest aesthetic value.

Fig. 4. Plan of the University of Malta/Superintendence of Cultural Heritage excavations at Ghar ix-Xih, Gozo

The Local Councils concerned are very appreciative of this cultural asset in their territory and they have all intentions of protecting it while making it accessible for the enjoyment of tourists and the general public. A decision as to what to do with the animal bone deposit, which is likely to belong to the Pleistocene, is awaiting specialist advice. In any case, the calcified deposits on the vertical surface of the recess need protection against vandalism and souvenir hunters.

### **Management of the National Archaeological Heritage**

This leads me on to move beyond the confines of the university and make a brief mention of the foreseeable future for the management of the national archaeological heritage. Following the enactment of the Cultural Heritage Act of 2002, the archaeological heritage has come to form an integral part of the cultural heritage, together with fine arts, architecture, ethnography, palaeontology and natural history.

Apart from setting up an official restoration agency, the Malta Centre for Restoration, which, after an amendment to the law, was incorporated as an Institute for Conservation and Heritage Management under the responsibility of Heritage Malta, the Heritage Act separated the responsibilities of the custody and administration of cultural heritage under two distinct agencies: the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage was given the regulatory role, and is there to take stock, protect and oversee, and if necessary take corrective measures, the whole corpus of the nation's cultural heritage; while Heritage Malta was entrusted with the custody, presentation and general management of the UNESCO Heritage archaeological sites, the other sites that are open to the public, museums and reserve collections.

Since then, Heritage Malta has grown into a large institution employing more than 300 personnel, including many of our graduates as curators, senior curators and principal curators. It has started an extensive programme of refurbishment of museums and archaeological sites. As you may be able to see for yourselves the temporary protective covers for the Hagar Qim and Mnajdra megalithic temples are about to be mounted; we hope that similar tents will protect the Ggantija and Tarxien complexes in the near future. The museum of the Domus Romana in Rabat has been turned into a state-of-the-art one, and we look forward to the completion of a similar

project for the National Museum of Archaeology so that the exhibition will finally incorporate the whole chronological range of Maltese archaeology from the Neolithic, through the Phoenician and Roman, down to Medieval.

The Superintendence, apart from its involvement in liaising with other national agencies in preventing land development from destroying or damaging any part of the cultural heritage, is also in charge of rescue excavation wherever it is required. An adequately documented publication of these rescue operations, especially those conducted within the ancient city of Melite is sorely desirable. Among other projects, including field research ones, the Superintendence has embarked on the Cultural Heritage Inventory Management System (CHIMS), the national inventory, of all that constitutes the national cultural heritage, and to make it accessible on line. It is an ambitious and worthy project, responding positively to the principle of knowledge-based democratic ownership and access to cultural heritage, even if in the virtual mode. It was officially launched in February this year and we all look forward to its realization.

### **The Archaeological Society, Malta**

I do not think that this rapid overview of the Maltese archaeological landscape would be complete without mentioning, albeit very fleetingly, the Archaeological Society of Malta. We now have a flourishing NGO comparable, taking into consideration the size and resources of the country, to similar societies abroad. It is very active in promoting awareness and appreciation of the archaeological heritage with the general Maltese public by organizing lectures by local and overseas experts, field trips to Maltese sites of archaeological interest and study tours abroad. It has succeeded in bringing Archaeology closer to a wider Maltese audience. But the jewel in the crown of its achievements, the more lasting one, is its journal, the Malta Archaeological Review. In the absence of other academic archaeological journals on the island, this Review is filling an important space in Maltese cultural life, and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

### **Conclusion: the future beckons**

Unlike History, which is based mainly on archival research, Archaeology is an expensive humanistic discipline. It requires much greater financial resources and expensive scientific technology. Some of the latter, like Accelerated Mass Spectrometer (Carbon-14 dating equipment), might never be within reach of the Maltese nation. In History, over the past 50 years it has been possible for single scholars to forge their way successfully and productively in specific areas of research without the need for collaboration with foreign colleagues and institutions; the most outstanding example is that of the Medieval historian, Godfrey Wettinger, who has, single-handedly, albeit with some occasional help from other colleagues (both local and foreign) produced monumental works of Maltese Medieval history and toponymy. His work in the latter field constitutes a rich resource even for archaeological research.

The same can never be the case for Archaeology. In Archaeology Malta can never be self-sufficient. Collaboration with overseas colleagues and institutions is indispensable. However, in this field, as in other fields, there is no room for neo-colonial attitudes, from either side. Local institutions should take, and be seen to be taking, equal if not leading roles. After all, it is they that are answerable to their own people (apart from the universal scientific community) for the archaeological heritage entrusted to them. Foreign research institutions and individuals may

come and go, their interest in local heritage might rise and fall, depending on many factors, chief of which are political and financial factors. But the management of that heritage, including the research agenda, need to remain firmly and decidedly in the hands of local operators.

The ideal model for such collaborative research undertakings is, I think, the one which has just been set in motion between the University of Malta and the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage on one hand, and the University of Ghent (Belgium) on the other, as a result of the initiative of Nicholas Vella from the Maltese side and Roald Docter on the Belgian side. The project involves an ambitious non-invasive field walking survey and an intensive study of the archaeological material of the Phoenician/Punic period in Malta. The fortnight before the EAA Meeting has seen a frenetic activity on the field and on the premises of our department. The atmosphere was impressively friendly with reciprocal respect among both staff and students. I would be understating the scientific results if I stated that they are very promising.

Fig. 5. Malta Survey Project 2008. Field walking at Bidnija (courtesy N.C. Vella)

One way of guaranteeing what I set out to promote above is to insist on the presence of local understudies to foreign experts working on Maltese materials. As a result of such policy we have, at long last, two young scholars who have taken up two areas of specializations for their future careers which might appear less glamorous than others, but which form the very foundations on which the whole edifice of chronology and other archaeological deductions (as well as anthropological ones) have to be based. These are prehistoric lithics on which an MA dissertation has just been completed, and post-prehistoric pottery with which another MA dissertation is concerned.

A DNA research project, involving both foreign and Maltese scientists, is also in the offing. It is hoped that it will shed light on several questions of break or continuity that confound Maltese archaeology and history.

Returning to the confines of the university, I am about to enter the second year of my last four-year term as head of the Department of Classics and Archaeology. What I have laid out in front of you this evening is, to some extent, my legacy to Maltese archaeology. I have done my best to serve well my country, my alma mater, and the discipline. Let me be frank with you, far from harbouring any notion of *après moi le deluge*, I am fully confident that Archaeology in this country has a bright future and will continue to flourish exponentially after I exit from its stage.

Anthony Bonanno  
Head, [Department of Classics and Archaeology](#)  
University of Malta