

FR MANWEL MAGRI'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONSERVATION OF MALTA'S ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE

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As a child and youth Fr Magri was fascinated by the Maltese folk-tales he used to hear recounted at home. Even during his schooldays at the Lyceum he was an avid student of Maltese history. These early interests grew later on into a more professional effort at studying the folklore and archaeology of these Islands.

Very probably Fr Magri had no formal training in archaeology, a science which was then in its infancy and limited to the private research of a few scholars. Practically every year saw spectacular finds in Greece, Egypt, North Africa, Palestine and the Middle East. No doubt these discoveries fired his imagination. His familiarity with ancient authors and his knowledge of languages (Latin, Greek, Arabic, Hebrew and Syriac among others) were immense helps in his study of archaeology.

The first reference to Fr Magri's archaeological work dates from 1885, when he was teaching philosophy at the Jesuit scholasticate at Palazzo Parisio, Naxxar. He discovered and surveyed the hypogea at Misraħ Ghonoq and Ghawwarijiet, Hal Dmiegh, both being localities in Mosta.⁽¹⁾ He also photographed the hypogea at Tal-Bistra, outside Mosta.⁽²⁾

There is then a hiatus for some thirteen years. For a further three years Fr Magri taught at Naxxar, then he spent a year in Albano Laziale, in the Roman Jesuit Province, doing his tertianship, a year of further spiritual and pastoral training. In 1889 he was posted to Constantinople, where the Sicilian Jesuits ran a College.

This paper is not intended as a comprehensive survey of Fr Magri's archaeological work. It complements the chapter on Fr Magri's archaeological work in my biography, *Manwel Magri, S.J.*, Malta (1978). It is based almost exclusively on documents I discovered at the Palace Archives, Valletta, after a suggestion by Mr J. Attard of Xaghra, Gozo, to whom I owe a special word of thanks. These documents are mainly the Petitions addressed to the Governor, referred to here by their official designation, e.g. M 3942/01.

1. The original plans have apparently been lost, but P.F. Bellanti made copies of them in his *Manuscript Notes on Various Archaeological Sites in the Maltese Islands*, c. 1918–22, pp. 48, 30. This notebook, preserved at the National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta, was the basis for Bellanti's *Studies in Maltese History*, Valletta (1924). Fr Magri seems to have written no report.
2. Erich Becker, *Malta Sotterranea – Studien zur Altchristlichen und Jüdischen Sepulkralkunst*, Strasbourg (1913) p. 68, mentions Fr Magri's discovery of "Phoenician" catacombs outside Mosta. He did not see the plans, then extant at the Museum. Plate XVIII is a reproduction of Fr Magri's photo. No date is given for the excavation. C.G. Zammit surveyed the catacombs in 1930 and published his report "The Tal-Bistra Catacombs" in *Bulletin of the Museum (Malta)*, I, n. V (Feb. 1935). He reproduced Fr Magri's photo of a general view of a portion of these catacombs at Tal-Bistra on p. 135. Fr Magri seems to have attempted no description.

During his stay here he made a journey to Palestine, Syria and Lebanon, to study the customs, sayings and languages of those lands and compare them with those in Malta. In 1892 he was nominated Prefect of Studies at the Gozo Seminary. During his six-year stay here he began his collection of folk-tales and proverbs and roamed about the island in search of archaeological sites. In fact, when Albert Mayr, the German archaeologist, spent four months in these Islands to survey their archaeology, Fr Magri drew his attention to the temple at Ta' Ċenċ, which he had discovered. In 1898 Fr Magri became the Provincial's secretary and was posted at the headquarters of the Province in Birkirkara.

Bighi Excavations⁽³⁾

At the beginning of 1901 five Egyptian stelae were discovered on Bighi Hill.⁽⁴⁾ At the time, Fr Magri was staying at the Seminary of San Giovanni La Punta, near Catania, Sicily, accompanying the Fr Provincial on his annual visit to the houses of the Jesuits. He was shown one of them, an inscription of the XII Dynasty, made of limestone, "the common stone of Egypt",⁽⁵⁾ by a friend who had gained access to it through the official on duty at the Egyptian Department of the British Museum.

Fr Magri thought that it must have been brought over from Egypt, "probably by the Romans, who did a great deal in that way," and that the presence of these stelae would appear to point to the existence of a temple of Isis⁽⁶⁾ on the spot. He considered a close examination of the available free space on Bighi Hill "of the utmost importance to local history." Since the Dockyard Works Department was soon going to begin digging the foundations of a new wing to the Naval Hospital, Fr Magri asked the Governor, Gen. Sir F.W. Grenfell, to see that any find of ancient remains be tackled "in a scientific way." He deplored the fact that "in similar cases the most elementary principles in digging and disposing of deposits have been often ignored in Malta." In particular he requested that, if any human remains were found there, he might be informed about "the manner of burial, whether the head is laid from W. to E., or from N. to S., and whether the body is laid flat, or in another position."

The Governor complied.⁽⁷⁾ The assistance of the Naval authorities was solicited,⁽⁸⁾ and the relative information was sent to Fr Magri,⁽⁹⁾ who sent a letter of thanks from Collegio Cassibile at Messina on 24 May 1901.⁽¹⁰⁾

3. M 3942/01.

4. *Ibid.*, L(etter) of 22/4/01.

5. *Ibid.*

6. In the same letter Fr Magri (M.) refers to "one of the autonomous coins of Malta struck during the earlier times of the Roman dominion" bearing the figure of Isis in "perfect Egyptian style." He adds that very often on such a coin there is "a countermark representing Astarte." He then asks, "Are we to understand that after the official introduction of the worship of Isis in Malta, a strong reaction took place in favour of the old national religion, and that the authorities came to a compromise by ordering the familiar figure of Astarte to be marked on the Egyptian type?"

7. The matter was discussed at the meeting of the Executive Council of 29 April 1901. (M 3942/01, note)

8. L(etter) B(ook Vol.) 93, p. 464, L 1531 of 3/5/01.

9. LB 94, p. 142, L 1704 of 20/5/01. No copy of the information is available at the Palace Archives.

10. M 3942/01.

Punic Inscriptions⁽¹¹⁾

In 1903 a friend presented Fr Magri with “a Punic inscription provided with vowel points,” which were “believed to have been introduced in Syria about the VII Cent. A.C.”⁽¹²⁾ It had been accidentally found among the rubbish removed⁽¹³⁾ when a new road was being laid leading to S. Rocco through the northern glacis of the Valletta advanced works, opposite the Floriana Parade Ground. (see Plate 4a)

The inscription was “engraved on a piece of common earthenware, apparently a portion of the rim of a very large amphora.⁽¹⁴⁾ The rest of the rim and *inscription* was broken and reduced to powder by the workmen,” a fate that had attended other earthenware utensils.⁽¹⁵⁾

Similar inscriptions “such as the Mtarrfah (Imtarfa’) Stelae and many others on Cave tombs” had been found and seen in Malta; “the existence however of our vowels, duly admitted at first by [the German savant] Gesenius, was afterwards rejected by him and the Mtarrfah stelae were pronounced by him to be a forgery!”⁽¹⁶⁾ Fr Magri was therefore very pleased with his find: “the recent discovery removes every possibility of doubt. It shows that we, even in the full flush of Roman and Byzantine civilisation continued to follow the literary movement of the mother country.”⁽¹⁷⁾

The Lt. Governor, E.M. Merewether, termed the inscription “a very interesting discovery”,⁽¹⁸⁾ and having made sure it was of sufficient value for Fr Magri’s letter to be sent to the British Museum, he asked Fr Magri what steps he wanted to take. On 22 May Fr Magri sent the Lt. Governor two copies of a memorandum he had written on the subject, requesting him to have one of them forwarded to the British Museum; he himself would be sending copies to the London Archaeological and Asiatic Societies.⁽¹⁹⁾

11. M 531/03, M 640/03, M 83/04.

12. M 531/03, L of 28/4/03.

13. M. adds: “Judging from the earthenware relics and fragments of worked stone and nails found together with the inscription, it is easily surmised that the rubbish hastily collected for the Valletta fortifications most likely contains ancient household implements which could easily be recovered from the still open trench.” *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.* In the memorandum he wrote on the subject M. noted that it was “a large locally made earthenware jar.”

15. *Ibid.* he notes: “Our workmen and countryfolk are very greedy of ancient baked clay; they reduce it to powder to prepare the special mortar used on house roofs.” Cp. “The greatest obstacle to the preservation of such finds is the practice prevalent in our Islands of collecting ancient pottery in order to pound and sell it for the making of house roofs. Country people are very greedy of it; they go long ways to fetch it; whenever traces of the foundations of an ancient building are discovered, they flock to the search, they treasure up their find in handkerchiefs or bags and carry it home. Thus many valuable relics of our ancient civilisation have been ruthlessly destroyed, and their absence from the public Museums and from private collections has led to the notion that ancient superior and varnished or painted pottery was very scarce in these Islands.” *Ruins of a Megalithic Temple at Xeuchia (Shewkiyah) Gozo, First Report.* Malta Govt Printing Office, 1906, p. 8.

16. M 531/03, L of 28/4/03.

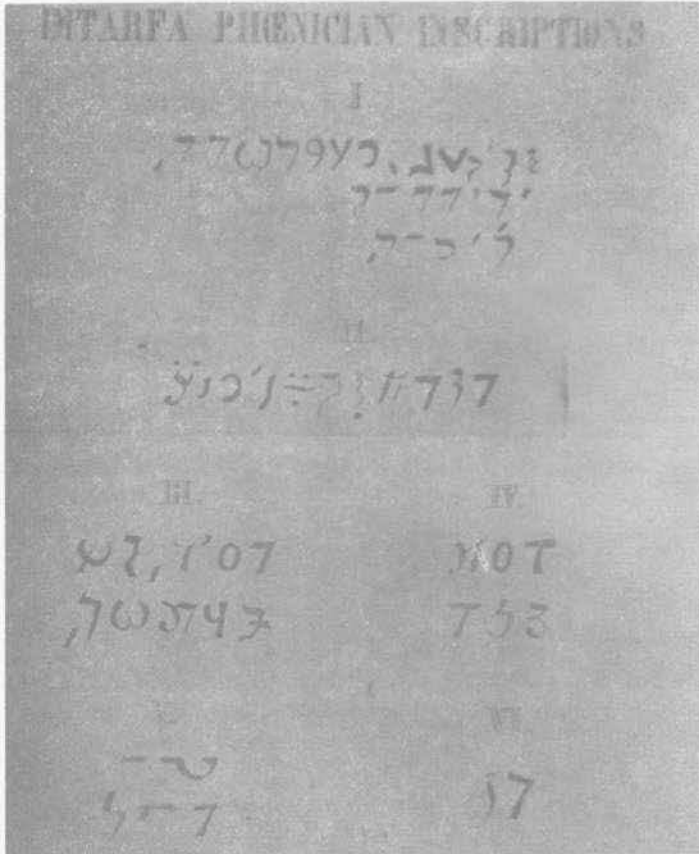
17. *Ibid.*

18. Note in M 531/03.

19. M 640/03. The paper was forwarded to the British Museum on 29 May. On 30 June M. sent a further communication together with a paper squeeze of the inscription. The letter was duly



(a) *The Valletta Punic pointed inscription*



(b) *The Mtarfa phoenician inscriptions (Fr. Magri's photograph)*
 (Photo credit: Kevin Casha)

In his memorandum⁽²⁰⁾ which was preceded by a copy of the inscription, Fr Magri referred to similar inscriptions known to have existed in Malta as late as the 16th century (cf. Quintin and C.I.S., *Phoenician Inscriptions* 125–30) but now apparently lost. He pointed out that the renowned Gesenius had rejected the Mtarfa stelae as apocryphal.

Fr Magri contended that the present discovery removed every shadow of doubt: on the rim-fragment two vowels were deeply engraved; there was also another dot, which was probably a special vowel.⁽²¹⁾

The vowel points on the Valletta inscription were identical, he wrote, with those used by the Eastern, and later on, by the Western Syrians. He argued that, since “no mention is made of vowel points in the Talmud and by St. Jerome, it is most probable that they were introduced in the Hebrew text of the Sacred Scriptures after the VII century of our era. But, of course, they had already been in use for some time before amongst the Arabs and Syrians. The latter, as it has been remarked, had since the IV century employed the simple dots to mark their vowels.”

Fr Magri thought that there could hardly be at present a satisfactory solution to the problem about the time when such vowel points were introduced in Malta, but one thing was certain: Maltese vowel pronunciation among country people and in Rabat, Gozo, was identical with that of the Hauran and some parts of Syria. Fr Magri was led to conclude that at least some of the Phoenicians were fond of inserting such vowel points. He also concluded that the Maltese could only have inherited such peculiarities from their ancestors, the Phoenicians.

Phoenician or Punic, he went on, continued to be the written language in Malta till 146 BC and the spoken language till the second half of the first century AD; the written language could not have just disappeared in one century: these were established facts. If the Maltese spoke Phoenician, they must have written it, too. “Besides, we have still many Phoenician and Punic short words roughly drawn by uneducated persons or by workmen.”

Although unfortunately the numerous Phoenician and Punic inscriptions found in Malta had all practically perished, a Christian epitaph written in Greek in 450 AD still existed, containing Punic proper nouns as well as the name of the Phoenician month Tōb. This seemed to Fr Magri very significant: “Not only ethnology, archaeology, topography and folklore, but the formal statement of the Maltese in the XVI century prove to evidence that the descendants of the original settlers from Sidon and Tyre had never left these Islands and always constituted the main bulk of

forwarded, but the squeeze was regrettably lost sight of in sealing the 10 July letter to the Director of the British Museum, so that the latter, having vainly waited for the squeeze for two months, sent Wallis Budge's letter of 3 July on 5 October without further delay. The squeeze was forwarded on 13 December. (Correspondence in M 640/03)

20. Copy in M 640/03.

21. In his further communication of 30 June, M. wrote: “A close examination of the earthenware fragment shows clearly that the initial mark on the right, read by me as a Neo-Punic lamed, is a mere scratch; whilst the following letters and points are *very deeply* engraved, obviously in the soft clay. Consequently, the alleged Neo-Punic lamed, if it is a letter intentionally drawn, does not belong to the original inscription.

Thus it cannot be said that the same inscription is made up of Neo-Punic and archaic letters. A mark, similar in all respects to the ‘lamed’ can easily be made by a sharp tool on the baked clay.”

the population".⁽²²⁾ The Maltese told (André) Thevet, (the 16th century French Cordelier monk and traveller), that "they had not been removed away from their own country, as their neighbours were." And even years after the coming of the Knights the memory of the Punic written language was still fresh in men's minds. No considerable foreign element had ever settled in Malta before the last years of Byzantine rule. Nor had the Arabs' domination affected the pronunciation of the Maltese country people and that of Rabat in Gozo. Whether it had affected that of Mdina, and through it, that of Valletta, was not easy to say.

Fr Magri then gave a list of the marked differences between the pronunciation of vowels and of some consonants in Valletta and in the country. He added that "It may be safely assumed that no Assyrian-Aryan influence altered the pronunciation of the Maltese before the advent of the Knights Hospitallers" (and some 5000 Rhodians) about the mid-16th century. Besides, Thevet affirmed that only Maltese was used besides a "grec corrompu", which, "obviously, was spoken only at the 'Bourg'" (Birgu).

Fr Magri then discussed the inscription, deciphering it and giving its meaning.

Mr E.A. Wallis Budge, Keeper of the Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum, made his comments on the memorandum in a letter of 3 July⁽²³⁾ addressed to the Lt. Governor. He found the paper "not only learned but interesting. The real point in the dispute is whether the Phoenicians added vowels to their inscriptions or not, and there is no doubt, from Father Magri's paper, if the text be copied correctly, that at a late period the Phoenicians of the Mediterranean added vowels to their inscriptions." When they began to do so was "a very moot point", "but it must have been when their language was becoming a thing of the past as a means of human intercourse." It was generally understood that the "pointing of the Bible" began in the third century AD and that it was "not seriously worked at by the Rabbis until the fifth century." He personally believed that most of the attempts to "point" texts were made about the 4th century, when people did not understand Hebrew. It was "quite certain that the Rabbis who added vowel points to the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible in the Vth century did not understand the words they were trying to force a meaning into, and, this being so, it is unlikely that ordinary inscriptions would be understood without some kind of vovelling added." Wallis Budge finally expressed the hope that Fr Magri would search for and find more "pointed" Phoenician inscriptions.⁽²⁴⁾

22. For a critique of Fr Magri's theory of the Phoenician origins, cf. J. Cassar Pullicino, *Studies in Maltese Folklore*, Malta (1976), pp. 83-90.

23. M 640/03.

Ph. Berger, President of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, disagreed with Fr Magri: "M. Berger ne croit pas qu'on puisse reconnaître, comme le voudrait le R.P. Magri, des caractères phéniciens accompagnés de points voyelles. La forme des caractères ne permet pas une pareille interprétation, contraire à tout ce que nous savons de l'épigraphie phénicienne". (*Académie's Comptes Rendus des Séances de l'Année 1904*, Tome 1, Séance du 29 janvier).

24. M. suggested the publication of Wallis Budge's remarks, thinking they would prove interesting to the Maltese public. "In no other place have been found 'pointed' Phoenician inscriptions." (M 640/03, L of 14/10/03)

Through his good offices the Museum obtained from the Louvre Museum an ectype of the

Fr Magri soon obliged. He had the Government forward to Mr Wallis Budge photographs⁽²⁵⁾ of six Phoenician inscriptions which had been found at Mtarfa, together with a memorandum entitled "Some further 'pointed' Inscriptions found in Malta".⁽²⁶⁾ In reply⁽²⁷⁾ to this "interesting document" the Keeper said that he had showed the photos to the Rev. Dr Löwy of the Bayswater Synagogue, who was very knowledgeable about Hebrew inscriptions from all parts of Europe. Dr Löwy was of the opinion that Hebrew inscriptions written in Phoenician letters, and pointed, were not older than the Roman period. Wallis Budge considered this to be the general opinion on the subject, and he expressed the hope the Fr Magri would continue his researches and publish the results in some journal such as the *Revue Archéologique* of Paris, where they would be easily accessible. (See plate 4b)

Phoenician Stone Symbols⁽²⁸⁾

Fr Magri was also interested in the stone symbols placed on the roofs of houses and on the top of garden walls, especially at their junction.⁽²⁹⁾ These "symbols" were "usually cut out of polished or rough stone" into "geometrical figures of various sizes and description, such as cones, conoids, balls, pyramids, pyramidal conoids, on or without a base, undressed pyramidal blocks, etc."⁽³⁰⁾ "Poor people are satisfied with a rough stone".⁽³¹⁾

In Fr Magri's opinion these figures represented Tanit, the national deity of Carthage,⁽³²⁾ they were a "Baal and Astarte symbol".⁽³³⁾ They were "copies of the Phoenician religious symbols of our ancestors",⁽³⁴⁾ as the similarity of these

Phoenician pillar with a bilingual inscription (C.I.S. no. 122) presented to Louis XVI of France by Grand Master de Rohan in 1780 and an ectype of another inscription (C.I.S. no. 124) (*Mus. Rep. 1905 - 06*).

M. made other facsimiles and tried to "find the place of preservation of the rest of the inscriptions found in Malta." (M 448/05, L of 4/4/05) He also suggested getting "facsimiles in plaster of the Phoenician monuments, especially inscriptions, found in Malta and not preserved in our Museums." (*Ibid.*) In fact, he himself gave the Museum "three ectypes of Phoenician inscriptions from Malta" and obtained ectypes of another two inscriptions (C.I.S. nos 123 and 132) in the possession of Mrs Strickland. (*Ibid.*, and *Mus. Rep. 1905 - 06*).

25. M. had asked for photographs to be made of an original drawing (size 17 in. by 12 in.) he had in his possession, of a series of "pointed" Phoenician inscriptions. (L of 14/10/03) On 31 October 1903 he stated that this was required "to find out a correct copy, or the autograph of the savant who saw the text". These inscriptions had been published in the 17th century, but the book was rare and the letters badly drawn. M. required six copies of this photo. The Government obliged (and at the same time made photos of other original drawings M. had in his hands). The approximate cost was £3.10s. for all the photos. (M 640/03)

26. In his letter of 25/1/04 (M 83/04) M. added that the Mtarfa Inscriptions had been considered by the editors of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* "so important that they asked Maltese savants to make researches in the Public and private Libraries in order to find a correct text of the same Inscriptions." This memorandum is not available.

27. M 83/04, L of 25/2/04.

28. M 640/03.

29. *Ibid.* L of 4/2/04.

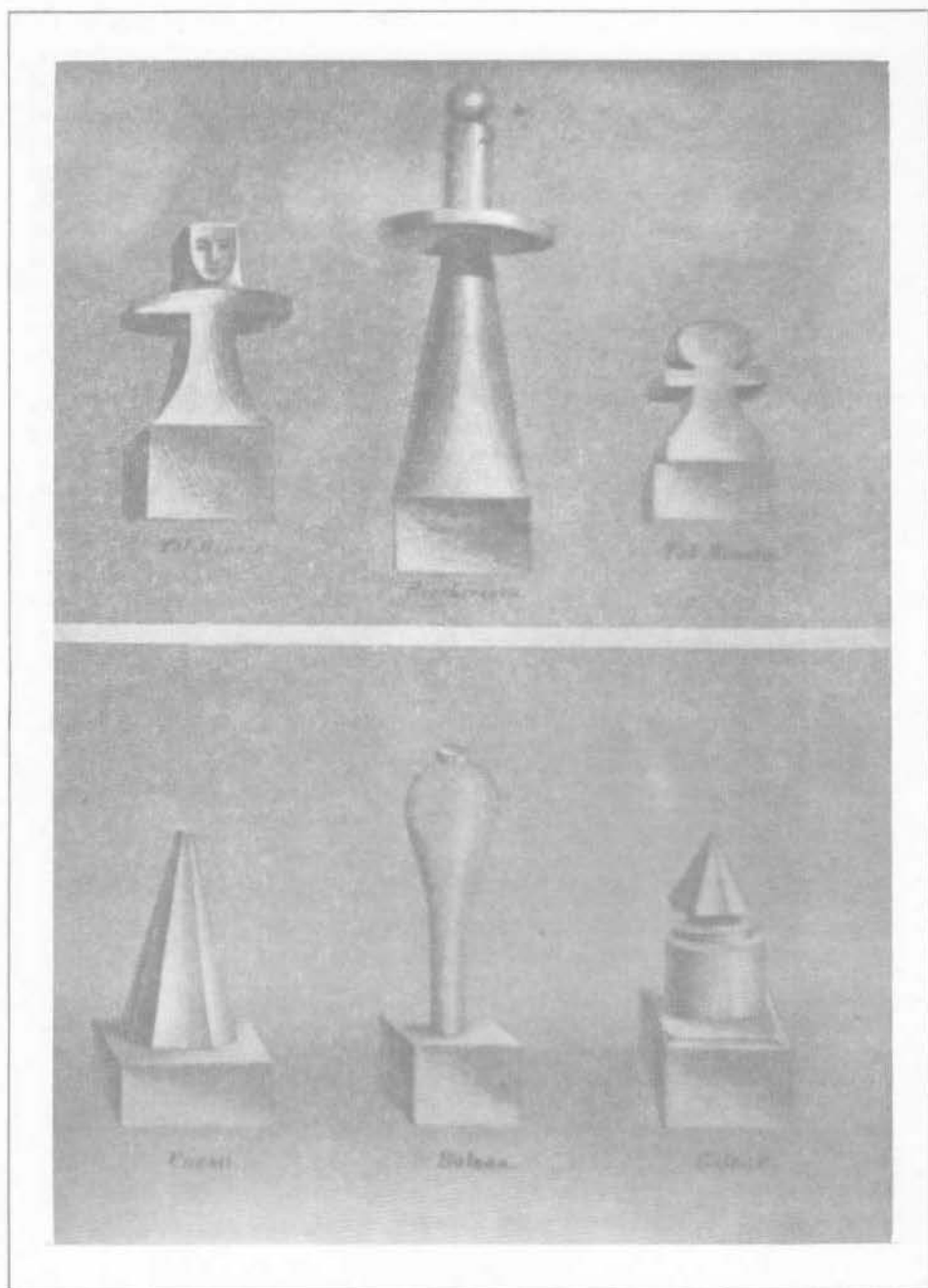
30. *Ibid.* L of 18/2/04.

31. *Ibid.* L of 4/2/04.

32. *Ibid.* L of 18/2/04.

33. *Ibid.* L of 31/10/03.

34. *Ibid.* L of 25/1/04.



Phoenician stone symbols (Fr. Magri's photograph)

(Photo credit: Kevin Cash)

“comparatively modern geometrical figures on our walls” to the *ex-voto* cippus from Borg in-Nadur plainly showed.⁽³⁵⁾

Fr Magri asked the Government to make 18 photos of an original drawing of his, representing reproductions of these symbols, for he desired to make a complete collection of these figures “still existing in great numbers in these Islands”.⁽³⁶⁾ He wished to know exactly the places where similar symbols still existed, for this would have been of great interest to scholars and archaeologists.⁽³⁷⁾ He also suggested that a notice be published,⁽³⁸⁾ soliciting information as to the whereabouts of such symbols. His wishes were met. The photos were made,⁽³⁹⁾ and a notice was published in the Government Gazette no. 4689 of 26 February 1904, asking for information “as to localities in which such symbols are to be found,” to be passed on to the Curator of the Museum.⁽⁴⁰⁾ (See plate 5)

The Hypogeum⁽⁴¹⁾

The Hypogeum was accidentally discovered in 1902. After two reports submitted by experts, the Government purchased the site.⁽⁴²⁾

On 31 October 1903 Fr Magri wrote to the Committee of Management of the Museum requesting them “to advise the Government on the appointment of a

35. *Ibid.* M. also requested the Government to make six photos of this *ex voto*, for it would also show “savants the origin and meaning” of the other stone symbols. (L of 31/10/03)

36. M 640/03, L of 25/1/04.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*

39. The photos were made whole plate size 8½ in. by 6½ in.; eighteen copies of the symbols, original size 12½ in. by 10 in.; six of the Borg in-Nadur *ex voto*, original size 22 in. by 14¾ in. These had also been reproduced on slides for projection by Mr Ellis for a lecture M. had delivered at the Malta Lyceum.

40. The notice was written by the Lt. Governor (LG) himself. There were three drafts. The LG criticised the clerk’s “careless” in writing the first draft and the Asst Secretary to Govt, Mr Fuller, for letting it pass; the clerk had inserted “Phoenician Inscriptions still extant on roofs and walls” instead of “stone symbols”, when M. had not mentioned inscriptions in his letter of 4/2/04. This was then changed to “Phoenician religious symbols.”

Before the second draft was written, M. was asked for fuller particulars. He suggested descriptive details of the symbols, but these were dropped from the notice. He also suggested altering the words to read “imitations of ancient Phoenician symbols” since “most of the symbols have been renewed several times” and dropping the word “religious” which “might give rise to an iconoclastic outbreak (sic) or to scruples. People in our days attach no idea to the placing of conoids and pyramids on their walls beyond that of an ornament, and it would be a great pity if this peculiar feature of Maltese habits should be discontinued.” (L of 18/2/04) M. also suggested that photos be exhibited at the Public and Garrison Libraries in Valletta, at Notabile, and at the Gozo Public Library. The word “imitations” was dropped by Mr Fuller because “a ‘renewed’ article cannot, properly speaking, be called an ‘imitation’ – & it might give rise to misunderstanding.” (Note of 23/2/04 in file). The notice did not satisfy the LG and he wrote the final draft himself. On 3 March M. forwarded four copies of the photo as requested.

41. M 995/04, M 22/05, M 21/07.

42. Dr A.A. Caruana was asked to submit a report. After a cursory inspection of the Hypogeum on 29 December 1902 he wrote that “the excavation is the work of the native Christians during the domination of the Arabs in the 11th. and 10th. centuries, and continued to be used as a place of temporary refuge during the numerous invasions of the Beys of Algiers and Tunis which became States of pirates in the 12th. and 13th. centuries.

competent person to supervise the exploration of the tombs discovered at C. Paula".⁽⁴³⁾

On 6 November the Museum Committee held a sitting at which the Lt. Governor, the Superintendent of Public Works, the Director of Education and Fr Magri attended. The Committee was of opinion that Fr Magri should undertake the supervision. Fr Magri said he "would willingly undertake the supervision but he could not give a definite answer before some time; he promised to send a definite decision in a few days".⁽⁴⁴⁾

On 17 November Fr Magri wrote his letter of acceptance, laying down certain conditions and requesting the appointment of a certain A. Doublet as overseer/caretaker.⁽⁴⁵⁾ The Lt. Governor was of the opinion that "Father Magri is obviously the best person to supervise the work & he is willing to do so. His Transport expenses should of course be paid".⁽⁴⁶⁾ The Governor, who considered that Fr Magri had written "a sensible letter", approved the appointment, and the Curator of the Museum, Dr Temi Zammit, informed Fr Magri on 11 December that "H.E. the Governor has been pleased to approve of your superintending the proposed excavation at C. Paula in the manner suggested in your letter of the 17th ultimo" and added that "all transport expenses incurred by you in connection with the work in question will be refunded by the Government, on the production of proper vouchers".⁽⁴⁷⁾

On 9 February 1904 Temi Zammit informed Fr Magri that "the work for the exploration of the Catacombs of C. Paula may now be taken in hand".⁽⁴⁸⁾

This is the first monument of this sort met with in the Island, which I consider deserving of preservation. Its archaeological value consists in serving to illustrate the history of Malta during the obscure period of the middle ages." (The end of his report in P(ublic) W(orks) L(etter) B(ook) to C(hief) S(ecretary), Vol. 496, pp. 365 – 7). Cf also *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 8/1/1903, p. 4.

The Governor then set up a Committee consisting of the SPW (L. Gatt), the Dir. of Educ. (N. Tagliaferro) and Dr Caruana to report after obtaining the views of a certain Pace Spadaro on the advisability of purchasing the tombs. (PW R(eference) B(ook Vol.) 23, fol. 28). After inspecting the site in May they reported that "Encumbered as place is by rubbish and stones, it is very difficult even for specialists to state the use to which the place was destined and the epoch to which it belongs, before it is thoroughly explored. So far as the Committee could see, the form and disposition of the different parts of the place shows that this hypogeum is unlike any of the tombs and catacombs existing in the Maltese Islands." They were of the opinion that the Government should purchase and explore the site; they recommended the acceptance of the price of £200 demanded by the owner, Mr Psaila. (PWLBCS 24, fol. 87)

Mr Psaila had taken the lands on perpetual emphyteusis from the Dominican Fathers in Valletta.

On 14 April Mr Psaila transferred to the Government the *utile dominium* in perpetuity of three strips of ground from the Hassaflieni lands and on 12 June 1904 did the same for a portion of the ancient "catacombs" discovered there, the remaining parts of these tombs at the time still unexplored, and a building site forming part of these lands. (For this and other purchases, cf. PWRB 38, fol. 17ff and 311.)

43. Referred to in L of T(emi) Z(ammit) to the LG, 20/11/03, in L(etter) B(ook) M(useum of Archaeology), p. 5.
44. Min(utes of the) C(ommittee of) M(anagement of the Museum), pp. 2 – 3.
45. PWRB 35, p. 165.
46. *Ibid.*, note of 2/12/03.
47. LBM, p. 6.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

On 7 March Fr Magri inspected the site and reported that he had “come to the conclusion that before any description of the same be attempted it is necessary that the rubbish that is filling the passage be removed.” In this letter⁽⁴⁹⁾ to the Lt. Governor, the Curator also pleaded that the SPW be requested to have the rubbish removed under Fr Magri’s supervision “with the least possible delay.”

The work of removing the rubbish was commenced by the PWD on Wednesday, 20 April. Fr Magri could not be present, but it was decided that not even Mr Doublet needed to be present, because only the rubbish thrown in by Mr Psaila was going to be removed.⁽⁵⁰⁾

On 28 April Fr Magri wrote, “I have told Mr Doublet that his presence was not reqd. during the removal of the rubbish thrown in by Mr Psaila in building the new houses; but it was absolutely reqd. during the removal of the rubbish pre-existing in the Catacombs. As there is a large stone table under this rubbish, the greatest care should be taken by the workmen”.⁽⁵¹⁾

On 19 September 1904 Fr Magri requested authorisation to send certain objects found at the Hypogeum to Mr Wallis Budge of the British Museum to have “their respective epoch” “properly ascertained by experts,” as he himself did not have “at hand the necessary modern publications for reference”.⁽⁵²⁾ He wished to have them forwarded by the Government, together with six drawings, a photograph and a letter to Mr Wallis Budge, “who is already informed of what is requested from him”.⁽⁵³⁾

On 2 January 1907 Fr Magri wrote to the Lt. Governor⁽⁵⁴⁾ from the Jesuit residence in Catania, Sicily, (where he was now Superior), to make suggestions regarding the “Has-Saflieni Necropolis”⁽⁵⁵⁾ and other antiquities. During his short stay in Malta in the previous December he had seen that considerable amounts of water were still oozing through the rock,⁽⁵⁶⁾ and this was threatening the paintings. He suggested buying Mr Psaila’s tenement, which contained a water tank (“useless, as it does not keep water and in summer gets dry”) and then selling it, after having destroyed the water tank. Moreover, he recommended that a ventilator be opened in the wall over the staircase and that the passage underneath, which seemed to be one

49. *Ibid.*, L of 14/3/04.

50. For details see PWRB 35, fol. 308.

51. *Ibid.* fol. 346.

52. The list of objects: two small triangular amulets in highly polished green stone (diorettes); a shell(?) amulet button shaped; a shell(?) cut in the shape of an animal; three common Egyptian necklace beads(paste); three fragments of pottery. (M 995/04, L of 19/9/04). According to a letter of TZ to Wallis Budge on 10/1/05 there was also a report by Fr Magri together with 22 objects therein described. (LBM p. 46)

53. M 22/05, L of 3/1/05.

54. M 21/07.

55. On 10 June 1905 TZ had requested the SPW to substitute the word “Necropolis for “Hypogeum”. (LBM p. 61, in answer to SPW’s letter of 5 June 1905)

56. On 8 Sept. 1906 TZ informed the LG that the Hypogeum required immediate repair, for oozing water had flooded again the lower story: it had to be emptied, and a shaft should be dug in the gallery at the further end of the lower story for water drainage, and the SPW should ventilate the place so that the current of air would decrease humidity and water have less chance to collect at the bottom. (LBM p. 92.)

of the original entrances to the hypogeum, be explored. He also suggested cutting a shallow groove at the bottom of the staircase shaft to collect and provide with an outlet the water that percolated.

Fr Magri also suggested elevating the entrance at the bottom of the staircase, so as to enable visitors to pass through without stooping, but this could be postponed if the original entrance to the Hypogeum was discovered under Mr Psaila's tenement.

Narrow planks provided with simple railings and supported by wooden beams, placed against the wall, could be used to bridge the space between the entrance to the different chambers. "Thus the splendid excavations, originally filled with earth for inhumation, would be seen to advantage."

The slabs originally covering the upper space over the lower staircase should be replaced; he wished "to be present at the restoration. Other odd stones in several places should be replaced in situ."

Fr Magri's final suggestion was the purchase of the shop or stable that had been used as a lumber room during the excavations; it would be a "useful dependency to the Necropolis".⁽⁵⁷⁾

As the total cost of these proposed works amounted to £570⁽⁵⁸⁾ the Lt. Governor noted that they would have to be carried out gradually. Dr Zammit considered the most urgent need was to prevent the water from finding its way into the Hypogeum and damaging the walls; he agreed that removal of the well would be a wise measure, but it all depended on the goodwill of the owner, and he proposed to talk to him. But the owner was unwilling to sell the cistern or let the cesspit at the presumed entrance to the Hypogeum be removed; he was ready, however, to sell the property, consisting of two adjoining houses, for £340. Dr Zammit recommended purchasing the property, making the proposed alterations and explorations and then reselling it. He strongly urged "the expediency of coming to a decision without further delay on this matter if we wish to preserve this unique monument. The action of the water has already sensibly deteriorated part of the hypogeum since its discovery".⁽⁵⁹⁾ These recommendations were followed, the property was purchased and Fr Magri's suggestions carried out.

The Xewkija Temple Excavations⁽⁶⁰⁾

There was a local tradition at Xewkija of an ancient pagan temple close to the old parish church, borne out by huge stones mentioned by G.F. Abela and de Soldanis as well as by Francis Ciantar (the actual tenant of the field), who had discovered a dressed stone 25 feet long, which he had broken up and used to build a wall.

57. On 22 August 1904 TZ requested the LG's permission "to rent a room, situated in close proximity of the hypogeum" "to gather in a convenient place the articles of antiquity met with during excavations at C. Paula." It was rented from the owner, Gio. Batta Borg, at the rate of 5s. 10d. per month from August 1904 to December 1906. (LBM pp. 35 – 6, 89).

58. M 21/07: remarks of the SPW, (or PW Petitions 21, fol. 106, 123, 131).

59. *Ibid.* Curator's note on 13/6/07.

This is a problem that has not been solved completely even nowadays. One finds other references in the Min CM to the problem. In the *Museum Report* for 1910 we read: "The monument was drained of water which persistently accumulated in it (a task which proved very difficult) and made accessible to the public."

60. M 1413/03, 83/04.

This tradition was confirmed in 1903, when Fr Magri discovered “the ground floor of the Phoenician Temple at Xeuchia” in a private property called “Iċ-Ċnus”.⁽⁶¹⁾ There were “large stones buried in the ground” and “according to all appearances, the remnants of the Phoenician temple still exist”.⁽⁶²⁾ Fr Magri thought that the removal of “the rather thin vegetable soil” would most likely reveal the floor of “this interesting monument” and enable him to make a plan, for “the foundations of some of the walls of this temple are still buried under the vegetable soil”.⁽⁶³⁾ In his letter announcing the discovery Fr Magri asked for Government funds to carry out the work.

The property belonged to the heirs of the late John Baptist Mompalao of Malta and was held on long lease (80 years) by the Archpriest of Xewkija, the Rev. P.P. Ciantar, D.D. At this time the Archpriest was on the point of coming to terms with the landlords to take the property on perpetual lease, and Fr Magri suggested waiting till the contract was signed.⁽⁶⁴⁾ But when the Archpriest took the lease Fr Magri became worried, for the Archpriest intended opening a road on the premises in order to transfer plots of ground for building purposes and “the projected road may fall within the area of the temple”.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Asked for advice as to what steps the Government should take “in order to avoid (the) possible demolition of valuable antiquities” at Xeuchia,⁽⁶⁶⁾ Fr Magri suggested that “trial pits be sunk in Ciantar’s property. The crop on the supposed site of the Temple is grain,” and “should the trial pits lead to important discoveries, then the site of the Temple may be bought by Government”.⁽⁶⁷⁾

In fact, the Government provided the necessary funds in September 1904, and on 20 October excavations began. On the following day a portion of one of the courts was discovered, and later on another portion; the floors were made of broken limestone and pounded pottery resting on a layer of small stones. Burned ashes, a few small bones of the canine genus and a great deal of broken varnished pottery (mostly incised and coloured) scattered all over the place were also discovered. Because of the advanced sowing season Fr Magri could not excavate in an eastern direction, where Ciantar had discovered the huge block of stone. At the beginning of winter all the work stopped.

In his Report⁽⁶⁸⁾ Fr Magri suggested exploring east and south of the area already

61. M 1413/03, L of 12/12/03. In his Report on the Xewkija excavations Fr Magri called the place “Iċ-Cens ta’ San Gwann”.

62. M 83/04, L of 4/2/04.

63. M 1413/03, L of 12/12/03.

64. M 1413/03, L of 20/12/03.

65. M 83/04, L of 4/2/04.

66. LB 116, p. 119, L 379 of 11/2/04.

67. M 83/04, L of 14/2/04.

68. Xewkija Report, *op. cit.*

At the sitting of the Museum Committee of 30 April 1906 Fr Magri read his “learned and elaborate report” on the explorations he had made on behalf of the Museum during the year and gave a detailed account of the ruins of the megalithic temple at Xewkija. The Committee resolved to have the report printed. (Min CM p. 10)

The Government printed 500 copies of the report, of which 50 were kept by the Curator “for exchange with other Museums abroad and for distribution” by himself. 200 copies were kept at the Govt. Printing Office and 250 at the Museum for sale at 6d. per copy. (LBM, pp. 173, 178)

excavated; "the ground sloping toward the south is for a considerable distance strewn with very thick potsherds".⁽⁶⁹⁾ But nothing came of it, and now everything lies buried under the new basilica. All that remains is some photos and earthenware at the Museum of Archaeology and Fr Magri's Report on the excavations, *Ruins of a Megalithic Temple at Xeuchia (Shewkiyah) Gozo. First Report.*

The Ġgantija⁽⁷⁰⁾

On 12 December 1903 Fr Magri wrote to the Lt. Governor complaining that the "Giants' Tower", (the Ġgantija Temples at Xaghra), was decaying, mainly because of "the wanton vandalism of street boys and of unprincipled sportsmen" who "occasionally brake (sic) the monumental slabs" while "hunting out rabbits".⁽⁷¹⁾

This monument was the property of Marquis Filippo Giacomo Cassar Desain.⁽⁷²⁾ Fr Magri succeeded in obtaining on loan the "Sacred Cone" of the Tower.⁽⁷³⁾

At a considerable distance from the Ġgantija complex Fr Magri discovered "a straight large stone wall flanked at right angles by two huge monoliths. Considering its position, size and plan, this ruin would appear to be the remnant of an outpost for the defence of the Temple." At this place, called "Il-Ġorġ" and "Ix-Xaghra ta' Bondin", Fr Magri thought that "small interesting articles" might be recovered, since "the lower stones of the wall" rested "upon a layer of burned earth".⁽⁷⁴⁾

69. Xewkija Report, *op.cit.* p. 9.

70. M 1413/03, M 424/04, M 224/05.

71. M 141/03, L of 12/12/03.

72. *Ibid.*, Note of SPW on 30/12/03.

73. Fr Magri had obtained no reply to his letter to the Marquis, dated 15/4/04. (M 424/04) Nor had TZ received any reply to his letter. (Min CM p. 5) In a letter to the Committee of the Museum read at its third sitting (14/12/03) Fr Magri drew the attention of the Committee to the "Sacred Cone or Pillar which lies broken in the Giants' Tower at Gozo." (*Ibid.*) But on 22/2/05 Fr Magri wrote that the Marquis had promised to lend the "Sacred Cone" to the Museum, "on the Curator giving him a receipt for it, with the power to remove it at any time, should he wish to do so." (M 224/05) Cf also Min CM p. 7 and *Museum Report, 1905 - 06.*

For the Museum Fr Magri also tried to obtain, under the same conditions, the loan of a huge tombstone inscribed with Hebrew square letters from Countess Sant Cassia. (M 224/05)

At the same sitting of the Museum Committee (14/12/03) two letters from Fr Magri were read. In the first he withdrew "his proposal, made in a former sitting, to remove to the Valletta Museum the clock alledged (sic) to have been brought from Rhodes." In the second he drew the Committee's attention to the "Sacred Cone", to four inscriptions on brass which existed formerly at the Marina Fish Market, and to a small bell at St Angelo brought from Rhodes at the time of the Order of St John. During the following sitting (No. 4) on 17/4/05 the Secretary informed the members that the SPW had been unable to find any record of the brass plates. No information is give regarding the bell.

74. M 1413/03, L of 12/12/03.

Rabat Antiquities⁽⁷⁵⁾

When Fr Magri learnt that drainage works would soon be taken in hand at Rabat, he requested the Lt. Governor to ensure that, if the diggers came across a find, especially in and about Strada Doni, all work should be stopped and the finds “shown to experts, explored and described.” The Lt. Governor gave the “necessary instructions” to preserve any valuable antiquities found there.⁽⁷⁶⁾

Slab Engraved with Hieroglyphics⁽⁷⁷⁾

The *Daily Malta Chronicle* of 8 April 1904 published a news item regarding “a granite slab of a reddish colour” found some time about 1880 “in the ground at a spot between Safi and Crendi.” Its surface had been “carefully prepared for the purpose, was adorned, as it appeared to the finder of it, with the figures of many things that grow and that move about.” The person who discovered it had treasured it “as a curious and somewhat mysterious stone,” but it was only recently that someone thought he had discovered in it “a value which the original finders” had not ascribed to it; according to the paper, the engraved figures were “assuredly ancient hieroglyphics.” When deciphered, it might reveal “facts of great interest” which were unknown up to that time; it probably dated from at least 2000 BC. The present owner was thinking of selling it in Germany, and the paper pleaded in the hope that no ancient monument would be allowed to pass out of our hands, the more so as we had “a nascent museum.”

The following day Fr Magri wrote to the Lt. Governor at his house, enquiring who the owner was. “This stone may, or may not be a missing link of the history of these Islands.” He had in his possession several drawings of Egyptian slabs found in Malta, one of which certainly dated from about 2300 BC; but they did “not appear to have been engraved in Malta.” He thought it advisable that a paper squeeze of the slab be taken and sent to him for purposes of study and comparison with his drawings.

Dr Temi Zammit, the Curator of the Museum, took the paper squeeze, which was sent to Fr Magri.⁽⁷⁸⁾ Four days later Fr Magri was informed⁽⁷⁹⁾ that the slab was at present at the ‘Marble Works’ of its owner, Mr Cesare Darmanin, (ex-Member of Council), in Sda Reale Via S. Giuseppe, Hamrun. But Dr Zammit was “doubtful whether the slab in question was found in Malta”.⁽⁸⁰⁾

L-Imrejsbiet⁽⁸¹⁾

At “Ta’ l-Imrejsbiet”, on the road to Ghajnsielem, Fr Magri discovered the ruins of a megalithic construction “presumably a tomb”.⁽⁸²⁾

75. M 276/04.

76. LB 117, L 790 of 22/3/04.

77. M 387/04.

78. LB 117, p. 262, L 1020 of 14/4/04.

79. LB 117, p. 309, L 1062.

80. *Ibid.*, Further comments were awaited from Fr Magri, but none are found in the file.

81. M 424/04, M 249/06.

82. L of 15/4/04. According to TZ M. considered it “a chief’s tomb”. The former personally believed the ruins to be the remains of the walls of a ruined building. (*The Maltese Islands and Their History*, Valletta: The Malta Herald Office, 1926, p. 43)

Fr Magri suggested to the Government the purchase of the property, which belonged to Count Manduca of Balzan, "in order to preserve them [the ruins] from utter destruction," for the subtenant had already begun to break up and remove the large blocks. Fr Magri had asked him to stop till he heard from him again.

The Government wished to purchase the "megalithic remains with a view to preservation," but the owner demanded the "exorbitant" price of £35; and a further £15 would be required to obtain court authority for effecting the sale of the property, which was entailed.⁽⁸³⁾

The Superintendent of Public Works (SPW) agreed with Fr Magri that, to preserve these and other ruins, a law should be enacted "as suggested by Father Magri for the preservation and care of antiquities".⁽⁸⁴⁾

Ruins opposite the Bishop's Palace, Gozo⁽⁸⁵⁾

On 26 December 1904 Fr Magri informed the Lt. Governor that ancient ruins had been lately discovered at the foot of the Gozo Acropolis (the Citadel), opposite the Bishop's Palace, during the digging of foundations for a building belonging to Mr Paul Pisani & Co. of Victoria, Gozo. The landlord had allowed him "to pick up & keep several important relics of a very remote antiquity found on the spot."

Since Fr Magri was afraid that "the large monoliths forming portion of a very ancient building, as yet in part undiscovered" would be almost immediately removed, and that "an adjacent cellar or well(?) lined with stones" would be filled up at the same time, he urgently requested funds (the outlay would not be considerable at all) to keep an overseer at 2 s. per day, who would report to him and keep in safety any find turning up during the excavations, which were being made at the expense of the landlord, and "to sift the earth under the large blocks and inside an oven (?) full of ashes and of some human bones in order to find the foundation deposits and any small articles that may be mixed up with the soil," and "to explore properly the above mentioned cellar or well(?)" The landlord, Fr Magri added, had given his consent to all these arrangements and "to delay for a short time the removal of the ancient building."

Fr Magri's request was granted.⁽⁸⁶⁾

Gozo Antiquities⁽⁸⁷⁾

At his suggestion several antiquities were removed to the Museums at Valletta or Victoria, Gozo.⁽⁸⁸⁾

83. M 249/06, SPW's note.

84. *Ibid.*

85. M 1372/04.

86. *Ibid.*, note for 31/12/04: "An overseer has been employed, and is carrying out the work under the direction of Father Magri." The *Museum Report (1905-06)* mentions that Fr Magri made excavations among the ruins of a mansion at Haggarija (now Castle St) and that several relics were presented to the Museum by Mr Paul Pisani.

87. M 448/05.

88. *Ibid.*, L of 4/4/05.

At Mgarr, embedded in the wharf, were eight “white marble fluted shafts, alleged to have been removed from the site of the pagan temple in the upper city of Gozo”. Fr Magri considered that four of these could be removed, but he advised that they should be replaced by hard stone posts. Another such shaft, which was preserved in the garden of the “Government House”, the Officers’ Mess, near Fort Chambray, was sent to the Valletta Museum.⁽⁸⁹⁾ He did not think it worthwhile buying another similar shaft in the house of the sacristan of the Cathedral Church. Fr Magri thought it would please the Gozitans to see some of these shafts at their Public Library.

“A large marble or hard stone capital outside Bishop Cagliares’ old palace” – a ‘historical’ relic – and an ancient fountain basin, lying near a megalithic wall on the way to Xewkija, were also sent to the Gozo Library.

Ruins of “Il-Borg/It-Torri ta’ l-Imramma” Megalithic Temple at Ta’ Ċenċ⁽⁹⁰⁾

On 17 December 1905 Fr Magri submitted “a rough and provisional plan of the ruins of an ancient temple” he had discovered some time before at “Ix-Xaghra l-Kbira” at Ta’ Ċenċ, Gozo.⁽⁹¹⁾

The site measured about eight tumoli and was at present held on temporary long lease by a certain Salvu Grima nicknamed “Tal-Ghedru” of Sannat, but the whole Government tenement, forming part of the endowment of St Paul’s Grotto, was held under perpetual lease by Miss Farrugia Bugeja of Valletta.⁽⁹²⁾

Fr Magri wished the Government would take a temporary or perpetual lease of the site, so that he would be able to remove the light vegetable soil and explore the site properly, and, at a very small expense, restore it partially.⁽⁹³⁾ He added that the tenant of the fields to the E. and S.E. of the ruins would allow him to excavate these fields, in which were found “many fragments of ancient pottery.” Fr Magri hoped that the Government would approach the lady’s administrator and brother-in-law, Judge Anthony Micallef, for the proposed lease.

The SPW accordingly informed the judge of the Government’s “intention” of acquiring from his sister-in-law the *dominium utile* of a portion of her lands⁽⁹⁴⁾ at Ta’ l-Imramma and requested him as her representative kindly to appoint a “Perito” so that the amount to be paid by the Government might be fixed jointly with his Department.

Miss Farrugia Bugeja’s lawyer, Dr Oreste Grech Mifsud, wrote back⁽⁹⁵⁾ that these lands were “very interesting from an archeological point of view, and as such both her late father and herself have most carefully guarded them without having the slightest intention of ever parting with them”; he also complained of the word “intention” used in the letter which he considered “threatening” and justifying his client’s suspicion that the Government was contemplating a “compulsory expropriation”.

89. Cf *Ibid.*, for correspondence.

90. M 2819/05, G 401/06, M 1039/06.

91. M 2819/05, L of 17/12/05.

92. *Ibid.*, Note by A.S. Gozo. For history of lease cf *ibid.*, Sheet 2.

93. *Ibid.*, L of 17/12/05.

94. L 1629 of 6/3/06 in *External Letters of SPW 1905–06*, Vol. 537, p. 147.

95. G 401/06, L of 19/3/06.

The law of expropriation, the lawyer contended, should apply “only in those special instances in which individual interest must needs give way to the public weal”; in the present instance could “a forced expropriation” be considered “either a just or gentlemanly act”.⁽⁹⁶⁾

The Lt. Governor considered the SPW’s letter “most unfortunately worded” and let Dr Grech Mifsud know this; he also informed him that the Government “desired merely to ascertain” from his client “whether she was willing to dispose of the portion of the lands at ‘ta l-Imramma’ at ‘ta Ċenċ’, Gozo, on which the remains of an ancient temple stand, in order that they might be preserved in the interest of archeology”.⁽⁹⁷⁾ On 16 April he wrote that, if the lady was “willing to dispose of the site therein referred to, the remains of the ancient temple existing on it would be preserved by the Government out of public funds, and Miss Bugeja would be spared any expense in the matter, while the preservation of the ruins would be ensured.” The Lt. Governor also enquired whether Miss Farrugia Bugeja “would be willing to consider the question of disposing of the site to the Government. The ancient remains in Malta and Gozo are of great interest to archeologists all over the world, and the Government is extremely anxious that they should be carefully preserved”.⁽⁹⁸⁾

In a letter of 19 July 1906⁽⁹⁹⁾ Fr Magri reminded the Government that the temporary lease of the site would expire on 15 August, and suggested that Judge Micallef be approached in order to reach a final settlement, to help “ensure the lasting preservation and proper restoration of the Temple.” He thought that a photo of the ruins in the Curator’s possession would convince the judge that his sister-in-law owned “a heap of stones, which in time will, by the force of things, crumble to dust” whereas, if the ruins were in the hands of the Government, he (Fr Magri) would be able to restore the foundations of the Temple and preserve it for posterity. It was “not an easy task to undertake a restoration of this kind; for in many places what appears to be the original boundary walls are modern rubble constructions.”

Dr Grech Mifsud replied on 26 October⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ saying that “il modo più pratico per incontrare i desideri del Governo senza ledere i dritti di altrui proprietà sarebbe di offerire al Governo quel sito in locazione ad un affitto nominale, e per un tempo, anche eccedente 16 anni, e con facoltà di farvi qualunque scavo all’oggetto di preservare gli avanzi di quel tempio,” and that his client would have no difficulty in giving the Government “un dritto di preferenza per qualunque futura locazione”.

There was however another problem. What would happen to objects found during excavations? Could the Government dispose of them and remove them to the Museum? The Crown Advocate stated that the Government, as lessee, could only undertake the preservation of the ruins and would have to reach a special agreement with the lady to dispose of any relics or finds. When the lady’s lawyer was asked

96. *Ibid.*

97. LB 133, p. 122, L 1006 of 3/4/06.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 254, L 1136 of 16/4/06.

99. M 1039/06.

100. *Ibid.*, after further communications with Miss Farrugia Bugeja and her lawyer had yielded no definite reply, so that the LG informed M. that “apparently Miss Bugeja’s object is to procrastinate. She will neither answer herself nor through her legal adviser.”

about this,⁽¹⁰¹⁾ he replied⁽¹⁰²⁾ that she was not disposed to give the Government *a priori* “promesse così ampie”, although she was not unwilling to take the Government’s wishes into consideration for any particular find.

The Crown Advocate suggested an agreement to settle the lease by accepting to pay a nominal rent as proposed by the lady’s legal adviser, and to rely on her “good will which, I hope, will not be failing” with regard to removing objects of interest found on the site. The Lt. Governor suggested that “any articles removed to the Museum wd. remain her property, & be regarded as a loan”.⁽¹⁰³⁾

Preservation of Antiquities in Gozo and an Antiquities Law⁽¹⁰⁴⁾

On 15 February 1906 Fr Magri submitted photographs and a report with a list of suggestions⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ for the preservation of several antiquities in Gozo, “most of which are fast disappearing”. Temi Zammit considered Fr Magri’s suggestions “very sensible for unless special precautions be taken our ancient monuments will soon disappear,” and since the sum required was small, he advised it should be made available.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾

Fr Magri suggested among other things taking on lease the lands adjacent to “Il-Gebla tas-Sansuna”, purchasing “Għar Gherduf”, surrounding with a rubble wall certain dolmens, fixing notice boards, and purchasing L-Imrejsbiet ‘tomb’; he also mentioned the ruins at Tal-Qighan.

But the most important and far-reaching of his suggestions was the enactment of a law “for the preservation and care of antiquities”. This was taken up seriously. The SPW agreed that such a law, as suggested by Fr Magri, was advisable “in order to save considerable expense” since owners of such ruins usually demanded excessive prices.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾

101. LB 138, p. 105, L 3416 of 5/11/06.

102. M 1039/06, L of 17/11/06.

103. After the Antiquities Ordinance was passed in 1910 the Curator was asked if any further steps could be taken. (M 1039/06, note for 13/5/11) On 15 June 1912 TZ noted that he had kept the correspondence, in the hope that Dr Ashby, the Director of the British School of Rome, whom he intended consulting on the subject, would come over to Malta about that time. He understood that Dr Ashby would not be visiting Malta that year, and so works which were not considered “absolutely necessary” could not be carried out at that time. He proposed that the question raised in the correspondence be considered at a later date.

The site of the Copper Age temple complex has not yet been systematically excavated.

104. M 249/06.

105. The report and photographs missing from the file. It is only from the comments made by the SPW that one gathers what were most of the items mentioned.

106. M 249/06. Note in file.

107. 19/3/06, comments by SPW. As a result of these suggestions, a yearly allowance of 2s. 6d. was paid to the lessee to take care of “Il-Gebla tas-Sansuna”; the SPW considered £6 sufficient to buy Għar Gherduf, but up to 28 August 1906 not all owners had been found; the construction of a rubble wall, notice boards and other works mentioned in the report would require a sum of £26. 15s., but the owners were not willing to come to terms; for l-Imrejsbiet cf above p.159; with regard to these ruins and those of Tal-Qighan the SPW advised that Fr Magri’s suggestion for a law to be enacted should be taken up.

On 19 March 1906 the SPW made his comments re the law.

On 30 August the Lt. Governor required observations regarding the proposed law, and mentioned there was “a law of this kind in Italy”. He added that “the present situation is very unsatisfactory, as owing to the carelessness of private owners, or their desire to get a high price from the Govt., valuable antiquities disappear or become irretrievably ruined”.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

In 1910 the Government published the Antiquities Ordinance, officially called “The Protection of Antiquities Ordinance”.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

Kerċem Phoenician House⁽¹¹⁰⁾

In 1906 the villagers of Kerċem, Gozo, were quarrying stone to build their church from a site gratuitously granted for that purpose by the owner, Francesco Vella, nicknamed “Ta’ Carlozz”, who hailed from the same village. Early in June there came to light “the ruins of a building almost identical with the houses of the XV Cent. B.C. lately found in S. Palestine”.⁽¹¹¹⁾ They were the “remains of a Phoenician house, consisting of several rooms, made of large stones”.⁽¹¹²⁾ Fr Magri considered these ruins “unique in these Islands and their importance cannot be overrated”.⁽¹¹³⁾

It was only with difficulty that Fr Magri “obtained a suspension of the work of the village population in order to ascertain the nature and extent of the ruins”.⁽¹¹⁴⁾ In order to save the remains he, together with Mr N. Said of the PWD, even proposed to have the stone for the church quarried from a site further away from the ruins, but the villagers would not agree, “wrongly” believing that the stone in the spot pointed out by them was “of an inferior quality”.

Fr Magri cleared the ruins of all encumbrances and replaced the stones *in situ* as they had been found at the time of their discovery, and hired a man to stand on guard to prevent further destruction. He also wished to surround the ruins with a rubble wall.

In his letter of 7 June Fr Magri urgently begged the Government to buy the site at once or, “if the owner, in view of the ruins, should ask a very high price”, to take it on perpetual lease; the Curator was in favour of purchasing the site. It was urgent that the Government settle at once the terms of the sale or lease, since “delay and the flocking of visitors to see the ruins” would only tend to make the owner demand a higher price.

In fact, the site, covering an area of about 265 sq. yds. was valued at £10,⁽¹¹⁵⁾ independently of the discovery of the ruins. But the owner demanded £110 for an outright sale or £3 a year for a perpetual lease. “The price asked seems exorbitant”, commented the Lt. Governor.

108. M 249/06.

109. There is a note of 14 December 1913 saying that the matter dealt with in this paper was disposed of by the enactment of the Antiquities Ordinance. The full title reads “Ordinance to make provision for the protection and preservation of monuments and other objects of local antiquarian or archaeological importance”, and published in the Government Gazette of 29 April 1910.

110. M 792/06, M 21/07.

111. M 792/06, L of 7/6/06.

112. *Museum Report 1906-07*.

113. M 792/06, L of 7/6/06.

114. *Ibid.*

115. Asst. Secr. Gozo’s telegram of 9/6/06, but this estimated the site “only as land of good quality”.

The Curator of the Museum corresponded repeatedly with Fr Magri and other persons in Gozo, but to no avail, for the owner would not budge from his "excessive" selling price. After some time Fr Magri came to the conclusion that the owner would later on agree to more reasonable terms.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ In August Fr Magri left the Island to take up the post of Superior at the small Jesuit residence in Catania.

Unfortunately the episode had a tragic ending. Fr Magri had taken photos and sketches, and the Curator had been authorised to buy the site at a reasonable price, when the Curator was suddenly informed by Mr Casolani, Asst Secretary at Gozo that "the ruins had been completely destroyed by the owner, and the large blocks of stone were broken and used for building purposes".⁽¹¹⁷⁾ The owner, "finding that the Government was not disposed to give it" (the "exorbitant price" he demanded), "deliberately destroyed the remains".⁽¹¹⁸⁾ "Thus a priceless monument which might have shed much light on Phoenician history was ruthlessly swept away by an ignorant man, who cynically stated that that was his private property and that nobody had a right to interfere with it".⁽¹¹⁹⁾ This unhappy event induced the Curator to express the hope that "this liberty to destroy historical monuments will be curtailed in the near future and that owners and guardians of such monuments will rise to the sense of their responsibility towards society and their country".⁽¹²⁰⁾

In fact, as an immediate consequence of this wanton destruction, the Committee of Management of the Museum passed a resolution at its meeting of the 12 November 1906 that "it is desirable that immediate steps be taken to legislate in connection with the preservation of the antiquities and the monuments in these islands".⁽¹²¹⁾

The tragic incident gave an impetus to the enactment of the required legislation.

Visit to Malta 1906⁽¹²²⁾

Late in 1906 Fr Magri wrote to the Secretary of the Museum Committee (Dr T. Zammit) from Catania, asking if he could come to Malta for about a week "at the expense of the Museum funds, to complete his reports on the Hassaflieni hypogeum and the other monuments he was studying." The expense would amount to about £5, including travelling expenses and maintenance allowance. The Museum Committee, informed of this letter at its sitting of 12 November, passed a resolution accepting the proposal, so that Fr Magri would be able to "complete his reports on

116. M 792/06. Fr Magri's verbal communication to TZ: note for 28/8/06.

117. Min CM p. 11. On 22/1/07 TZ asked the LG that the SPW be so good as to "direct that a plan of these ruins, with all available details, be made on behalf of the Museum before further destruction of the monument." (LBM p. 111) The SPW was unable to oblige "as the ruins are totally destroyed." (L of 1/2/07 in PWRB 41, fol. 83) On 21/2/07 TZ thanked Mr Louis Bondi of Victoria, Gozo, for a "stone saved from the Kerchem ruins" which he had presented to the Gozo Museum. (LBM p. 113)

Fr Magri also obtained for the Gozo Museum "the stone mill in the centre of one of the rooms" and "saved several articles from the Kerchem ruins". (M 21/07)

118. *Mus. Rep. 1906-07.*

119. *Ibid.*

120. *Ibid.*

121. Min CM p. 12. For TZ's letter of 17/11/06 conveying the above resolution to the LG cf. LBM p. 106.

122. Min CM p. 14.

the antiquities with the study of which he was entrusted by this Committee with the approval of the Government.”

In his letter of 17 November⁽¹²³⁾ to the Lt. Governor conveying the above resolution, Dr Zammit mentioned that the Government had already sanctioned the payment of Fr Magri's travelling expenses in connection with the drawing up of the report on the Hypogeum and added that Fr Magri was abroad and that he “being a religious has no means of his own and could not therefore travel on such business unless the necessary expenses be found for him.”

This seems to have been approved, for Fr Magri did in fact spend some days here in December.⁽¹²⁴⁾

Marsaxlokk Ruins⁽¹²⁵⁾

During his stay here Fr Magri paid a visit to Marsaxlokk, where he saw “relics of a structure with large stones and an ancient water tank,” but Folklore considered the place, called “Ta' Bir-riċċa” (Birrikka) and Hal Ginwi, to be the site of “an ancient city and old records mention fragments, of marble, bronze & lead (lumps) & gold coins found in tilling the ground.” During his short visit he personally gathered information on the spot and consulted documents in the archives of the Collegiate Church of Vittoriosa, and he became convinced that these were “very interesting ruins”.

Fr Magri suggested taking the land, which belonged to the above-mentioned Church, on lease for a year and excavating; it would be even better to take it on perpetual lease. “The Canons would get permission to grant the lease, provided a small real advantage would accrue to their Church.” Fr Magri stipulated that he should be present when fixing the area to be taken on lease; he was already investigating the extent of the ruins underground.⁽¹²⁶⁾

Projected Archaeological Exploration in Tunisia⁽¹²⁷⁾

Early the following year the Maltese community in Tunisia asked the Jesuit superiors to send them a priest to preach the Lenten sermons to them. Fr Magri offered to do so, for he hoped to combine archaeological research with his work for the spiritual good of his countrymen in North Africa. The superiors were rather reluctant to let him go because of his ill-health, but, hoping that the climate would do him good and being unwilling to go back on their promise, they acceded to his request.

123. LBM p. 107.

124. *Giornale della Casa di S. Calcedonio dal 1° Gennaio 1891* at the Archives of the Jesuit Maltese Province in Naxxar. During his short stay Fr Magri met among others Alf. M. Galea, N. Tagliaferro and Dr S.L. Pisani.

125. M 21/07.

126. Hal Ginwi (a prehistoric locality) was excavated by Dr A.V. Laferla in 1917. (Evans, *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands*, 1971) The Museum authorities excavated Punic tombs in the fields called Ta' Birrikka in 1923. (*Mus. Rep. 1923*) Fr Magri's wish to excavate at Marsaxlokk was fulfilled nearly 60 years later when the Italian Archaeological Mission began excavating at Tas-Silġ. Although the three sites are not identical, I believe that Fr Magri was indicating the area.

127. M 350/07.

On 28 February 1907 Fr Magri wrote from the Parish of Our Lady of the Rosary in Tunis to the Lt. Governor that he had "a splendid chance of exploring in this country, with a very small expense, ruins connected with the ancient history of Malta" and requested funds to do so.

One of these ruins was the old *Thaenae*, at present called *Tyna*, south of *Sfax*; "its ruins, sterling mosaics and statues" showed that it was a "very important city". "What is most striking are the very numerous statuettes in Malta stone found in the tombs of the Graeco-Roman period." According to the natives of *Sfax*, the Maltese hailed from here: a contention borne out by local names, such as *Wad el Maltin* und *Elhel el Maltin*, and confirmed by Arabic MSS. Fr Magri suggested "a summary survey of the ruins, and a regular exploration of one or two unopened tombs, in order to find out the style of architecture and of the tomb furniture." The expense would be from 40 to 50 shillings. He would do the work in one day and would be accompanied by a friend and two or three workmen and would need no escort.

Fr Magri also wished to visit the as yet unexplored ruins at *Kasr el 'Alia*, lying about 12 miles due East of *El Djem*, (the site of the famous Amphitheatre), and the site of *Acholla*, "a Maltese Colony and free city planted about 1000 B.C."⁽¹²⁸⁾ He would make a summary survey, get photographs and "find out the leading landmarks which connected it with the sea"⁽¹²⁹⁾ He thought he could do the work in one day but would probably have to spend two nights in a hotel at *El Djem* or somewhere else. Since *Acholla* lay in a wasteland he would have to ride thither on horseback and be accompanied by a European, a respectable native, v.g. from *Sfax*, and a paid escort. He estimated the cost at £6, "a fair estimate on the safe side"; he might try to travel by steamer (if one were available) as far as, say, *Mehdia*; that might be cheaper.

"It would be a great pity," he added, "if the French were to explore before us what is our own." He requested funds only for "the travelling and hotel expenses (personal & for my party) that would oblige me to go out of my way," since travel to and from Tunisia he would pay out of his own pocket. The first two weeks of March he would be at *Sousse*, and afterwards till about Easter at *Sfax*. Fr Magri also requested an official letter of introduction to the Consul General at Tripoli, Mr Justin Alvarez, since he might call there on his way back, seeking fuller information about "a tribe of Maltese origin settled in Tripolitania in pre-Islamic times."

128. *Ibid.*, L of 28/2/07.

129. cf. also Fr Magri's *Three Punic Inscriptions re-discovered in Malta. Ed. with Trans. and Commentary*, Malta Govt Printing Office, 1901, pp. 15–21. This had formed the text of a lecture he delivered on 2 March 1901 to the Malta Archaeological and Scientific Society.

On 19 March Fr Magri wrote to TZ: "At *Acholla* remain only the ruins of a castrum, traces of the harbour, water tanks and drains. What is most important would be to follow and mark the lines occupied by the ancient city. . .

A regular excavation of the foundations of the walls of *Acholla* is out of the question, as it would require a very large outlay. It would appear that the heap of ruins seen by Taylor in the XVIII cent. has disappeared. Consequently there is little to explore.

At present an officer of the Tunisian army is exploring at *Tina* (*Taenae*). I can start my work at *Tina* on the 25th inst. . . . I have been authorised to get copies of the mosaics at *Tina*." A copy of this letter was given to Mr Guzè Cassar Pullicino by Mrs L. Galea, wife of Alf. M. Galea, and quoted by Ms Maria Muscat in her (unpublished) B.A. Hons. (Maltese) Dissertation, *Patri Manwel Magri, S.J.: Hajtu u Hidmietu*, R.U.M. 1974.

Fr Magri hoped he would get an answer before leaving Sousse. On receiving the letter, the Lt. Governor remarked that the permission of the French authorities was required and there was not enough time to get it as Fr Magri was staying only for a few days in Tunis. He also noted that Fr Magri had overlooked the fact that "our vote (for antiquities) is for the exploration & preserv. of antiquities *in Malta*, & not in other countries".⁽¹³⁰⁾

The letter of introduction to the Consul General in Tripoli was provided, recommending Fr Magri as "a well known authority on archaeological matters in Malta",⁽¹³¹⁾ but by an oversight the letter was sent directly to Mr Alvarez instead of to Fr Magri, who was appraised of the mishap.

In the meantime Fr Magri was doing his stint of preaching and archaeological research at Sousse, the ancient Hadrumetum of the Romans, where he also visited the Roman, Punic and Byzantine ruins.

Fr Magri's Sudden Death

Fr Magri then departed for Sfax to preach the Lenten sermons to the Maltese community there. He preached, heard confessions and dispensed spiritual advice to those who flocked to him. On Wednesday of Holy Week he felt a little unwell, but carried on as usual. On Maundy Thursday he said Mass and preached with difficulty. His nephew, Mr Salv Spiteri, took him to his home to rest. During the night his condition took a turn for the worse and he was given the Last Sacraments. He died early on the morning of Good Friday, 29 March 1907.

Meanwhile Mr Alvarez was waiting for Fr Magri. On 2 April⁽¹³²⁾ he wrote to the Governor, Sir Charles Mansfield Clarke, that, having received the letter of introduction dated 18 March, he had been "awaiting Father Magri's arrival for the last ten days or so either by direct steamer or via Tunis. Unfortunately he has not yet arrived." He promised to do "what is in my power to assist this distinguished archaeologist on the occasion of his visit to Tripoli." But Fr Magri had already passed away.

On learning of Fr Magri's sudden death Temi Zammit wrote the Lt. Governor a "pressing" letter dated 1 April⁽¹³³⁾ explaining that Fr Magri had been "preparing several reports on behalf of the Museum and had taken with him for the purpose books, plans, manuscripts, etc., belonging to the Museum and which the Museum cannot afford to lose." As the Curator understood that the father's papers were "likely soon to be destroyed" he requested authorisation from the Lt. Governor to approach the Fr Provincial of the Sicilian Province (Malta formed part of this Province) to recover all these documents. At the same time he "strongly" recommended that the Fr Provincial be requested to present to the Malta Museum

130. M 350/07.

131. LB 141, p. 85, L 831 of 18/3/07.

132. M 350/07. The letter arrived in Malta on 8 April.

133. LBM p. 120.

“any private manuscripts of Father Magri having reference to Maltese History and Maltese Antiquities, which are sure to be greatly appreciated by all students of our history and which will be likewise valued as a memento of the late lamented Father.” On the following day Dr Zammit wrote to the Provincial, Fr Nalbene, an almost identical letter, and on the Government’s behalf, requested Fr Magri’s manuscripts “which relate to Malta” “if there is no one who has a claim to them”.⁽¹³⁴⁾

At the Museum Committee’s sitting held on 27 June 1907 Dr Zammit paid tribute to Fr Magri, calling him “one of the best members of the Committee and one whom it will be difficult to replace as the deceased made the study of Maltese archeology his life subject. His untiring zeal & his enthusiasm for all that related to Malta marked him out as the foremost student of our history”.⁽¹³⁵⁾

Among others who paid tributes to his goodness and learning were the Governor, Sir Charles Mansfield Clarke, who considered his erudition in archaeology and the history of Malta almost unique⁽¹³⁶⁾ and the Lt. Governor, Edward Marsh Merewether, who called him “a great archaeologist”.⁽¹³⁷⁾

Conclusion

But did Fr Magri deserve these tributes? Obviously we cannot expect or demand of him the training, knowledge and the technical know-how that a modern archaeologist acquires after years of study at a University and field-work, when so many developments have taken place to make archaeology a fully fledged science. One must also bear in mind that archaeology was for Fr Magri not a full-time occupation, but only a serious hobby, pursued in the limited leisure time which his calling as a priest left him.

Fr Magri was a pioneer, imbued with a real love for the archaeology and folklore of these Islands. He was the first to excavate three important sites (the Hypogeum in Malta, Santa Verna and Xewkija in Gozo, the first two still in existence). He was also one of the very first to understand clearly the usefulness of photography together with a close study of pottery and numismatics for the science of archaeology. Moreover, it can be claimed for Fr Magri that he inspired and fostered a great love for Malta’s cultural heritage in some of his contemporaries, chief among them Sir Temi Zammit, who was to set Maltese archaeology on a solid basis.⁽¹³⁸⁾

Fr Magri’s love of archaeology was but one aspect of his abiding love for everything Maltese, including his constant desire for the people’s intellectual and moral progress and the preservation of the Island’s heritage.

134. *Ibid.*, p. 123. There is no evidence of the Provincial’s reply.

135. Min CM p. 16. In the *Museum Report 1906 – 07* TZ wrote: “The valuable discoveries made in Gozo by the late Father Magri, and his contributions to the study of our language and of our early history, entitle him to rank with the best of these Islands.”

136. *Historia Seminarii Gaudisiensis ab Anno 1866*, p. 117, at the Jesuit Archives, Naxxar.

137. *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 15 May 1907, p. 2.

138. See F.X. Mallia, ex-Director of Museums, “Manwel Magri Arkeologu”, *Problemi tal-lum*, Jan. 1968, pp. 20 – 21.