

EXCAVATIONS  
AT  
HAL MILLIERI,  
MALTA

T.F.C. BLAGG, A. BONANNO, A.T. LUTTRELL



A Report on the 1977 Campaign conducted on behalf of the National Museum  
of Malta and the University of Malta

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*The photographs were kindly provided as follows:*

1: Peter Jennings. 2: Malta Government Tourist Board. 3: Roger Vella Bonavita. 4, 6: Charles Eynaud. 5, 7–10, 12, 13, 15–23: Malta Government Department of Information. 11, 14: Paolo Zanolini. 24–36, 40, 41: National Museum, Valletta. 37–39: J. Schembri. 42: L. Zammit. 43: Amanda Claridge.

# INTRODUCTION

The editor's preface to *Hal Millieri: a Maltese Casale, its Churches and Paintings* published in 1976 noted that, in the absence of written documents, only archaeological techniques offered any serious possibility of learning more of the development of the *casale*:

Ideally the studies in this volume should have been complemented by excavations designed to elucidate the early history of the site, to establish the plans of buildings no longer standing, and to provide other information the nature of which cannot be foreseen . . . only the most precise and careful digging, sieving every ounce of earth, noting every change in the consistency of the soil and analysing every scrap of pottery, pollen and bone, can offer any substantial hope of recreating the lost centuries of Malta's medieval history.

The excavations of 1977 went a considerable way towards the fulfilment of this programme by increasing the body of historical information concerning Hal Millieri. A full understanding of the new material naturally requires a reading of the volume already published. Indeed, the fact that the documentary evidence and the standing remains had already been studied in detail made the site an especially attractive one for an excavation. These operations have also introduced purely medieval archaeology to Malta for the first time, and have inaugurated the systematic investigation of the medieval pottery, a process which should prove valuable in the future. It should be emphasized that the immediate results are limited, but that progress in identifying and dating the pottery may make it possible at some future date to interpret the materials excavated with greater precision.

The excavations were carried out within the fifteenth-century church of the Annunciation, and on the site of the adjoining church of the Visitation, the demolition of which was ordered in 1667. In addition to evidence for the construction of the Annunciation church, the most important result of the excavation was the discovery of the remains of an earlier church beneath it which had also been painted with frescoes. Burials had been made within both these churches, and a substantial quantity of late Roman pottery found in the layers beneath the floor of the earlier church provides evidence for the occupation of the site in that period also, though no remains of pre-medieval structures were found. The floor and the remains of the walls and piers of the Visitation Church were completely cleared and have been left open to view, and limited excavation beneath the floor uncovered remains of two burials and evidence for the way in which that church was constructed. These investigations have thus brought to light a considerable body of information concerning earlier occupation of the area, the medieval pottery, the practice of burial, the skeletal remains and medieval construction methods. These

matters have furthermore been studied in relation to the available written documents and to comparable materials elsewhere.

\* \* \*

The three authors jointly and generally collaborated in the presentation of this work for which they take overall responsibility, while the authors of separate sections are naturally responsible for what appears above their own names. The plans, figures, pottery and small finds were drawn by T.F.C. Blagg. As in the case of the first volume on Ħal Millieri, many bodies and individuals have generously assisted in the project, and the authors wish to express their gratitude to all of them.

The scheme depended in the first place on the support of the Ħal Millieri and Bir Miftuħ Trust and of its parent body Din l-Art Ħelwa, which not only gave permission for the excavation but provided generous moral and material support; the President of the Trust, the Hon. Mr. Justice Maurice Caruana Curran, its Vice-President Mr. Roger Vella Bonavita and its Secretary Mr. Walter Zahra are especially deserving of thanks. We also wish to thank those who contributed to Dr. Blagg's travelling expenses in his coming to work on the excavations and subsequently on the preparation of the results for publication, that is, the Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas in London, acting through the University of Malta; the Institute of Archaeology, University of London; Din l'Art Ħelwa; the Din l-Art Ħelwa Youth Section; and certain anonymous donors. We are also most grateful to the University of Malta for the publication of this work.

The excavation was carried out on behalf of the Museums Department of Malta. Under the overall direction of Mr. Francis Mallia, the former Director of Museums, the conduct of the excavations in the field was supervised by Dr. T.F.C. Blagg now of the University of Kent at Canterbury and Dr. A. Bonanno of the Department of Classics, University of Malta. The Museums Department provided workmen and equipment, and the field directors wish to thank Mr. Mallia and Dr. Tancred Gouder, Curator of the Archaeological Section of the National Museum in Valletta, for the full and enthusiastic assistance and encouragement which they provided both on the site of the excavation and in the subsequent work on the finds.

We also wish to record with gratitude the contributions of those whose indispensable help will be evident from the following pages. Dr. Lisa Fentress assisted with the supervision of the excavations and with the preparation of the pottery report. Others who worked on the excavations included Mr. Angelo Muscat and Mr. John Giordmaina of the Museums Department, the Hon. Mrs. R. Borwick, Mr. Mario Buhagiar, Miss May Cassar and Mr. Anthony Zerafa, together with Mr. Anthony Spiteri and Mr. Philip Piscopo both of the Department of Classics at the University of Malta, and members of the

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Dr. Myra Shackley, then of the University of Oxford, provided reports on samples of sediments. Dr. Helen Brown of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford assisted with the identification of the coins. The assistance of various scholars in the study of the pottery is acknowledged in the introductory note to the Pottery Report. Conservation and restoration of the finds have been carried out by Mr. Paul Busuttill of the National Museum, and Mr. Ronnie Muscat of the Department of Information took the photographs of the site at the conclusion of the excavation and of the finds illustrated in this report. To all of the above we are most grateful.

The text of this book was completed in 1981 and in general it has not been possible to take account of later publications and discoveries.

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