

MUSEUMS NEWS

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The following is a brief account of the principal projects undertaken by the Archaeology Section within the Museums Department during 1997. This is intended to provide a more accessible report than that published in the Government Departments Annual Report for 1997.

New Units within the Archaeology Section

Significant developments were registered in the re-organisation of the staff structure of the National Museum of Archaeology. There are now three principal areas of operation, with staff organised into three units, each of which is accountable for one of these areas of activity. These are: the Collections Management Unit; the Heritage Information Management Unit; and the Site Management Unit. During 1997, the total curatorial complement within the National Museum of Archaeology was increased from one Curator and two Assistant Curators to one Chief Curator, two Curators, and four Assistant Curators.

Collections Management Unit

Permanent Exhibition Project (PEP) - During 1997, the Permanent Exhibition Project - which is aimed at totally refurbishing the National Museum of Archaeology - was mainly concerned with finalising the rehabilitation of the Auberge de Provence. The focus was set upon the ground floor where refurbishment works were completed, including carpeting and lighting, as well as the installation of new joinery works. This, together with the conclusion of the design and layout of the exhibition halls within the ground floor, enabled the Museum to initiate the installation of the information panels and accompanying graphics, as well as the showcases and the artifacts within these galleries. The exhibition display also includes a series of models and reconstructions which were refurbished or newly constructed.

During the year the artifacts which would form part of the exhibition display were selected and conserved. Conservation of the prehistoric artifacts was not solely limited to the smaller objects but it also included the Tarxien megaliths located within the Museum.

A fundamental part of the permanent exhibition project includes the development of exhibition content and display, which has been undertaken thanks to the Getty Grant programme which ran into its second year.

The Getty grant programme also enabled the Museum to acquire the services of Prof. Albert Borg, Department of Maltese and Linguistics, University of Malta and of Dr. David Trump, former Curator of the National Museum of Archaeology. Prof. Borg undertook the task of translating all the information texts into Maltese and also of producing the children's information text. Dr. Trump kindly offered his services to establish a study collection for Maltese prehistory.

Temporary Archaeological Exhibitions - Two temporary displays were set up by the Museum of Archaeology. One was held at the Foundation for International Studies on the occasion of an international seminar on 'Heritage in Small Island States', whilst the other was held at the Mediterranean Conference Centre.

Heritage Information Management Unit

The following are the major operations undertaken by this Unit in the course of 1997:

Bugibba - A dense scatter of Punic ceramic sherds was discovered at an undeveloped site along the coastline between Bugibba and Qawra. A small trial trench was dug at this site, whereupon two distinct layers of soils were noted, the upper yielding a substantial amount of sherds, while the lower was found to be sterile.

The considerable amount of sherds present at this site, together with the types represented, suggest that the area could contain archaeological remains dating to the 3rd/4th centuries AD. No architectural features were, however, detected during this preliminary investigation.

Marsaxlokk - The Unit was involved in supervising and co-ordinating two separate archaeological investigations at the Punic sanctuary of Tas-Silg. A first investigation was carried out in the northern half of this site by an Italian archaeological mission, which was composed of members from the Universities of La Sapienza (Rome), La Cattolica (Milan) and of Lecce. The southern half of the monument was investigated by a team of archaeologists from the University of Malta.

Mdina - A sub-rectangular, rock-cut cistern was discovered within the Mdina ditch in the course of trenching works. The cistern had two major distinct fills, namely a fill of brown soil underlying a stony fill. An investigation of the cistern established that it had been obliterated by the excavation of the Mdina ditch in the 17th century, and must therefore pertain to a structure sited immediately outside the earlier line of fortifications. It is not yet clear whether these earlier fortifications were classical or medieval.

Mellieha - A cluster of three Roman rock-cut tombs were discovered at Il-Hewwiexa, along the Selmun ridge, by members of Nixxiegha Kulturali - a local cultural organisation. An investigation established that all three tombs had been disturbed by a small coralline limestone quarry early this century, although much of the original features are still well preserved. All three tombs appear to have had the usual shaft and chamber morphology. The interiors of the tomb-chambers, however, show features more usually associated with Late Roman catacomb chamber types, such as headrests, vaulted ceilings, and the absence of any water-drainage system. However, these tombs definitely do not belong to a catacomb complex, but were entirely isolated burial places. Owing to the disturbances which the site has undergone, no archaeological materials were recovered from within these tombs.

Paceville - A number of features belonging to a late 19th century fortification - known as Spinola

Battery - were identified and documented in the course of ongoing development at the site of the former Hilton Hotel. The original fortification, built in the 1890s, was demolished during the 1960s when the first Hilton Hotel was constructed. However, parts of the Battery had been buried beneath the foundations of the hotel, and were uncovered during the recent developments in the area. These remains consisted primarily of a short section of a vertical rock-hewn scarp and sloping counter scarp, situated along what was once the southern corner of the rectangular-shaped plan of the fort.

Rabat - A small catacomb complex was discovered within the St. Paul's Grotto complex in Rabat. Preliminary investigation and documentation of the site established that it consists of a small catacomb, equipped with a mensa and stibadium arrangement, window tombs and infant burials. Another small catacomb was investigated at the Grotto in the 1980s. There are also indications that other small catacombs had originally existed across the present street, under the Wignacourt Collegium. Preliminary examination of these remains suggests that the area was intensely used for burial in Roman times at least since the 1st and 2nd centuries BC, and continued to be extended until the 5th century AD.

Rabat - A large cluster of classical funerary monuments was discovered in the district of Tac-Caghqi. This site was found to include three rock-cut tombs and two catacombs, which have been only partially investigated. A further rock-cut feature was investigated, which was found to be roofed over by means of an intact barrel vault constructed out of Roman concrete. Although disturbed in recent times, these features were found to be in a good state of preservation and still hold substantial archaeological potential, thus requiring further, extensive investigation.

Tarxien - Two stretches of undeveloped land to the west and north of the Tarxien temple complex were investigated to determine whether they contained any archaeological remains. The need for these investigations was to identify areas free of archaeological deposits close to the prehistoric monument which could host a visitors' centre intended for the Tarxien Temples. In both instances, prehistoric structural remains and earth deposits were located, such as an apse-

like structure apparently made of a double wall built with medium sized, irregularly shaped stone blocks, and a large group of megaliths, possibly still in situ. These remains indicate that the Neolithic temple complex originally occupied a far larger area than that excavated by Sir Temi Zammit, that is, the area of the currently exposed monument.

Valletta - A large deposit of 18th and 19th century materials were recovered from within an abandoned water culvert in the basements of the Auberge de Castille. The material includes ceramics, glass, metal and animal bone. The ceramic assemblage from this site is particularly interesting because it consists of very distinct types. One finds English Blue on White stoneware and fine porcelain which was used as tableware for the English garrison. In sharp contrast, much coarser wares, including rough maolica and glazes from Sicily, together with glazed cooking pots probably from the Thyrranian area, were used in the kitchens. Thus one gets a marked distinction between the material culture employed by the British and by the Maltese as it existed in the colonial period.

Victoria - Two classical rock-cut tombs were discovered under the Bishop's Seminary in the course of development. The tombs were badly damaged and much of the internal archaeological remains were consequently lost. The archaeological investigation of these tombs still managed to recover archaeological material - ceramics, metal and glass - datable to the Punic and Roman periods, as well as some human and animal skeletal remains.

Victoria - A site on the east flank of the Cittadella height was investigated to evaluate the area's archaeological potential in connection to the planned development of the area. Preliminary results obtained so far indicate that the area was occupied in early modern times by humble domestic structures. Further investigation of the site should provide us with information as to whether there are archaeological remains from earlier periods.

Site Management Unit

The Hypogeum Conservation Project - A number of key elements of this project were executed

during 1997. In February, the details of an improved visitor route which includes cloakroom arrangements and easier access for people with special needs were defined. During March, visitor walkways were installed in the middle level. These have been designed to eliminate treading over prehistoric surfaces, to create a smooth and safe walking surface, and to be 100% reversible. The climatic monitoring of the site was resumed in April 1997. In May, an Internet Website providing general visitor and background information world-wide was launched. This is the first Internet site providing detailed information about a museum or site managed by the Museums Department. The audio-visual experience which will precede the visit to the site itself was also completed during 1997.

Mnajdra Temples - The Mnajdra temples were re-opened to the public in September 1997, following the completion of extensive restoration works. The apse which had collapsed in the Spring of 1994 has been completely reconstructed.

Tarxien Temples - A brief for the development of the Tarxien Temple site was completed in October 1997, and issued to interested architectural firms by the Bank of Valletta International (BOVI) Heritage Trust, which is committed to funding the project.