

The conservation project and archaeological excavation of the old Parish Church at Siggiewi – an intermediate report ¹

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Introduction

Until December 2007 the old parish church of Siggiewi, dating back to the late medieval period, and occupying a central location within the village core, had been in a neglected and dilapidated state for a very long time, so much so that the remaining ruins were almost totally covered with debris and thick vegetation (Plates 2; 9A; 9D; colour plate 2A; Fig. 4 and colour plate 3). While passing by the walled-up and highly degraded site, the inhabitants of Siggiewi barely knew that beneath the soil and vegetation were the remains of their first parish church and the cemetery where most of their ancestors had been buried.

The idea for the conservation of the site was originally conceived when Fr. Albert Buhagiar, Parish Priest of Siggiewi, together with the Hon. Architect Ninu Zammit, then Minister for Resources and Infrastructure, and the Kummissjoni Patrimonju Siggiewi considered a plan for the upgrading of the old Parish Church and its immediate surroundings. Within a very short time the conservation of the site was entrusted to the Restoration Unit within the Works Division.

The primary aim of the conservation project was to bring to light once again all the church ruins, and preserve them for the enjoyment of present and future generations. The site is now open to the general public who can visit the ruins of the church. The church vestry has been converted into a site museum and houses some of the most important finds retrieved during the excavation (Colour plate 1D and plate 8). All

works were carried out by an interdisciplinary team of experts, in full collaboration with the Parish Church authorities, as owners of the site.²

The project was carried out in the following phases, namely the removal of trees and vegetation from the site, the clearing of the site from debris, an archaeological excavation, and the conservation works based on the concept of minimum intervention. Accessibility and site illumination were also catered for.

Before the start of any conservation works, an in-depth study of the site was carried out. This included historical research,³ site surveys, analysis of the uses the building had throughout the years, visual appearance and how the building evolved through time, deterioration processes and mechanisms, present state, and any past interventions, such as alterations and maintenance works carried out on the building.

The architectural and pre-archaeological investigations were based on a number of reconnaissance trips and on-surface deterioration mapping. Through observation of the exposed structures on the site under study and their analyses, such as how and to what extent the structures were related to one another, the consistency of the complex form and major changes over time, were identified. The information obtained from the architectural and archaeological reconnaissance and the historical research confirmed the importance of the monument.

As a matter of fact the site is considered of great historical and archaeological importance and it contains structures of outstanding

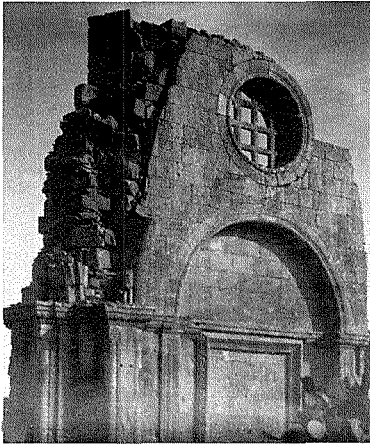


Plate 1. Early 20th century photo showing a wall in the southern transept



Plate 2. Early 20th century photo showing the ruins of the northern transept



Plate 3. Erecting the scaffolding



Plate 4. A highly eroded column and architrave

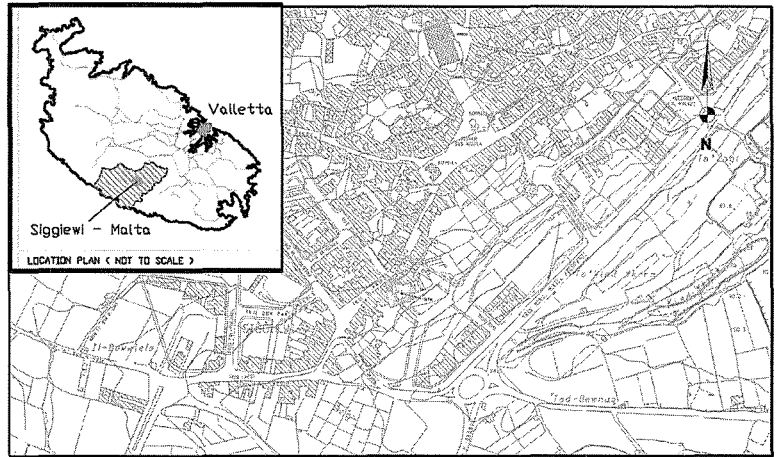


Fig. 1. Location Plan and Site Plan

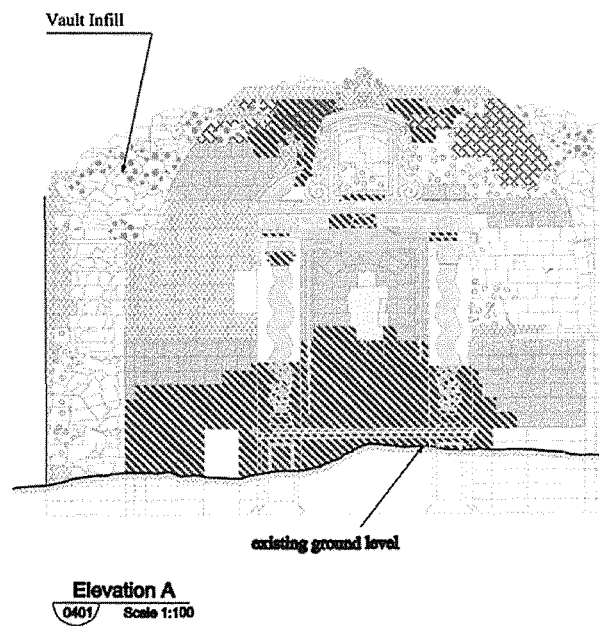


Fig. 2. Elevation of one of the altars showing deterioration mapping

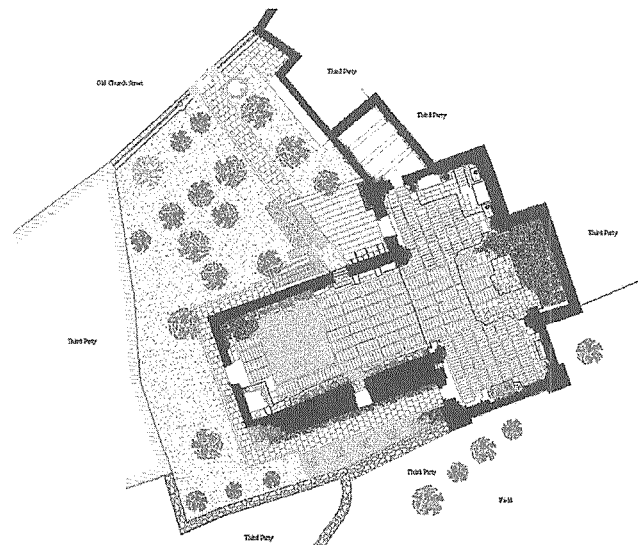


Fig. 3. Post completion survey



Plate 1

- A. Part of a fresco discovered within the baptistery area*
- B. A 17th century solomonic column discovered with the debris*
- C. External view of the wall and later buttressing along the nave*
- D. Central keystone with attached rib voussoirs*

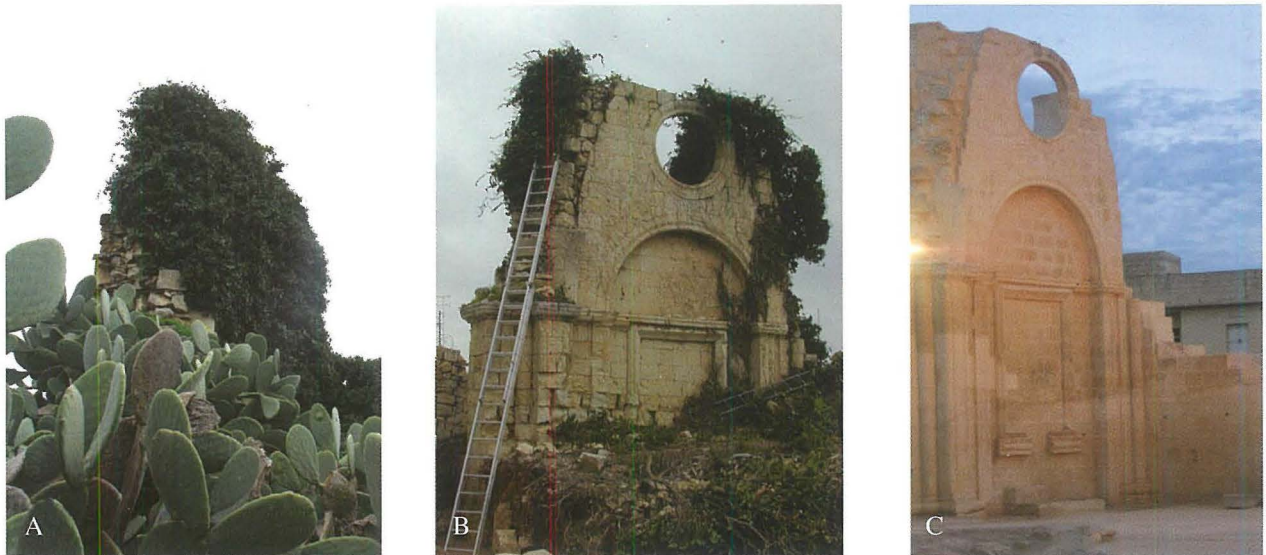


Plate 2

- A. The southern transept before restoration*
- B. The southern transept during restoration*
- C. The southern transept after restoration*



Plate 3. Survey Pre-Conservation/Excavation Works

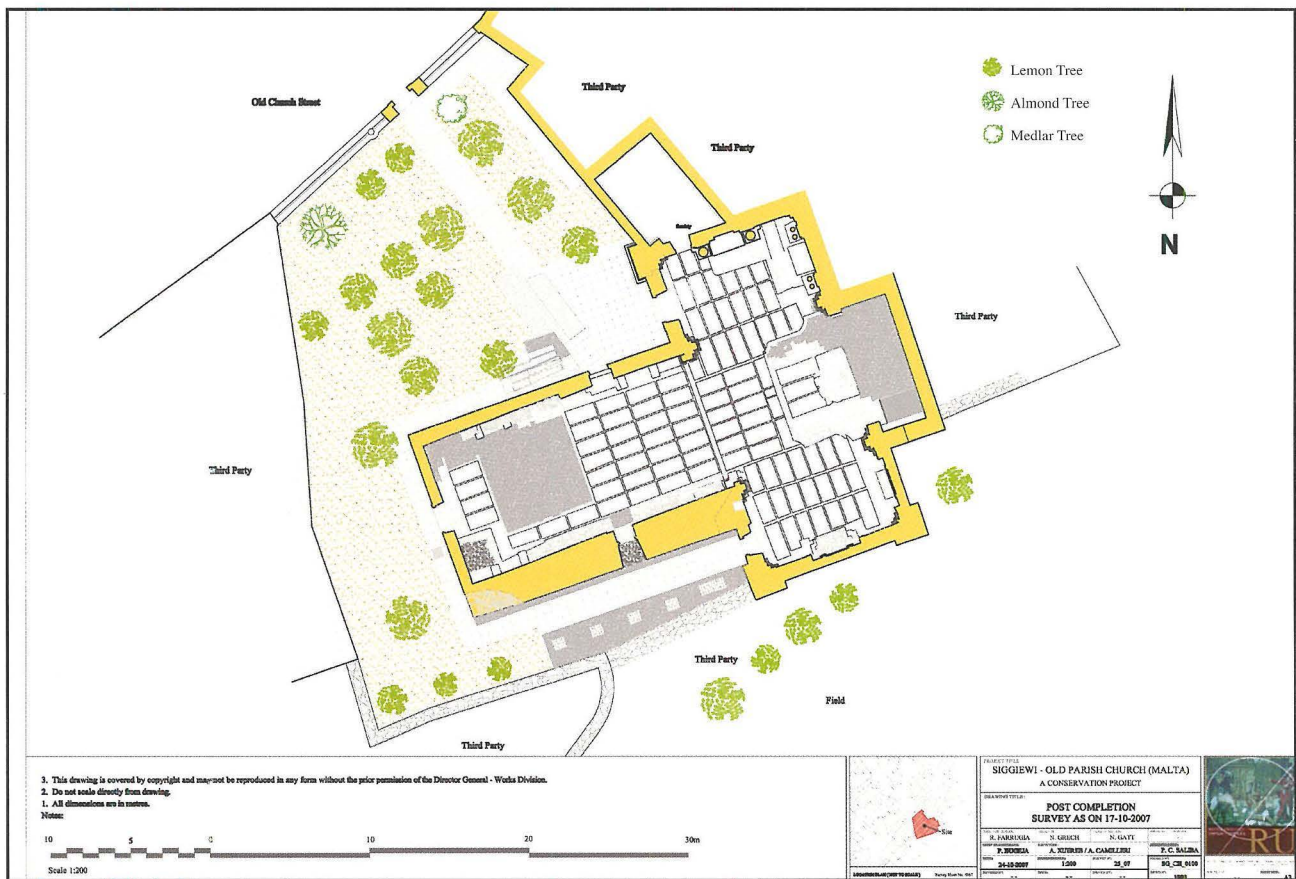


Plate 4. Survey Post Completion

architectural interest. It therefore had to be preserved in its entirety.⁴

The project also took into consideration the human relationship with the urban and rural environment and sought to disseminate experiences and expressions of everyday life and basic human needs to the whole public. These include the understanding of the historic, cultural and archaeological values of architectural monuments, the symbolic and religious beliefs and meanings, and the artistic developments that were widespread throughout the Euro-Mediterranean region.

For this reason during the second phase of the project it was considered opportune to carry out a survey about the public perception of the site so as to establish the value of the ruins of the old parish church of Siggiewi and their significance to the general public.⁵ An open day was held on 4 March 2007 for the public to view the conservation work and archaeological excavation in progress. Information boards about the history of the site and works in progress were put up. Leaflets on the project were also distributed. Thousands of visitors from all walks of life flocked to the site.⁶ From their response it has been established that besides having a historical and archaeological importance, the site also enjoys social, economic, cultural and educational values.

The site before the Project

The site formerly occupied by the church and its immediate surroundings was used for agricultural purposes after having been converted into a field and a large orchard with mature fruit trees, prickly pears, fig trees and others (Plates 2; 9A; 9D; colour plate 2A; Fig. 4 and colour plate 3). These trees and other vegetation made it impossible to walk in the area originally occupied by the church. They were distorting its character, and roots were causing damage to the remains of the church. Some of the original masonry was reutilized for the making of a small terraced field within the site formerly occupied by the southern transept, while original stones were used for the erection of a boundary wall separating the abandoned field, originally the site occupied by the church, from the orchard.

The farmer who was occupying the grounds at the time had been utilizing the area originally occupied by the cemetery as a citrus orchard (Fig. 4 and colour plate 3), but had abandoned the church area originally converted into a field. The exposed standing structures of the church were left to collapse, crumble and deteriorate as a result of weathering by the elements (Plates 1 and 2). Some of the walls and structures were in a dangerous state and were in imminent danger of collapse (Plate 4). The derelict site, camouflaged by trees, thick vegetation, a small overlying terraced field and partly surrounded by a shabby old wall, lost all its historical and archaeological context. Few people were aware that this was the site of the old medieval parish church of Siggiewi. In some areas the remaining walls were totally covered by creepers hiding all evidence that a building once stood on site (Colour plate 2A).

The setting

Today the site is bounded to the south by privately owned fields which are at a much lower level, while to the west and east it is bounded by dwelling houses. The northern boundary forms part of the present alignment in Old Parish Church Street (Fig. 1).

However, from onsite studies it became obvious that the topographical layout surrounding the church area during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was very different. Also, as Mario Buhagiar rightly points out, an important factor in determining the geographical location of a parish church during the late Middle Ages was the fact that it was strategically located as much as possible within an accessible distance from the scattered settlements forming the entire village.⁷ This is very evident for the old Parish church of Siggiewi which is more or less centrally situated between Hal Qdieri (a locality west of Siggiewi),⁸ Hal Kbir (a district south of Siggiewi)⁹ and Hax-Xluq (a hamlet south-east of Siggiewi).¹⁰ These three localities together with Hal Niklusi (situated not far from Haġar Qim)¹¹ were absorbed into the village of Siggiewi, already referred to as a parish dedicated to St Nicholas of Bari, along with other parishes mentioned for the first

time by Bishop Senatore de Mello in his Rollo dated 1436.¹²

Historical background

When Christianity re-emerged as the main religion of the Maltese Islands towards the end of the 13th century,¹³ the first known churches dating to this period were situated in natural caves or hewn in the rock in order to serve the small communities of the villages and rural settlements.¹⁴ In due course, the church form developed into a simple small rectangular structure (except for Mdina Cathedral which was larger in size and highly embellished with elaborate architecture), with a number of pointed arches in between bays to support the roof made up of stone slabs. The exterior of the church was plain with a simple arched entrance, occasionally surmounted by a small round or oval window. A small bellcote was added to a number of churches at some stage.¹⁵ After the arrival of the Order of St. John in Malta in 1530, church architecture was enhanced and by 1575 the old medieval parish churches continued to develop gradually until they became the central building in all towns and villages, with the result that their grandeur started to dominate the skyline, symbolizing the prestige and status of the Catholic Church.¹⁶

The rectangular form of the early Maltese churches could have been reflected in the initial form of the old parish church of Siggiewi dedicated to St Nicholas of Bari, mentioned in 1436.¹⁷ When the church was visited by Mgr Dusina in 1575, he stated that the old parish church was built to the right of the church dedicated to the Visitation of Our Lady.¹⁸ This small Visitation church had its own rector and procurator. The feast of the Visitation of Our Lady was also celebrated in this small church.¹⁹ Two other churches, one dedicated to St Sebastian and the other to St Michael, are mentioned by Mgr Dusina as lying in the vicinity of the old parish church of Siggiewi.²⁰

In 1575, St Nicholas church had two side altars, two small transepts and a vestry.²¹ Ten years later, in 1585, the small church dedicated to the Visitation of Our Lady was demolished and its masonry was integrated into the medieval parish church of Siggiewi.²²

This means that the old parish church was probably enlarged to occupy the area of the two churches. As a matter of fact when St. Nicholas church was visited by Bishop Gargallo in 1594, he mentioned that this time the parish church had five altars (and not three as mentioned by Dusina).²³ As the population of Siggiewi had increased substantially, and following the current trend to enhance church architecture, the parish church was further enlarged, probably between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and was transformed into the shape of a Latin Cross. The height of the church was achieved by the construction of a central cross-vault above the presbytery abutted by two smaller ones above the transepts. Such conclusions were extrapolated from an analysis of the remains of the building. That the church was further enlarged between 1594 and 1625 can be substantiated by the fact that, according to Bishop Cagliares who visited the church on 8 December 1625, the church had seven altars (and not five as mentioned by Gargallo).²⁴

During the first quarter of the seventeenth century the northern transept underwent extensive interior embellishment and became evocative of Baroque art and architecture that was reaching all corners of Malta and Gozo. The southern transept was left undecorated. Therefore, the two transepts provide two different historical phases in the architectural decoration of the church. The northern wall along the nave which still stands today shows a few traces of red paint on the scanty plaster that has survived on what were once the bays between the wall piers. These are the remains of frescoed panels depicting the Virgin and Child and a number of saints which were recorded in a number of illustrations and a descriptive account by Giuseppe Hyzler (1793-1859) during the first part of the nineteenth century.²⁵ A vestry is situated in the northern part of the church and is accessible from the northern transept. The internal structural sequence of the vestry indicates that it was also subjected to several phases of development.²⁶

The nave of the new larger parish church, designed by Architect Lorenzo Gafà to meet the needs of the increasing number of inhabitants of Siggiewi, was blessed on the 22



Plate 5. Roof collapse behind the main altar



Plate 6. Roof collapse behind the main altar

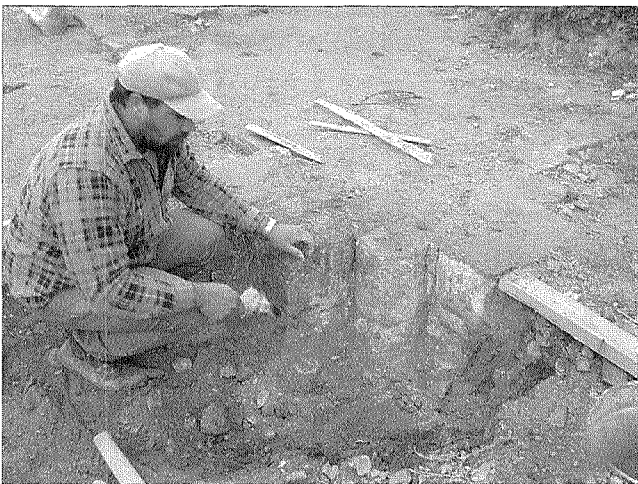


Plate 7. Unearthing wall structures near the southern transept



Plate 8. The site museum

November 1682. The visit of the old parish church by Bishop Molina took place some time after this blessing. He stated that the population of Siggiewi by 1661 had already reached 1469 inhabitants.²⁷ In the meantime the old parish church had structural problems and was abandoned, until Archbishop Cocco Palmieri, gave orders for it to be demolished in the late seventeenth century.²⁸

Phase 1 of the Project: Trees and vegetation clearance

The first phase of the project entailed the removal of trees and vegetation from the site of the old Parish Church. Only part of the nave, consisting of a very thick wall and the

fragmented walls of the transepts, remained exposed above the dense trees (Plates 9A; 9D and 9E). Moreover, the remaining part of the southern transept was totally covered by ivy (Colour plate 2A). The only room from the old church that has survived in its entirety was the vestry and this had been turned into an agricultural store for the farmer to keep haystacks and tools. Works commenced during the second week of September 2006 and were completed by the beginning of October.²⁹ The site was cleared of the thick vegetation which for many decades had covered all the area up to a height of several metres (Plates 9B and 9E; colour plate 2B and Fig. 5). This restored access to the area originally occupied by the church, and revealed its outer perimeter wall. A survey of

the site carried out after the removal of the trees confirmed that the plan of the church took the form of a Latin cross (Fig. 5). The removal of the trees was monitored for any important finds such as sculptured stone from the original building of the church. The site was found to be covered in debris although some moulded blocks were still partly visible above the surface (Plate 9B). About half a dozen horses' skulls were exposed in an area of about three metres square within the easternmost part of the nave.

Phase 2 of the Project: Archaeological Excavation

The second phase was to clear the site of debris and to carry out a scientific archaeological excavation.³⁰ The demolished church stonework which was deemed to be of particular interest (Colour plate 1B; plates 5 and 6), such as sculptured stone, vaulted rib voussoirs, and others lying above ground level, was collected and catalogued while the overlying infill and worked but plain masonry were carried away. The topsoil was roughly levelled out, except for the areas abutting the internal walls of the church, which were slightly higher. However, the original floor of the church was evidently lower than street level when compared to the floor level of the vestry, which is still standing (Fig. 6).

The removal of material was facilitated by the fact that the limit of the excavation was determined by the perimeter wall of the church while the depth was established by the existing floor. Any archaeological remains underlying the earlier medieval chapel and the old parish church were left sealed below the original flagstones.³¹

The first trial trench was dug within the northern transept at the point where the corner of the wall abutted the easternmost part of the nave. This excavation revealed the lower part of two pilasters abutting a section of a half-column from where one of the rib vaults of the transept had originally sprung. The surviving part of the wall is about one metre high and at this depth below the soil and rubble was the original floor of the church, made up of Globigerina flagstones. The material excavated

from the trench was mainly rubble, stone and infill belonging to the demolished church.

The material within the second trench, situated along the centre of the nave and about one metre deep, consisted solely of agricultural soil, devoid of debris and archaeological material. It was evident from this trench that since the demolished masonry of the church in this particular area was minimal when compared to the area occupied by the transepts, a huge volume of agricultural soil had had to be imported to fill the remaining void so that the site could be transformed into an agricultural field.

Removal of material was at first restricted to a number of trenches between the squares of the grid in different areas within the church, which were gradually joined into an open-area excavation. When possible all the material was removed cautiously with the sole use of hand tools (Plate 7).³² The newly-exposed parts of the church were recorded in drawings (Figs 2, 3, 7 and colour plate 4) and photographs. The excavation work was carefully documented, such as the all important find-spots and the roof collapse behind the main altar, within the choir area (Plates 5 and 6). All retrieved sculptured masonry was catalogued.

The nave, covering an area of approximately 165 square metres, had a soil cover varying in depth from 0.75 m to 1 m. The topsoil was rather loose because of the overgrown vegetation while the subsoil consisted of red compacted earth. This particular area seemed to have been used for a period of time for agricultural purposes but had been left abandoned for decades. The red soil must have been imported to the site and most of the pottery sherds within this particular context must have been imported along with the soil. A *terminus post quem* for the earliest date when this area was transformed into a small field was established as the date when the church was abandoned in the late seventeenth century. However, the transportation of the soil to convert the nave into a field could have taken place later.³³ No cuts were recorded in this area as the surrounding perimeter of the field made use of the lower courses of the church wall itself.

It seems that the area covered by the presbytery, the two transepts and the choir

(approximately 160 square metres) were never altogether adapted for agricultural purposes. This is indicated by the fact that the context immediately below a thin layer of topsoil consisted of the demolished masonry of the church. This had a thickness of more than 1.25 m made up of masonry blocks of varying sizes within a voluminous infill of rubble that had once filled the cavities of the double walls. For this reason back trowelling was very difficult within this particular context and pickaxes, spades and hoes were kept continuously busy. However, excavation work was carried out cautiously and no damage was done to any of the finds which consisted principally of sculptured stone. During the process, traces of a crude cut were recorded between the northern transept and the presbytery.³⁴

There is evidence that the area covered by the southern transept was converted into a minute terrace, possibly intended for the planting of fruit trees, as the area is rather small for any other agricultural activity.

There is no doubt that the remaining standing structures, those which were already exposed prior to the excavation, and the physical evidence exposed during the dig clearly reveal that the church had undergone several structural changes and was enlarged a number of times, most probably to accommodate the ever-increasing population of Siggiewi. This is proved by the stretch of the two remaining walls abutting each other along the nave which at a later time were buttressed to resist the outward pressure created by the arches (Colour plate 1C). In the preliminary reports of the excavation it was stated that the western wall along the nave could have formed part of the church dedicated to the Visitation of Our Lady. This hypothesis was based on the account of Mgr Dusina who in his pastoral visit reports stated that the small Visitation church was constructed to the left of the old parish church. It is further substantiated by the document which stated that the small church of Our Lady had to be dismantled and its stones reutilized for the repairs of the old parish church.³⁵

However, in a recent visit to the old parish church of Siggiewi, Architect Ruben Abela³⁶ saw the evolution of the church in a similar way to that originally described by Mario

Buhagiar, that is, the westernmost wall of the nave could have formed part of the first parish church dedicated to St Nicholas.³⁷ The church was then elongated towards the east to about half its length. At a later stage the church was further enlarged to the present shape and included two transepts and a small choir.

The excavation revealed that the final plan of the parish church (Fig. 7 and colour plate 4) had five external doors. These consisted of the main entrance, two side entrances situated respectively along each longitudinal elevation of the nave and two other entrances, each leading to one of the two transepts. The remaining part of a staircase, which originally led to the roof of the church, was found encased within the thick buttressed wall. Ruben Abela commented that the side entrance along the northern wall of the nave must have been the main entrance of a church owing to the fact that the lower part of the architrave bears a fragment of Melitan moulding.³⁸ If Abela's suggestion is correct, the present area of the nave must have originally been the space occupied by two churches with their axes perpendicular to one another. The earliest parish church occupied the western half of the nave while the Visitation church was erected in the space occupied by the eastern half of the nave. This might also explain why the surviving wall consists of two separate halves (Plate 9D). All this is conjectural and may only be confirmed through further archaeological excavation.

The bases of the arches along the nave were all identified during the excavation, four in each space occupied by the two 'separate halves'.³⁹ Therefore, the fully developed nave contained eight arches with stone benches in between which are still very evident, except for the space taken by the side entrances and the area taken up by the baptistry on the right of the main entrance. At one stage the side entrance within the northern wall of the nave had to be shifted slightly towards the left to accommodate the erection of one of the wall piers when the two separate churches were transformed into one church. This is evident as part of the arch for the earlier door is still encased within the wall.⁴⁰ The northern wall of the nave must have been buttressed when the thinner back wall of the Visitation church

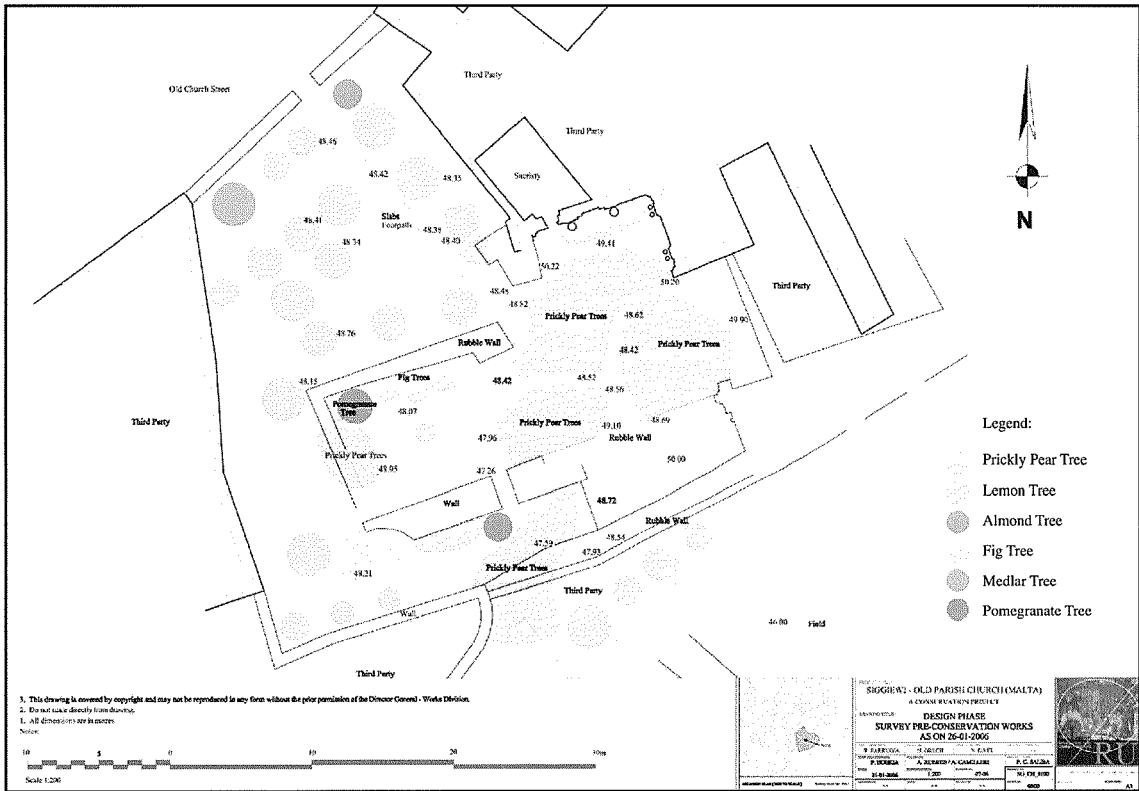


Fig. 4. Survey pre-conservation/excavation works

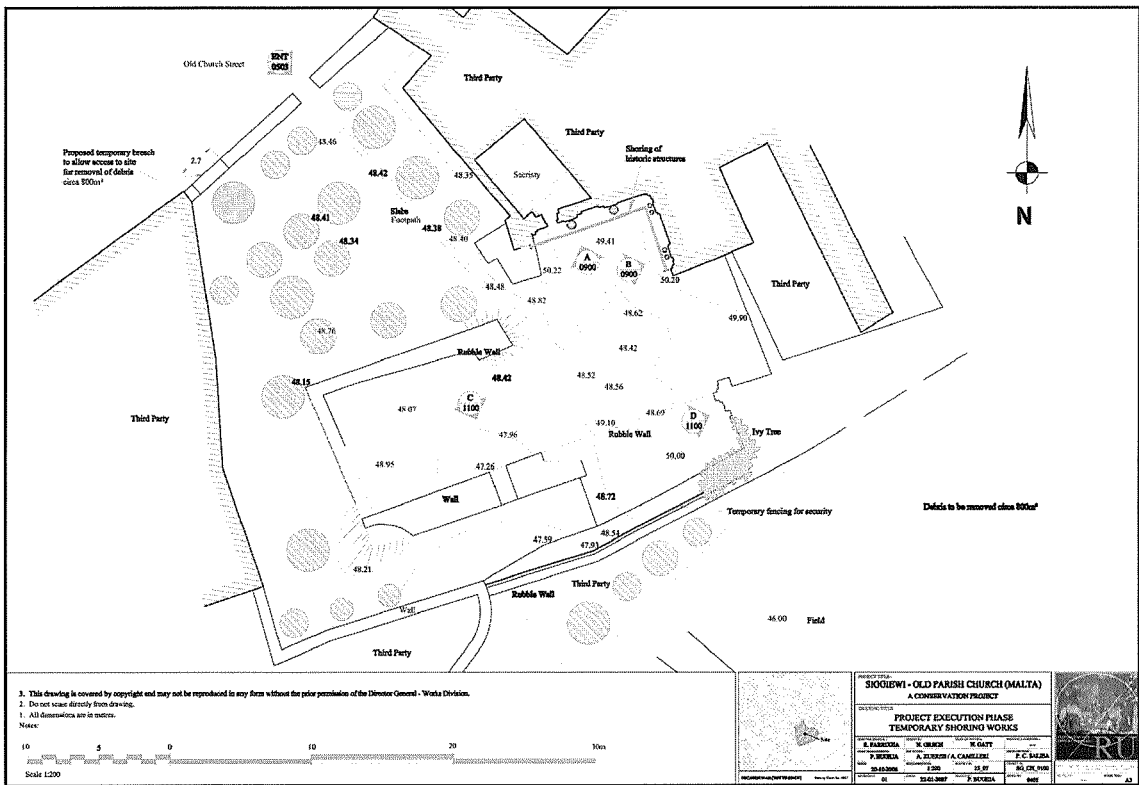


Fig. 5. Survey pre-excavation showing site cleared from trees and vegetation

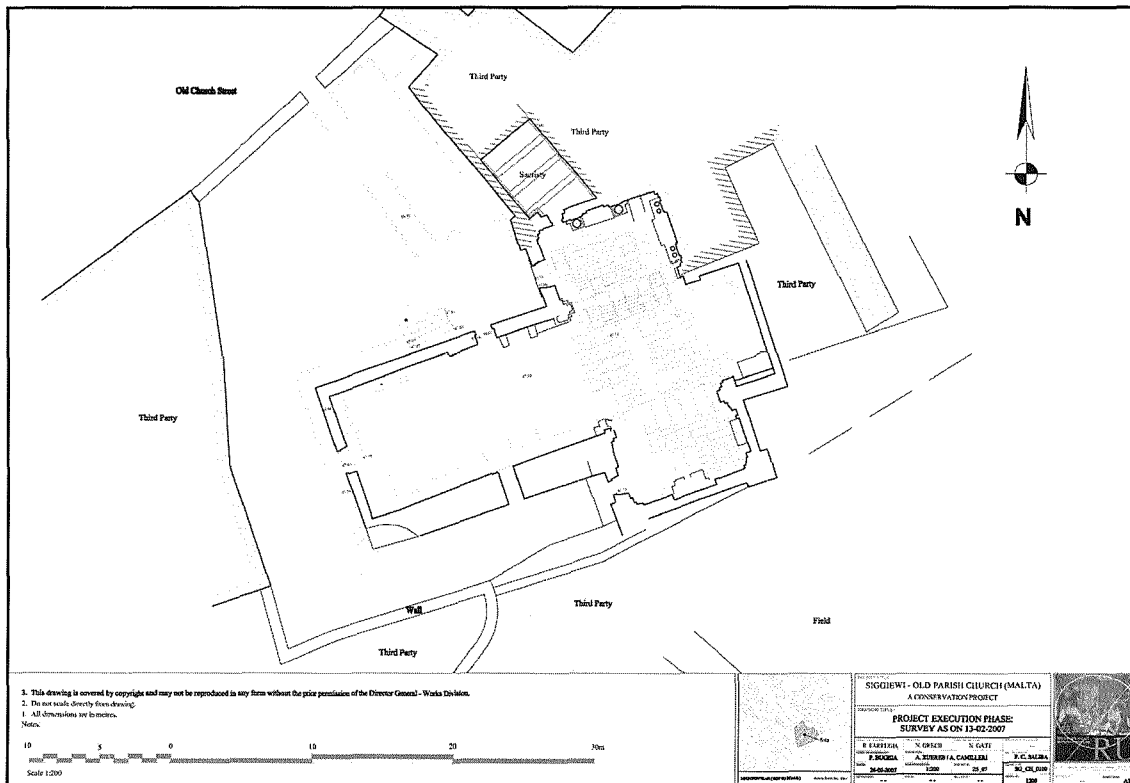


Fig. 6. Survey during conservation/excavation works

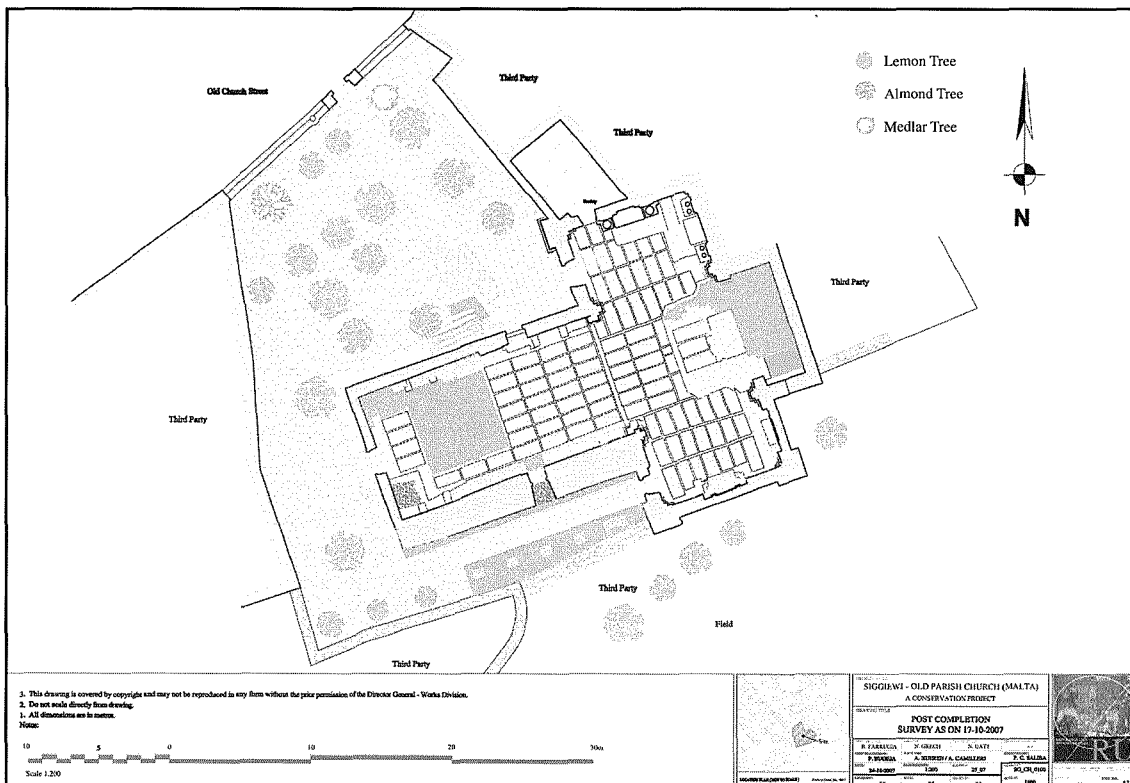


Fig. 7. Survey post completion

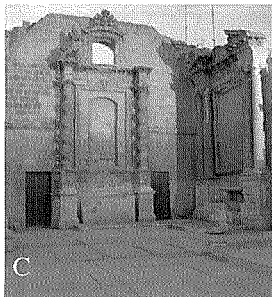
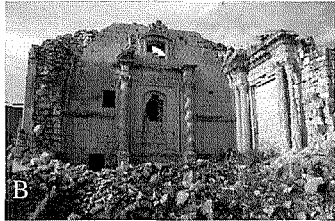
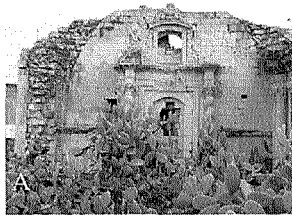


Plate 9.

- A. The northern transept before restoration*
- B. The northern transept during restoration*
- C. The northern transept after restoration*
- D. The wall along the nave before restoration*
- E. The wall along the nave during restoration*
- F. The wall along the nave after restoration*

together with the side wall of the parish church (or maybe the back wall if the two churches were both orientated parallel to each other, in which case their layout fits Mgr Dusina's description exactly) became a single wall of the enlarged parish church.

An important observation made by Ruben Abela is that the buttressing wall was erected when the two transepts were added to the church. He based this observation on the fact that the courses of the buttressing wall are aligned with those of the southern transept. There is no doubt that the transepts and presbytery were roofed with 'Gothic' cross-vaults as the lower rib voussoirs and bases of the vaults are still in situ in each of the twelve corners. The choir was roofed by an arched apse. The overall plan of the church is very similar to St. Gregory's church at Żejtun, suggesting a late sixteenth-century date for the cross-vaults.⁴¹

Some of the finds include a baptismal font found buried within the choir area, two Solomonic columns (Plate 8), a number of sculptured angels and floral motifs, a schematised bewigged head showing a bearded face⁴² and a large sculptured stone depicting the coat-of-arms of Bishop Cagliares (1614-1633). The latter was found adjacent to the side entrance leading to the northern transept. The dating of the coat-of-arms is contemporaneous with the period when the two side altars of the northern transept were embellished with pediments, friezes, cornices, Corinthian and twisted columns dated to the first quarter of the seventeenth century and is reminiscent of Baroque decoration which was gradually infiltrating the villages. The southern transept did not undergo the same decorative process (Colour plate 2B). Its sculptural motifs consist of a single layer and are similar to the hidden sculptural layer in the northern transept. However, four plain columns found buried in the floor next to the external northern wall of the nave must have been designated to decorate one of the altars of the southern transept but this project never materialized and the columns were left lying on the floor. Remnants of frescoes were also found (Colour plate 1A) and carefully detached and restored by expert personnel from Heritage Malta. Two very interesting decorated tombstones with

Latin inscriptions dated 1660 were discovered in the north transept. The floor of the church was completely covered with tombstones (Fig. 7 and colour plate 4) but most were broken and the graves were filled to the brim with stone, soil and debris.⁴³

Phase 3 of the Project: The Design and Conservation Works⁴⁴

The design and conservation works directed by Chief Architect Norbert Gatt constituted the last phase of the project, although in certain areas the conservation of the ruins was carried out simultaneously with the archaeological excavation of the site, especially the structures above the existing topsoil level.

Technical research prior to the works involved the drawing up of detailed surveys and plans, and included the deterioration mapping of all existing structures, carried out from rectified imagery (Fig. 2). Such documentation was also used for the planning application necessary for the conservation works.

The conservation works mainly consisted of the erection of scaffolding (Plate 3); the temporary shoring of dilapidated structures; the replacement of dangerous elements as necessary; cleaning (by wet brushing); consolidation interventions including plastic repair with lime-based mixes; pointing works; repair of the defective impermeable layer of the roof areas as necessary; the manufacture and installation of timber apertures and the laying of suitable paving.

This phase was conservation-oriented, aimed at preserving the church in its actual state by halting further deterioration. There was no attempt at reconstructing any of the architectural elements or features. Structural repairs were restricted to areas in a dangerous state. The eroded right-side column on the eastern elevation of the south transept was the only decorative element to be replaced, in view of its advanced stage of deterioration. This was replaced by a plain profile since the exact detail of the capital could not be established.

Some decorative elements of the ruins had structural cracks and were consolidated by epoxy injection. Otherwise, consolidation

interventions, carried out by means of a traditional lime-pozzolana mortar, were limited to the formation of the coping at the top of the ruins to avoid ingress of water into the wall thickness and into the exposed infill.

Both external and internal surfaces were pointed with a lime-based mix, finished shy from where the stone arises. Traces of old rendering, evident on the southern elevation along the nave, were retained.

Walkways were constructed through the installation of platforms and bridges to provide access for all, as well as to prevent visitors from damaging the paving and the archaeological site. These were constructed in steel and timber to be easily recognized as modern structures. An illumination system was also installed.

This project has improved the legibility of the church ruins for people from all walks of life to see, read, feel and understand, and even travel back to the years when the church was still in its full glory.

Conclusion

One of the commitments of this project was to publish a monograph report giving a full account of the excavation and results, a detailed historical analysis of the church and a description of the conservation project. It is hoped that the present monograph report will provide a source of information to both scholar and layman alike on the interventions that were carried out during the project, including all data and results. It will also be a resource for educational and touristic purposes.⁴⁵

Further potential archaeological excavations are reserved for the future as funds and resources become available. Such excavations would aim at tracing the evolution of the church. They will also augment the present limited understanding of everyday life in medieval Malta.

The project was instrumental in promoting and facilitating integrated heritage management on both national and European levels.⁴⁶ It succeeded in upgrading the site as a heritage attraction⁴⁷ and was also able to demonstrate the multi-disciplinary approach and integration of cultural heritage management between heritage professionals, administrators, students and

craftsmen. The project fostered networking between various agencies, the local public bodies and institutions as site managers, with schoolchildren and visitors as beneficiaries. In this way it promoted the understanding of the origins and development of church architecture and the need for the protection of the site, while maintaining compatibility with the existing urban and rural environment.

The project also met the current needs for

the appreciation and awareness of historic and archaeological monuments without jeopardizing the needs of future generations. It facilitated discreet and compatible change in the management of this cultural site within the periphery of an urban and rural context. The ruins of the old parish church and site museum are now open to the public and are being managed and maintained by the Parish Church of Siġġiewi.

Notes

- 1 The intermediate report is a concise account of the conservation works and archaeological excavation including a brief history of the site following a number of preliminary reports carried out during this project. The final report will be carried out once adequate funding is obtained from an interested body.
- 2 The Restoration Unit (Works Division), within the Ministry for Resources and Rural Affairs, provided the professional and technical in-house expertise comprising a restoration architect (Chief Architect Norbert Gatt), an archaeologist (the author), draughtsmen and surveyors, and a group of workmen trained in heritage skills. Other institutions, namely Heritage Malta, the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, the Malta Environmental and Planning Authority (MEPA) and the Parish Church of Siġġiewi were also instrumental in the successful implementation of the project.
- 3 The historical information was gathered from sources which included all pastoral visits, although these were not all available as primary sources, nineteenth and twentieth century publications, documents and photographs found in local archival depositories. The resultant research work was then evaluated vis-à-vis the physical evidence and was instrumental in helping to understand the stratigraphical development of the old parish church.
- 4 The ruins of the old parish church of Siġġiewi are surviving relics of the past that in most other instances had been destroyed. For this reason the area of the old church and its surroundings are scheduled by MEPA as a Grade 1 site. The site is also protected under the Cultural Heritage Act (2002) administered by the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage.
- 5 The value and significance of cultural heritage monuments may be defined according to the meaning that people give to such monuments. Different people subscribe different values according to their own criteria. Moreover, it is not only the monuments that have value, but also the sense of place, where the landscape surrounding the monument is also considered as having a crucial and integral value as that of the monument, K. Walsh, 'Mediterranean landscape archaeology and environmental reconstruction', in P. Leveau, F. Tremont, K. Walsh, and G. Barker (eds.), *Environmental Reconstruction in Mediterranean Landscape Archaeology. The Archaeology of the Mediterranean Landscape*, Vol. 2. (Oxford. Oxbow Books, 1999), 1-5.
- 6 'Old Siġġiewi Parish Church to become archaeological site', in *The Times*, 5 March 2007, 7; 'Ix-xogħol ta' restawr tal-fdalijiet tal-Knisja parrokkjali l-qadima tas-Siġġiewi – Sejbiet arkeoloġiċi jqanqlu interess', in *In-Nazzjon*, 5 March 2007, 4.
- 7 M. Buhagiar, *The Late Medieval Art and Architecture of the Maltese Islands*, (Malta. Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2005), 192.
- 8 C. Wetzinger, *Place-names of the Maltese Islands ca. 1300-1800*, (Malta. PEG, 2000), 286-287.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 281.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 291.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 285. A. Ferris, *Descrizione Storica Delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*, (Malta. 1866), 398 does not mention Hal Niklusi as forming part of the Siġġiewi Parish. A. Guillaumier, *Bliet u Rhula Maltin*, (Malta. Lux Press, 1972), 432, places Hal Niklusi within a central location surrounded by Hal Kbir, Hax-Xluq and Hal Qdieri. M. Buhagiar, 154, states that Hal Niklusi is another place-name for Hal Kbir.
- 12 M. Buhagiar, 'Medieval Churches in Malta', in A.T. Luttrell, (ed.), *Medieval Malta – Studies on Malta before the Knights*, (London. The British School at Rome, 1975), 172.
- 13 C. Dalli, *Malta – The Medieval Millennium*, (Malta. Midsea Books Ltd, 2006), 115-116, states that by 1270, 'the last Muslim inhabitants were finally integrated into the Christian fold'.
- 14 Buhagiar (1975), 163-164. Buhagiar also states that during the early years of Christian resettlement after the Muslim Period in the Maltese Islands, the first Christian churches might have been some re-utilized pre-Muslim buildings, although no such examples have survived today.
- 15 M. Buhagiar, *The Christianisation of Malta – catacombs, cult centres and churches in Malta to 1530*, BAR International Series 1674, (Oxford. Archaeopress, 2007), 105.
- 16 C. Thake, *Baroque Churches in Malta*, (Malta. Arcadia Publishers, 1995), 1-7.

- 17 Ferris, 398.
- 18 'Malta: Visita Apostolica No. 51, Mgr Petrus Dusina, 1575', in G. Aquilina and S. Fiorini, (eds.), *Documentary Sources of Maltese History, Part IV, Documents at the Vatican*, (Malta. Malta University Press, 2001), 82. Actually Dusina stated that the Church dedicated to the Visitation of Our Lady was constructed on the left of the Church dedicated to St. Nicholas, '*Constructam a parte sinistra dictae parochialis Ecclesiae*'.
- 19 Ibid., 82.
- 20 Ibid., '*Constructam prope parochialis Ecclesiae*', 82.
- 21 Ibid., 81-82. Mgr. Dusina visited St. Nicholas Parish Church, Siggiewi on 2 February 1575.
- 22 Archiepiscopal Archives, Malta. *Visitatio Pastoralis, 1579-1608*, 30v. quoted in V. Borg, (ed.), *Marian Devotions in the Islands of St. Paul (1600-1800)*, (Malta. The Historical Society, 1983), 71.
- 23 Copy of the documents related to the pastoral visits of Bishop Gargallo kindly given to the author by the historian Mr Tony Terribile.
- 24 Copy of the documents related to the pastoral visits of Bishop Cagliares kindly given to the author by the historian Mr Tony Terribile.
- 25 The Nazarene artist Giuseppe Hyzler did not manage to publish his works which included several illustrations and descriptions of local late medieval and early modern iconographic representations. However, some of his drawings and related accounts, including the sketches of the frescoes found at the old parish church of Siggiewi, were published in the *Repertorio di Conoscenze Utili* (Malta. 1843) after Hyzler's death, (Buhagiar [2005], 188).
- 26 There is ample evidence that part of the vestry was at a later stage integrated into third-party property. As a matter of fact the existing third-party wall has separated an arch into two halves, with the result that only one half of the arch is still retained within the area occupied by the vestry. For this reason, owing to the large dimensions of the vestry and its location within the area occupied by the parish church in its latest phase of development, this vestry does not match with that mentioned by Mgr Dusina in his pastoral visit.
- 27 Copy of an original document about the pastoral visit of Bishop Molina kindly given to the author by the historian Mr Stephen Degiorgio. According to Bishop Molina the old parish church had seven altars. The six side altars were dedicated respectively to Our Lady of the Rosary, St Cecilia, St John and St Peter, St Rocco, St Anthony of Padova and Our Lady of Graces. A very interesting part of the document states that Molina ordered that the old parish church should retain one chapel (*cappella*) in memory of Giovanni Fiott who had commissioned Mattia Preti to paint the titular painting of St Nicholas of Bari for the new church. The nave of the new parish church was erected and blessed by the Vicar General Rev. Ludovico Famucalli on 22 November 1682. It was actually completed on the 6 December 1693, (Ferris, 399).
- 28 Copy of the documents stating that Bishop Cocco Palmieri had given orders for the old parish church to be demolished kindly given to the author by the historian Mr Tony Terribile.
- 29 Approval for the removal of the trees was granted by MEPA on 16 August 2006 after full clearance from the Department of Agriculture.
- 30 Since the setting up of the Restoration Unit in 1996, it has occasionally been found necessary for the restoration project to include a scientific archaeological excavation.
- 31 The methodology for the archaeological excavation was arrived at after a method statement was prepared by the Restoration Unit in consultation with the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage and MEPA.
- 32 The Restoration Unit provided a group of masonry heritage skilled labourers under the responsibility of Mr Raymond Hili who played a major role in the clearing of material and archaeological excavation of this and other archaeological sites.
- 33 The soil would have definitely been imported on site by the time Giuseppe Hyzler recorded the frescoes on the nave wall as he missed the figure of the saint hidden by the height of the soil.
- 34 A Harris matrix (and other data) reflecting the relative position and stratigraphic contacts of the observable stratigraphic contexts was kept throughout the excavation.
- 35 The abutting but unconnected western wall along the nave could have never belonged to either of the other two small churches dedicated respectively to St Sebastian and St Michael as it is specifically stated in the report of Mgr Dusina's visit that they were constructed near but not abutting the old parish church.
- 36 Personal communication by Mr Ruben Abela. Mr Ruben Abela is an architect and Manager in Architecture, Stone and Objects Conservation at Heritage Malta.
- 37 Professor Mario Buhagiar considered the westernmost half of the unconnected nave wall to be the southern wall of St Nicholas church during the first phase of its evolution. Therefore the overall shape of the church would have been approximately that of a square. The church was roofed over by four timber beams whose cavities still show today. Probably, soon after it became a parish, the church was enlarged to twice its length towards the east. The new length was roofed over by five new beams encased within the wall one course lower than the previous four beams. This could be deduced from the two separate halves of the remaining southern wall of the nave. At a later stage the timber beams were replaced by stone arches and the exterior wall was strengthened to resist the thrust of the arches. As a matter of fact the position of the wall piers is still distinguishable from the remains of plaster between the space occupied by the bays. During the early seventeenth century the northern and southern transept and the choir at the east end were added to the building, which made the size of the church considerably larger, (Buhagiar [1975], 172-173). Prof. Buhagiar reached these conclusions when the site was still covered over with material, thick vegetation and tree cover.
- 38 Personal communication by Architect Ruben Abela.
- 39 The post excavation studies which are still subject to further verification revealed that it is more likely that the arches came first and the timber beams afterwards. Moreover, a detailed analysis of the southern nave wall, when all its components were exposed after the excavation, indicates a possible bonding of the wall piers within the nave wall. It could therefore mean

- that the cavities along the second course from the top of the nave were meant to bond the uppermost part of the wall piers.
- 40 Personal communication by Architect Ruben Abela.
- 41 Personal communication by Architect Ruben Abela. He further explained that as far as the local history of architecture is concerned, the late-sixteenth century within the rural areas of the Maltese Islands is still to be considered as late medieval and should not be confused with the late medieval date of pre-1530s as chronologically prescribed for the history and archaeology of the Maltese Islands. Generally, the arrival of the Knights in 1530 is termed the beginning of the early modern period for the Maltese Islands.
- 42 Prof. Buhagiar visited the site twice during the project. He dated the schematised head to the mid-fifteenth century.
- 43 The following is a list of sculptured blocks found during the excavation: 92 rib voussoirs, 61 pilaster blocks, 23 arch voussoirs, 48 voussoirs belonging to cross-vaults, 68 blocks belonging to several cornices, 24 roof slabs, 7 capitals, several water sprouts with different sizes, a sort of *trija* (a game played on a geometrical design) and two fragments of stone-stoves. The sculptured blocks and other architectural features found within the church museum and along the exterior elevation of the buttressed nave, including the large statues of St. Nicholas and St. Paul are not included.
- 44 The following section regarding the conservation works mainly consists of short extracts from conservation reports of the old parish church prepared during the project by Architect Norbert Gatt. The actual and splendid conservation works carried out during this project are far more elaborate than the description that the author has included here. It is also worth noting that the Restoration Unit architects are usually responsible for the running of several conservation and restoration projects simultaneously and the list of completed and successful projects since the set-up of the Restoration Unit in 1996, runs into hundreds (see: <http://www.resources.gov.mt/otherprojects>).
- 45 It is impossible for the Restoration Unit within the Works Division to issue a scholarly publication for each project that it undertakes.
- 46 The project was especially successful in implementing the values and recommendations of the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (Venice Charter, 1964), the Charter for the Protection and Management of the Archaeological Heritage (Lausanne, 1990), the European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage (Valletta, 1992), Charter on the Built Vernacular Heritage (ICOMOS 1999), and the Draft European Landscape Convention (CoE 1998).
- 47 In 2008 the Restoration Unit was presented with the Silver Medal Trophy and Prix d'Honneur by Din l-Art Helwa for the conservation works carried out on the old parish church of Siġġiewi.