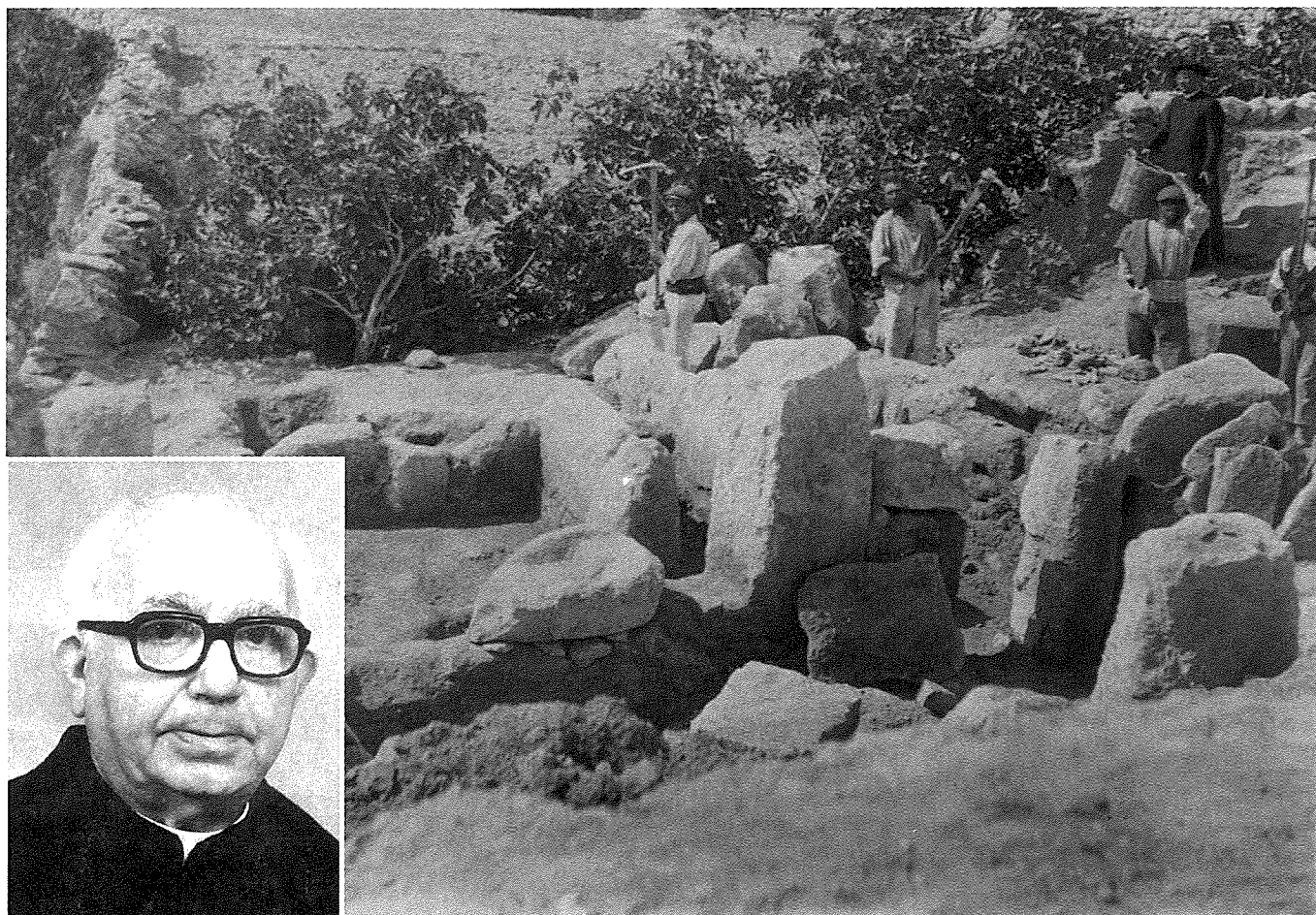




Fr Manwel Magri's Contribution to the Conservation of Malta's Archaeological Heritage

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 Misrah; Ghonoq

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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. [p.146] 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' Cenc, which he had discovered. In 1898 Fr Magri became the Provincial's secretary and was posted at the headquarters of the Province in Birkirkara.

Kercem Phoenician House [110]

In 1906 the villagers of Kercem, 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.

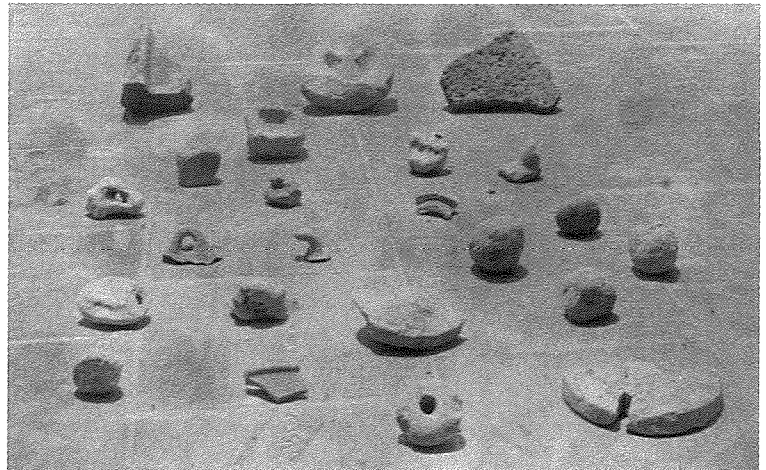
In his letter of 7 June Fr Magri urgently begged the Government to buy the site at once or, "if the owner, in view of the ruins, should ask a very high price," to take it on perpetual lease; the Curator was in favour of purchasing the site. It was urgent that the Government settle at once the terms of 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.

[p.165] 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.

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