

FEATURE

Stories of a prehistoric cave

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While listing all the known caves on the Maltese islands in his book *Della Descrizione di Malta* (1647), Giovanni Francesco Abela included Ghar Dalmau, which later on became known as Ghar Dalam. The site was simply mentioned as a geological feature in the landscape.

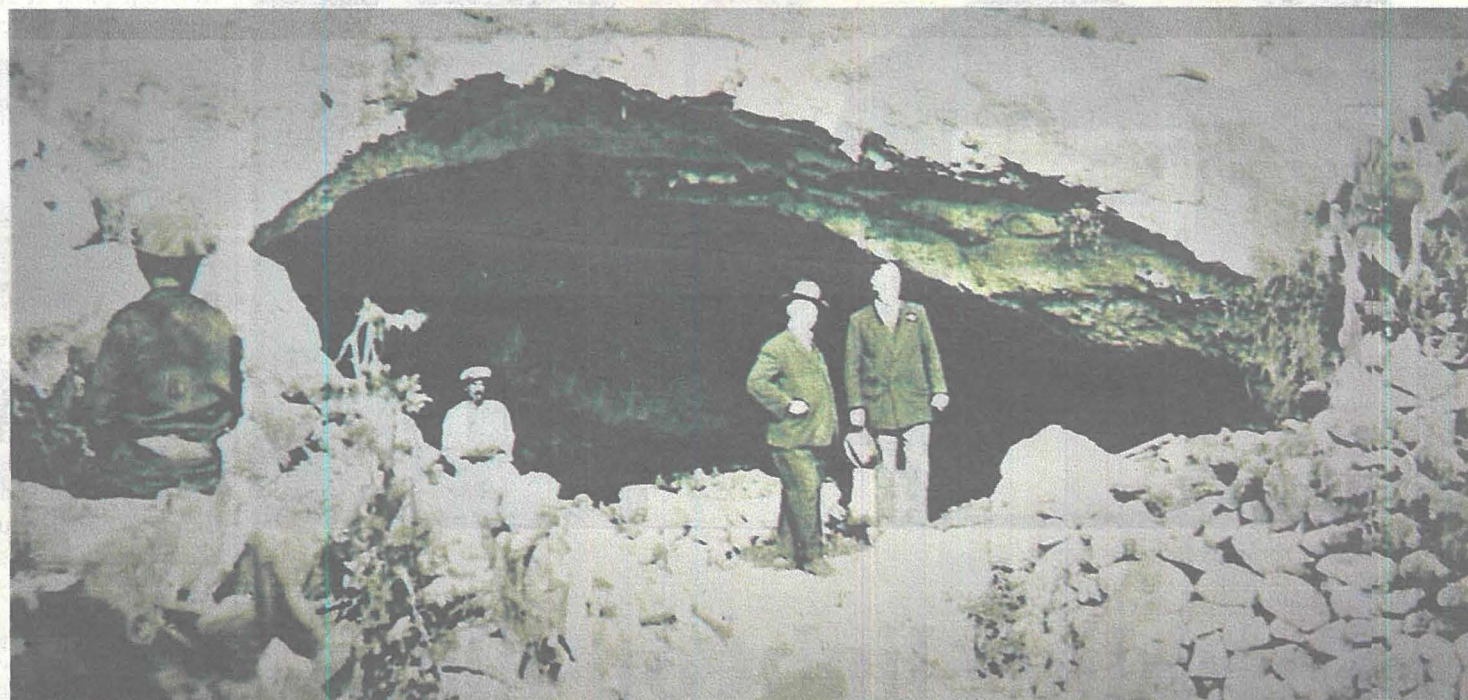
More than 200 years later, in 1865, a distinguished Italian palaeontologist named Arturo Isssel, who was investigating various local caves in search of prehistoric human traces, came across this site. He dug a 60-foot trench in the cave where he found some pottery remains and a large hippo bone. He must have been quite disappointed.

"At the time, researchers were not that interested to find prehistoric animal remains. People tend to look for people. Moreover, by then, the need to identify the origins of the first settlers in Malta had also become a political issue," John Borg, Heritage Malta senior curator, said.

Several others followed Isssel, including John Cooke, Napoleon Tagliaferro, Giuseppe Despott, Thomas Ashby, Gertrude Caton Thompson, Carmel Rizzo, George Sinclair and Joe Baldacchino. The major part of their finds consisted of various prehistoric animal bones.

All these excavations led to a massive collection of thousands of ancient animal bones. A good number of these impressive bones are exhibited at Ghar Dalam's museum. Yet, a much larger proportion is stored at the National Museum of Natural History in Mdina. Several others are located within museums in various other countries.

The Victorian-style museum at Ghar Dalam is still the original one that was set up to hold part of the bone collection in the years before World War II. Only a handful of Victorian-style museums remain in Europe.



A photo taken in the 1930s shows the entrance to Ghar Dalam, above which are a number of engraved crossings.

"In those days, museums were meant to impress, not to educate. Therefore, you find sheer quantities of the same thing, row after row. The best preserved pieces were chosen to be exhibited. Some were also displayed in a particular design to please the eye. Very little information accompanied such exhibits," Borg noted.

Instead, around 100 years ago, mounted skeletons of modern animals were used as a means of comparison with the bones of the ancient animals.

"Some visitors tend to believe that these skeletons were unearthed at Ghar Dalam. In reality, the elephant and the hippopotamus are young modern specimens, whereas the wolf, the fox and the deer are modern adult specimens. The type of deer which was found at the cave was actually smaller in size than

the one exhibited," the senior curator pointed out.

Ancient human remains did, however, reveal themselves at Ghar Dalam, the most disputed of which are those of strangely formed teeth.

"The roots of these teeth were fused together, forming one massive root, and for a good number of years, they were believed to belong to the lost hominid *Homo neanderthalensis*. However, in 1969, a local dentist extracted a similar tooth from a Maltese person in his clinic in Zebbug, and this myth was debunked since from time to time, such teeth are found in modern humans."

Yet, according to a recent study which Borg published in *Tesserae*, Issue 7, 2019, the ancient teeth catalogued as GHD001 and GHD002 were not even discovered at Ghar Dalam.

Ghar Dalam as an air-raid shelter

Another study by Borg which was published in the *Malta Archaeological Review* Issue 8, 2006/2007, refers to a period during World War II when the prehistoric cave was chosen to serve other purposes.

On June 11, 1940, a day after Italy declared war on Britain and France, a series of air raids was carried out on the Maltese islands. The prime targets were the harbour areas and the airfields. Following one of these early raids along the southern coast of Malta, a handful of residents from various villages in this area packed a few belongings and headed off to Ghar Dalam. The site was closed off with a gate, however, the desperate

refugees threatened the old deaf watchman and he had to let them in the cave.

"Following a report of a number of refugees living in a cave, F. M. Stivala, the District Commissioner (Air Raid Shelters, Valletta) visited Ghar Dalam on July 5, 1940. The next Monday, a census of the people (adults and children) living there was taken: 99 were from Birżebbuġa, 35 from Żejtun, 34 from Marsaxlokk, 25 from Cospicua, two from Valletta, one from Tarxien and one from Hal Ghaxaq."

It was noted that the cave was kept clean. Trenches were dug at about 91 metres from the cave into which urine pots and pails were emptied. All refugees were issued with non-transferable passes. No more persons were to be allowed to reside permanently in the cave.

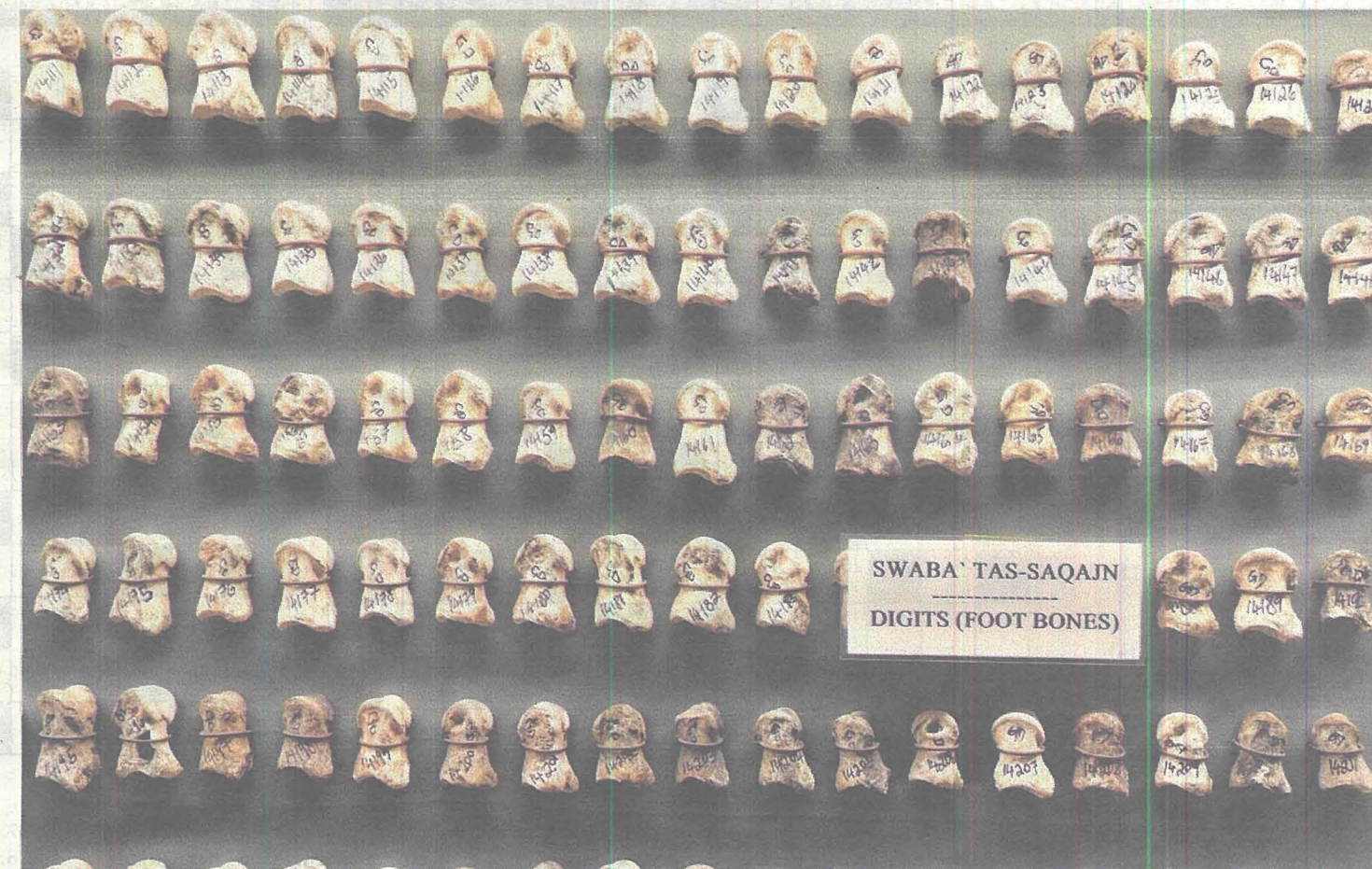
Unidentified crosses

At the entrance of the prehistoric cave, high on the rocks at the right-hand side, there are a number of engraved crossings. Although some believed that these were made by the refugees who lived in this cave during World War II, a photo (held in the archives of Heritage Malta) showing Giuseppe Despott, the first curator of the Natural History section of the Valletta Museum (on the left), together with a visitor at Ghar Dalam, prove that these crosses were already there in the 1930s (Despott passed away in 1933).

Till now, it is not known who made these crosses or why. However, many similar crosses can be traced in various sites on the Maltese islands.

A store for military fuel

In early September 1940, the prehistoric cave was earmarked for the possibility of serving as a store for military fuel. Eventually, the cave was deemed to be ideal for this purpose and alternative accommodation was found for the refugees who were



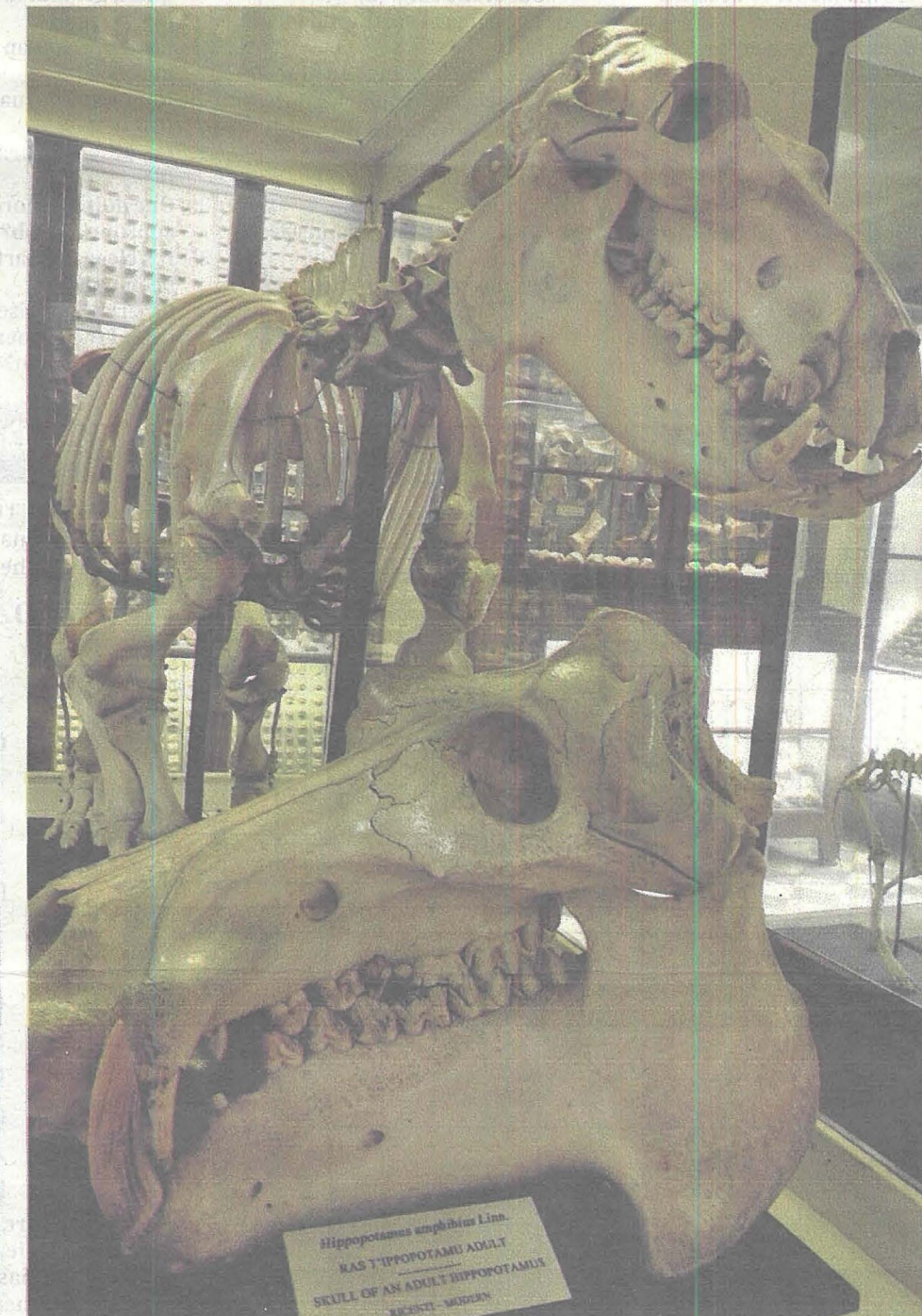
Foot bones at the Victorian-style museum.

living there. A layer of earth was placed on the exposed palaeontological and archaeological sections of the cave in order to protect the site. Rubble was used to level the cave floor and the military fuel was brought in.

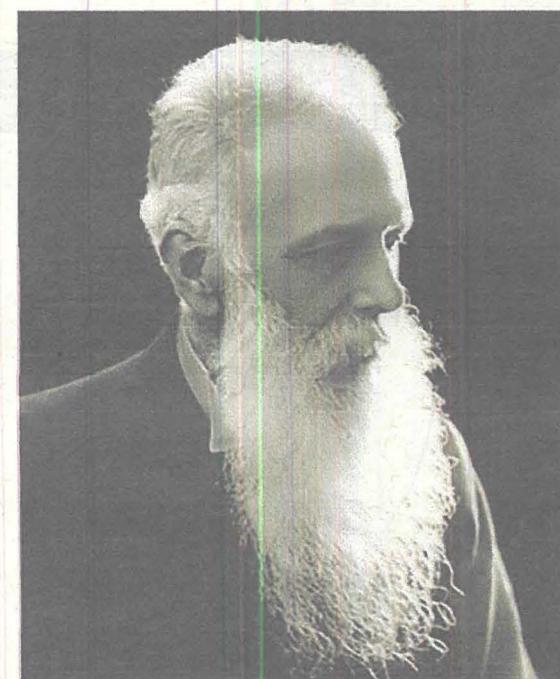
"Hostilities over the Maltese islands terminated by 1944, and as agreed, the military fuel was removed from the site, while the cave was cleared of rubble and other debris under the direction of J. G. Baldacchino, who was the curator of the Natural History Section of the Museums Department," Borg concluded.

The Ghar Dalam Cave and the museum at Birżebbuġa were reopened to the public on April 1, 1947.

Fiona Vella is communications and marketing executive at Heritage Malta.



The skull of an adult hippopotamus at Ghar Dalam. PHOTOS: HERITAGE MALTA



Italian palaeontologist Arturo Isssel



The Ghar Dalam path in the 1920s with fill, before the excavations.



GHD001 and GHD002 (on the left) are the first two fused molars allegedly found at the prehistoric cave.