



## HAL MILLIERI EXPLORED

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The year 1977 has marked another important addition to the archaeological heritage of our Islands. A new archaeological discovery has been made which will remain a significant landmark in the history of the study of Maltese antiquities not, however, for the grandeur or monumentality of its finds, but as the first systemic exploration of a purely medieval site. Towards the materialization of this project "Din l.-Art Helwa" has contributed its share.

The Annunciation Chapel at Hal Millieri has since 1968 absorbed great part of the attention and energies of the "National Trust" which has succeeded in restoring to this unique jewel of Maltese architecture and art much of its original brilliance. The abandoned site, consisting of the chapel itself and the surrounding cemetery enclosed by a high boundary wall, was tidied up and cleaned of its overgrown vegetation. Necessary work was carried out to prevent deterioration and the church was opened to the public. The conservation programme reached its culmination with the restoration of the wall paintings by an Italian expert in 1974. The whole effort was crowned by the publications of "Hal Millieri: A Maltese Casale, its Churches and Paintings" a collection of scientific articles on the history and topography of the 'lost' village and the architecture and paintings of the Annunciation church, edited by A. Luttrell.

### Medieval Archaeology

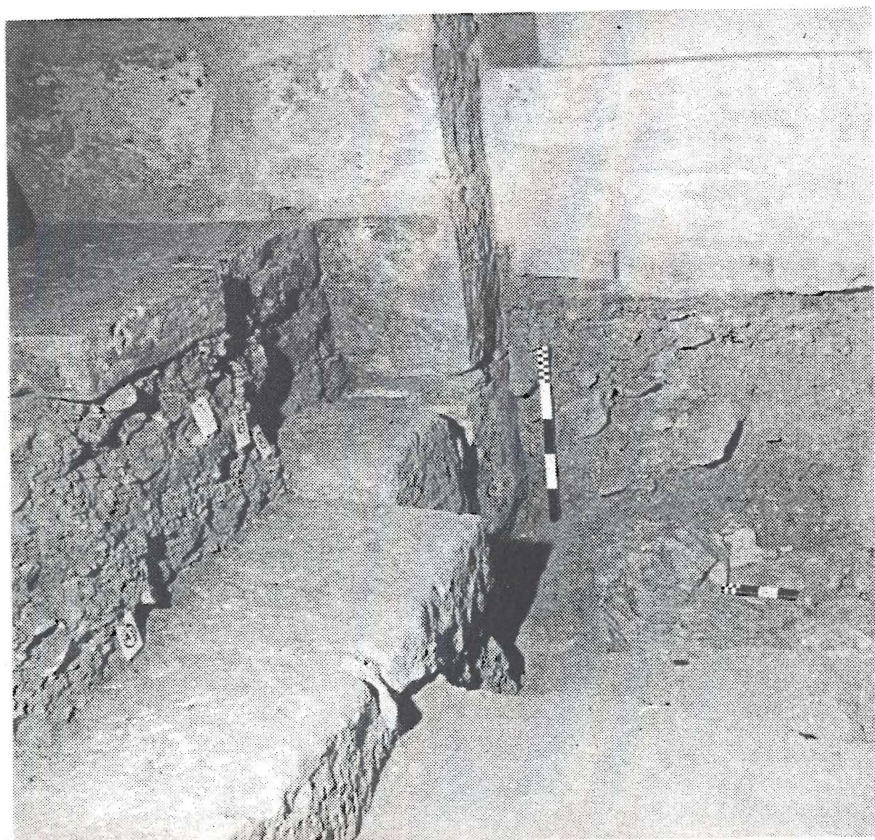
It was this publication and the inexhaustible energies of Dr. Luttrell that prompted further research, this time of archaeological nature, intended to clarify a number of problems raised by the study of the architecture of the church and to extend our knowledge of its history to the period prior to the first available documents. Such a 'field' exploration promised also to throw light on the structural and planimetric evolution of Maltese churches as well as to provide a basis for a stratified sequence of medieval pottery. Considering the poverty of material and historical documentation of our medieval period the study of stratified pottery is indispensable for reconstructing this 'dark' age of Maltese history,

The short but rewarding excavation campaign was conducted in the first two weeks of April and the immediate results were illustrated to the public, by way of a preliminary report, at the headquarters of the Trust on April 18th. In the expectation of the publication of a full, detail-

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ed report of the campaign and finds, which are presently being studied, we are limiting ourselves in this short note to the main points of information made public on that occasion.

The excavation has revealed the existence of 3 churches within the present precinct wall of the Annunciation chapel at Hal Millieri. It was found that the present Annunciation church had been preceded by an earlier church, and that for more than a century it was accompanied by another church of similar shape and dimensions. The latter church, which historical documents say was dedicated to the Visitation of the Virgin Mary, was build against the north side of the Annunciation church and at one stage a communicating door was pierced in the intervening wall. It had a semicircular apse at the east end and was divided into five bays by four transverse arches supported by piers. It also possessed a stone pavement and contained one or two graves.





Uncovered floor - Visitation church.

The excavation inside the Annunciation chapel was made possible by the temporary removal, after carefully numbering and recording the exact position of each slab, of the flagstone pavement of the north half of the church. Beneath it, at a lower level, a floor of beaten earth was discovered which must have belonged to the earlier church. More accurate dates for the construction and rebuilding of this church will hopefully be attainable after the careful study of pottery and coins. We can say, however, that this should be one of the earliest known churches of Malta since it precedes the present one which, it is calculated, must have been erected towards the middle of the fifteenth century. This earlier

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Sounding at Hal Millieri



Apse and interior - Annunciation church.

church, as well as the later one, contained burials in the usual christian, manner, that is with the heads to the west and facing the altar on the east. The skeletal remains are being studied by the Anatomy Dept. of the University and a report on them is expected to be included in the final publication. Besides a good sequence of pottery, the dating of which will be aided by the few stratified coins, fragments of painted wall plaster were uncovered, one of which shows a good portion of the head of the figures which are missing from the restored frescoes. *sw*

The project was undertaken under the overall responsibility of the Museum Department to which the Trust is most grateful for its generous help in providing equipment and other facilities. The operation<sup>s</sup> on the site were conducted under the direction of Mr. T. Blagg, from the Institute of Archaeology of the University of London, and the present writer. A number of volunteers helped with the digging and their conscientious and selfless contribution was appreciated by all. Finally, acknowledgement must also be made of the hard work put into the project by Dr. Luttrell who provided, throughout the operation, not only expert advice on historical points but also physical and moral help.