

## **RESEARCH ON PREHISTORIC AND ROMAN GOZO: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**

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**T**here is no doubt that the most important and impressive of the archaeological monuments that mark the Maltese landscape are the megalithic temples. Gozo's Ġgantija temples at Xaghra outdo all the others, even their counterparts in Malta. In spite of this, we Maltese and Gozitans have for generations grown with these constructions at our doorstep and were not always appreciative of their value. I, for one, do not remember being particularly moved by their size and sophistication on my occasional encounter with them as a child. It is normally the foreigner who 'discovers' them for us.

Nevertheless, for centuries the gigantic dimensions of the stone blocks used in these wonderful constructions struck the imagination of the uncultured local population who conjured up stories of giants (sometimes even of a single female giant) going about raising these stones according to some uncanny design (Mifsud-Chircop 1990: 166-7, with previous bibliography; Veen 1994). This is not to say that the more educated Maltese were insensitive to these unusual structures. Two Maltese writers, Gian Francesco Abela, the Chancellor of the Order of the Knights of St John (1647), and Marc Antonio Haxiaq (1610), a medical doctor of the same Order, were already writing about them in the beginning of the 17th century and attributing them to the Phoenicians, the earliest dominators of the islands in Maltese history.

### **The Ġgantija Temples**

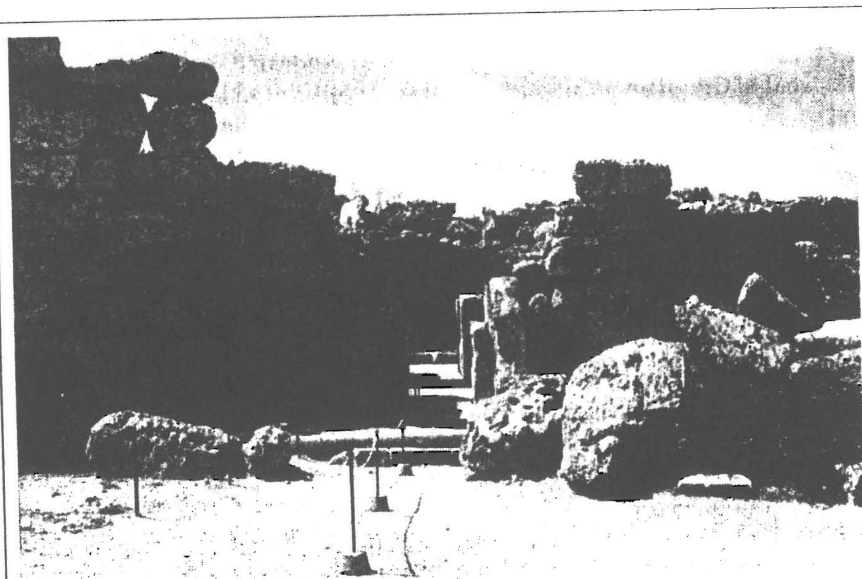
It is strange that Jean Quintin d'Autun, the French chaplain and auditor of the Order, who wrote the first extensive description of the Maltese islands (1536), had missed the Ġgantija temples in his account of the

antiquities of the islands. In any case, he had also missed the ones at Haġar Qim and Mnajdra, and had noted only those scoring the landscape of the Grand Harbour and the Marsaxlokk harbour. It seems that he was only trying to find ancient structural remains that fitted the references given by ancient writers (Bonanno: 1982; 1993).

Gian Francesco Abela shows some inconsistency in his attribution of the temples also to a race of giants, descendants of the children of Noah, who were, according to him the first inhabitants of the Maltese islands, and whose skeletal remains turned up occasionally in Maltese soil (1647: 145-8). At first, Abela appears to limit himself to mentioning the megalithic remains at Marsaxlokk and Haġar Qim and to miss Ġgantija altogether, in spite of the close connection of the placename with the giants of his theory. But then, it is possible that the placename Ġgantija had not yet taken form by his time. In fact, after reading the placename given by Agius de Soldanis (1746: 53) it becomes clear that the "*smisurati pezzi di pietre dirizzate all'in su, alcune di due canne di lunghezza con qualche parte di muro, composto, e fabricato di grossissimi sassi situati, e posti l'un sopra l'altro senza cemento, o altra mistura, che l'unifica*" situated in the area known as El Eeyun (Abela 1647: 119) are none other than the Ġgantija temples. Abela also notes the existence of megalithic remains (*evidentissimi vestigij d'habitatione de' Giganti*) near the church of St John at Xewkija. He even describes the sizes and height of some of the large stones (Abela 1647: 119).

His successor Gian Antonio Ciantar, in his revised edition of Abela's *Descrittione* almost a century-and-a-half later (1772), limits himself to reproducing word for word Abela's account, whereas his contemporary, the Gozitan Agius de Soldanis, refers more specifically to the *torri tal gianti* at *Sciahra tal hafzenin in contrada tal hjun* (1746: 53). The same scholar notes groups of stones "that could not have been raised if not by giants' hands" at *Ta' Goliat* and *Dahlet Korrot*. He also supports Abela's note of the existence of megalithic remains at Xewkija, close to the parish church.

Probably the first writer to illustrate the Ġgantija temples was another Frenchman, Jean Houel, a painter and engraver in the court of Louis XVI of France on whose behalf he undertook a tour of Sicily and its minor islands, which he described and illustrated by means of engrav-



The entrance to the south temple at Ġgantija. Photo: John Cremona.

ings in his monumental *Voyage Pittoresque* (1787). In fact, to Ġgantija Houel dedicates a lengthy description and a full-page view (1787: pl. CCL), as well as a rough plan on another engraving (pl. CCLI). Houel seems to have been more fond of Gozo and more appreciative of its singular remains than any other writer before him, because he also describes extensively and illustrates with a full-page engraving the remains of a circular megalithic wall which was destined to become a landmark in prehistoric archaeology of the late 20th century, the Xaghra Stone Circle. He referred to it simply as “*un edifice antique de forme circulaire*” and produced a somewhat integrative plan of the structure emphasising its technique of blocks laid in a radial position alternating with others in a tangential position (1787: 78, pls. CCXLIX, CCLI). In the tradition established by Abela, Houel attributed these megalithic remains to the Phoenicians.

After Houel, the next most enlightening work on the Gozitan prehistoric archaeological heritage is that of Charles de Brocchtorff who has regaled us with a series of 19 watercolours showing various views of the interior and exterior of the temples of Ġgantija soon after their clearance

operation in 1820. These scenes were being sketched while a large and deep hole was being excavated inside the Xaghra Circle, only 300 m to the west of Ġgantija. This operation was captivated by the same painter in two additional watercolours, one giving a side view of the circle from the east and the other a more panoramic and detailed view showing the excavated hole within the circle, against the topographical backdrop of Ġgantija, the In-Nuffara hill and Kemmuna in the distance. The series of watercolours is preserved in the National Library in Valletta bound together with other watercolours in a magnificent volume (Brochtorff 1849), and preceded by a handwritten introduction describing these remains as "Druidical"; Druids being a peculiar class in Celtic society – priests, judges or teachers – derived by 16th century scholars from the descriptions of the Classical age, in particular Caesar's *Commentaries*, and Tacitus' *Agricola and Germania*.

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A return to Biblical terminology is documented with the publication in 1827 of the investigations at Ġgantija by the Frenchman Mazzara in a volume entitled *Temple ante-Diluvien dit des Géants dans l'Île de Gozo* (Mazzara 1827). An interesting aberration is provided by a Maltese eccentric scholar, by name Giorgio Grognet de Vasset, who in 1854 published a monumental volume entitled *Compendio della Isola Atlantide...* in which he proposed his theory that the megalithic remains were the vestiges of the civilisation of the lost Atlantis of which the Maltese islands were the last surviving remnants (Grognet 1854). Grognet even reconstructed the language and the script of this lost civilisation. There are reasons to believe that he might be the author of the inscription engraved on the stone floor in the inner corridor of the south temple of the Ġgantija complex since the letters are extremely similar to those of his script.

The attribution of the megalithic temples to the Phoenicians was adhered to by virtually all the scholars who wrote on Gozitan antiquities during the rest of the 19th century, including Annetto A. Caruana in his many works (1882; 1899). Their prehistoric identity was recognized first by P. Furse (1869), later by J. H. Cooke (1893), but most emphatically and authoritatively by the German scholar A. Mayr at the turn of the century (1901).

With the discoveries of the two previously unknown, and fundamentally



important, prehistoric sites of the Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni (1902-8) and the temples of Tarxien (1915-18), the attention of field archaeology was shifted to Malta and very little activity was devoted to Gozo for almost a century. It would be enough to skim through the works of Temi Zammit, Margaret Murray, John Evans and David Trump, the most active prehistoric archaeologists on these islands since the beginning of the twentieth century to realize this. Naturally, however, all these archaeologists included the Gozitan sites in their works of a general nature, like Evans' *Malta* (1959) and his monumental *Survey* (1971), as well as Trump's *Guide* (1972). Indeed, it was Colin Renfrew, the eminent British prehistorian, who in 1973 made the claim that the Ġgantija temples were the earliest free-standing stone structures in the world (Renfrew 1973). Nevertheless, field exploration was limited to a few sporadic trenches. A noteworthy one was that made in 1969 by Francis Mallia on the floor of a roofless cave at Il-Mixta, near San Lawrenz (*Museum Annual Report 1969*: 5-6). Mallia was hoping to hit on sealed deposits at Il-Mixta like the ones from which a great amount of impressed pottery of the Ghar Dalam type had been clandestinely excavated and eventually surrendered to the Museum authorities. But he was not successful and had to abandon the exercise owing to impending dangers from a nearby quarry, the same one which had eaten away the original deposits (*Museum Annual Report 1970*: 6).

The first archaeological publication solely dedicated to Gozo's prehistoric monuments, albeit of a greatly reduced size and of a popular nature, appeared in 1986, in the series *Gaulitana* edited by Joseph Bezzina (Bonanno 1986a). This was followed by a much more extensive publication on Gozo, edited by Charles Cini (1990), with a section dedicated to archaeology (Bonanno 1990).

### **The Ġhajnsielem Huts and the Xagħra Stone Circle**

It was against this background that in September 1985, while Dr David Trump and Prof. Colin Renfrew were in Malta attending the conference on "Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean", the opportunity was snatched to set up a joint research project between the Universities of Cambridge and Malta and the Museums Department, with a view to undertaking excavations in Gozo. This project material-

ised in the summer of 1987 with the excavation of the remains of two domestic huts of the *Ġgantija* phase on the edge of Mġarr Road, Ghajnsielem (Malone *et al.* 1988). Simultaneously, the full scale excavation of the Xaghra Stone Circle was started, with immediate promising results. In fact, this was followed regularly by an excavation campaign each year until the project was closed in 1994 in expectation of the publication of the academic reports. Another aim of the joint research project was to undertake a systematic field walking survey of a wide strip of land stretching all along Gozo from the west to the east coast. This exercise is still being conducted.

The domestic huts at Ghajnsielem are of great interest in the light of the almost total absence of settlement sites for this period in both islands. The question often arose: "With all the concentration of imposing, monumental religious buildings, where did the temple builders live?" Traces of huts contemporary with the temples next door had been found in the sixties at Skorba (Trump 1966); but these were far too tenuous, though enough to allow us to guess that the temple builders' abodes were very ephemeral, built as they were of extremely perishable materials (Bonanno 1986). This was confirmed by the discovery at Ghajnsielem, where two huts of different sizes were found. The larger hut had walls and a central pillar built of mud-brick. The roof was probably of thatch which is not likely to leave any mark in the archaeological record after even a few decades, let alone thousands of years. Underneath another pillar, which was situated between the two huts, a cone-shaped object with a red ochre cover was found which could not be explained otherwise than as some sort of ritual object, probably connected with the foundation of the same huts (Malone *et al.* 1988).

At the Xaghra Stone Circle, by the third archaeological campaign it was confirmed beyond doubt that the circular field being excavated was indeed the one that had been illustrated by the two watercolours signed by Charles de Brocstorff in 1829 (1849), and previously by Jean Houel in his *Voyage Pittoresque* (1787). The excavators had to remove all the backfill of the huge hole that had been dug in the centre of the Circle in 1820. Underneath the soil surface they found essentially two distinct situations: 1) a small rock-cut tomb, consisting of two burial chambers reached through a common shaft, which appears to have been used repeatedly by members of an extended family in the earlier phases of

the Temple Period; and 2) a system of natural underground caves which were used as a collective cemetery by a large community of temple builders in the last phases of the same age. The roofs of practically all these caves collapsed towards the very end of the same age and the cemetery was abandoned, to be occupied at a later stage and for a different purpose by the Bronze Age people (Bonanno *et al.* 1990).

The finds were abundant and most rewarding, in many senses. The ceramic remains were more or less of the same types with which we are familiar from the temples themselves, with a few pleasant surprises. Stone finds included a cache of three flint knives of a size never met with before in Malta, and axe-shaped pendants of exotic materials whose provenance has been traced to Sicily, Calabria and as far afield as the Alps region (Malone *et al.* 1993). The figurative material ranges from a series of stylised anthropomorphic bone pendants and a stone anthropomorphic stele (similar to the one from the Ta' Trapna tombs), through clay and stone figures of the usual corpulent type, albeit with some important variations, to a group of stone figurines belonging to an iconography unknown before (Stoddart *et al.* 1993). All these will, no doubt, contribute with further study to a radical rethinking of the meaning of the figurative representation produced by this extraordinary culture.

Of central importance are – as to be expected from a cemetery site – the human bones which were found in their hundreds of thousands. Most were found in complete disarticulation, suggesting secondary burial. Some partial articulation, of hands and feet, was also encountered, suggesting some quite nightmarish scenery within the original underground cemetery complex.

A considerable number of completely articulated skeletons were also excavated with all the care normally required by such situations. It stands to reason that their physical context will have a lot to say as to their meaning.

The exploration and eventual excavation of the Xaghra Circle have been undertaken according to the most scientific and state-of-the-art methodology. Similarly, the post-excavation processing of the finds is being conducted with scientific rigour. We thus expect new light to be shed on

aspects, such as environmental history, palaeobotany and palaeozoology, the physical appearance and dietary regimes of our ancestors, as well as their social structures and interrelationships. The methods of geophysical surveying, excavation and research used for this collaborative project provide an excellent model for future research.

### **New Archaeological Sites**

The third component of the joint research project, the field walking survey, has already yielded concrete results. New archaeological sites are being discovered, sometimes merely from the progressive intensity of pottery sherds lying on the surface. The survey, which is still in progress, is expected to shed light also on land use in Gozo, both in antiquity and at present.

What are the prospects for prehistoric archaeology in Gozo? It is obvious that all we can say about this is by way of what is desirable to be done. We can only identify the present needs and suggest ways of providing for those needs. But it is most likely that the situation will change with the socio-economic, as well as the physical development of the island.

As far as the study of the known archaeological heritage is concerned, it is enough to mention the number of prehistoric sites in Gozo that still need to be properly documented through measured drawings, photography and (why not?) limited and very selective excavation. Borg il-Gharib, L-Imrejżbiet and Ta' Marżiena, to mention just a few examples, still await such study. Concurrently with that, Gozo would benefit enormously, as Malta itself would, if the study of landscape archaeology is taken up with greater intensity. A very modest exercise on these lines has been conducted by the present writer with respect to the archaeological monuments at Ta' Ċenċ. But a much more global study of the changing Gozitan landscape in prehistory was made, under the writer's supervision, by Mr Godwin Vella for his B.A. Hons dissertation. If the field walking survey referred to above were to be extended to cover the whole of Gozo, we should be able to form a much better idea not only of the archaeological resource of the island – thereby being in a much better position to protect and manage it – but also of how it changed over the millennia.



## **Management of Archaeological Heritage**

We have learnt from experience that, without proper management of resources, especially the archaeological one, we risk either losing it irredeemably without even noticing, or else over-exploiting it to its detriment. Most of us are aware of the great losses Gozo's heritage has suffered due to the inability of the central authorities to cope with the Gozitan realities. On the other hand, there appears to be a slow but positive change in mentality. For instance, plans are in hand to treat the archaeological resource within the Ta' Ċenċ property with a holistic approach, integrating it within the projected expansion of the touristic facilities, promoting and managing it in a way that befits its cultural, social and intrinsic value.

The management of the archaeological heritage needs to be backed by a thorough knowledge of the existing resources and a deep sensitivity for its treatment. Both require a fully-fledged university education in the subject besides, obviously, the political will and the financial resources to implement it. Since 1990, the University has been providing the country with a regular supply of graduates in Archaeology, some at Honours level and hailing from Gozo. In the circumstances, it would not be a bad idea if Gozo had its own resident archaeologists to mind its archaeological heritage.

## **Discovering Roman Gozo**

In view of the number of writings on Roman Gozo by the present writer in fairly recent publications (Bonanno 1990; 1992), in order to avoid undue repetition, this section of the paper is being restricted to the question of methods of research on Gozo's history and archaeological heritage of the Roman period. It should also be kept in mind that most of what has been written above on the history of prehistoric studies and archaeological activity is also valid for the Roman period in Gozo.

It stands to reason that the method of research into the historical past of Gozo differs from that of its prehistory, essentially because the sources of information available are not limited to the material evidence, the archaeological data, but include also the written records, whether of a

literary nature – such as poetry, oratory and historical accounts – or epigraphic nature. It is strongly believed that not only does such a research depend heavily on these latter sources, but it must actually start with a thorough study of them in order to extract from them the greatest amount of reliable information possible. And this is precisely what one must do in discovering Roman Gozo. A considerable amount of philological study has been done on the Greek and Latin literary references to Gozo. Quintinus himself (1536), the first writer on Maltese antiquities, showed a very thorough knowledge of the ancient literary references to both Malta and Gozo. The same and other references were taken up by various writers, both foreign and Maltese, and ranging from Abela (1647) to Ashby (1915), but never in a comprehensive way. Closer to our times, two Maltese scholars who devoted a number of important studies to these sources are Edward Coleiro (1964) and Joseph Busuttill (1968; 1975). A more historical approach is taken by the Sicilian scholar F. Rizzo in a long article published in 1977 (1976-77).

### **The Name Gozo in Classical Times**

Gozo has a name which very probably has its origin in classical times. *Gaulos*, or *Gaudos* (of which Gozo is probably a later corruption), was the Roman version of the Greek name by which the island was known as far back as the sixth century B.C. In fact, the oldest mention of *Gaulos* is attributed to Hecataeus, a Greek writer who lived approximately between 560 and 480 B.C. (Busuttill 1975). The same form appears in the genitive plural (*Gauliton*, “of the Gozitans”) on coins minted in Gozo in the first century B.C. (Coleiro 1965: 124).

An obvious observation, but one that needs to be made just the same, is that most of what the ancient sources tell us about Malta is applicable to Gozo. Just as today, when one refers to Malta in international quarters, one has in mind the whole Maltese archipelago, in antiquity whoever named Malta included also Gozo. It was in late antiquity that it was found necessary to mention both islands in the composite name of *Gaudomelete*. Some of the ancient writers make a specific mention of Gozo as distinct from Malta, such as Diodorus Siculus (first century B.C.) who attributes to it good harbours, and the geographer Ptolemy (second century A.D.) who even gives the coordinates of its town.

Cicero, on the other hand, who is such an important source of information on various aspects of daily life in Malta, as well as the Acts of the Apostles, have no words to spare specifically on Gozo.

## **Inscriptions**

Much more informative are the inscriptions which often define Gozo as a separate administrative entity with its own town, magistrates, priesthoods and rich patrons. A Punic inscription of the second century B.C. testifies to the survival, well within the Roman domination of Gozo, of the old Phoenician religion and of several shrines dedicated to Phoenician divinities. Only one inscription, of early imperial date, lumps the two islands together under the procuratorship of a certain Chrestion; while a contemporary inscription, dedicated to Iulia Augusta, wife of Emperor Augustus, records the existence of a female priesthood in Gozo who looked after the worship of this imperial lady in the guise of the goddess Ceres.

In the first half of the second century A.D., then, we have two inscriptions set up by the Gozitans to honour their patrons Postumus and his son Vallius which state clearly that Gozo by that time enjoyed the status of *municipium*. Postumus and Vallius both had honours conferred upon them by successive emperors, Hadrian first and Antoninus Pius after him. One inscription dedicated to Julia Domna, wife of Emperor Septimius Severus, with her title as "Mother of the Army Camps", is too fragmentary and reveals little about the goings-on in Gozo during the reign of the Severan dynasty, but another one, originally dedicated to her son Geta, implies a lot. The name of this prince was erased from the inscription, no doubt following his murder and the *damnatio memoriae* on his name and images on public monuments throughout the empire, declared by his brother Caracalla as soon as the latter succeeded his father as emperor. More imperial intrigue is suggested by two inscriptions which are recorded on Gozo, commemorating Constantius (A.D. 292-306) and Galerius (A.D. 293-311) who reigned first as co-Caesars and later as co-Emperors in the tetrarchic rule system introduced by Emperor Diocletian.

## Roman Archaeological Remains

The archaeological remains are not so abundant for Roman Gozo, mostly because most of them have been allowed to be destroyed by development, and the few that have escaped destruction still need to be properly studied. For this and for other reasons, such as the very shallow archaeological deposits normally present on both islands, archaeological excavations of ancient historical sites – including “Roman” sites – should not be less rigorous in their scientific methodology than those of prehistoric sites.

One of the first aims of Roman archaeological studies is to establish the topography of the ancient town of Gaulos: the shape and extent of its boundaries, the pattern of its streets, the position of its forum and of its public and religious buildings, the architecture of domestic housing. All this still needs to be established with more certainty than hitherto since the boundaries of the town have been only hypothetically established, as suggested by the discovery of tombs which were presumably outside them. As complete a record as possible needs to be held of all the accidental discoveries made during earth disturbing operations under the buildings and roads of the present urban texture. State agencies and departments should set an example by inviting the competent authorities to monitor closely any trenching operations performed within the town. Private developers are more likely to act responsibly if they have a good model to emulate and if they are given assurance of either timely and adequate compensation, or expeditious investigation prior to the release of development permits.

Outside the main urban centre of Roman Gaulos we know that there were some country villas, one of which – that found in Xewkija – being an example of the rustic farmstead type equipped with olive-pressing apparatus (*Museum Annual Report 1958-59*: 4), and the one excavated close to the sea-shore at Ramla Bay in 1910-11 being more likely a residential resort furnished with hot baths and rooms decorated with marble floors and painted walls (*Museum Annual Report 1910-11*: 11; Ashby 1915: 70-4). Of both these types there should be more specimens whose remains still exist buried in the soil in the Gozitan countryside. The field walking survey mentioned above is a non-destructive method that is very likely to reveal such surviving remains, as it has already





**A Roman marble *oscillum* with a tragic mask carved in low relief on one side and a griffin on the other.  
Photo: J. Farrugia**

done in a couple of cases. Even underground tombs are likely to be spotted by this method. Gozo is particularly short of such tombs, compared to the larger island. Besides the tombs found just outside the limits of the ancient town, such as the ones discovered in St Francis Square in 1892-3 (Caruana 1899: 50-1) and the funerary glass jar in Vajringa Street (Caruana 1899: 54-5), only a few tombs have been recorded for the Roman period, namely those of Wied il-Ghasri, Wied is-Simar and Tal-Qighan (*Museum Annual Report 1979:1*; Caruana 1884).

Besides the buildings and structures, the archaeologist has to turn his attention to the study of the objects retrieved from them and elsewhere. Roman sculpture from Gozo is represented mostly by the fine female draped statue from Rabat that probably represented an imperial lady, possibly the Julia Augusta recorded in the respective inscription mentioned earlier, and by a marble *oscillum* (that is, a decorative disc intended to be hung between columns) with a tragic mask carved in low relief on one side and a griffin on the other. The study of sculpture and art in general needs to be on the lookout for works that could be attributed to local production. None of the known marble pieces can be thus attributed, but sculpture in local stone, such as the satyr head in the Archaeological Museum in the Castello, and the telamon from the villa at Ramla Bay (now lost) could very well be traced to a local school of production which needs to be better defined with the discovery of more similar pieces.

Coins are also the object of an important specialisation of archaeology, and they can contribute reliable dating and other historical evidence whenever they are found in sealed contexts. Unfortunately, recording of such finds has not been up to standard in the past and the potential information that could have been provided by the context of the third century A.D. coin hoard found under the church of St George in Rabat in 1937 (*Museum Annual Report 1936-7:14*), to cite only one example, is now lost for ever.

One other area in which Gozo seems to preserve a precious heritage is marine archaeology. Off the mouth of Xlendi Bay two superimposed shipwrecks have been recorded (*Museum Annual Report 1961: 6-7*). Another one has been observed more recently in much deeper waters in the same region (Grima and Gauci 1993). Yet another shipwreck is known to lie on the opposite side of Gozo, and there are surely others awaiting to be discovered. Such heritage too needs systematic surveying, which for obvious reasons is much more costly, in terms of time, money and human resources than surveying on land.

### The Prospects

The problem with the archaeology of Prehistoric and Roman Gozo is that in the past evident remains that were encountered during building works even in the most frequented places were allowed to be obliterated or covered over without any proper record. This might be partly owing to a, possibly unconscious, feeling among the Gozitans against the Maltese bureaucrats who are considered almost like "foreigners" interfering in local affairs.

With the appointment of local, Gozitan archaeologists, this attitude might be overcome completely. The Gozitan people are bound to become increasingly jealous of their heritage and will want to protect it in earnest, against the unscrupulous developer, whether Gozitan or "foreigner". We all look forward to that future, hoping that it is not a distant one.

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