

12. Presenting the Bronze Age to the public at the National Museum of Archaeology

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Abstract. The National Museum of Archaeology of Malta is at present working on opening the Bronze Age room to the public. The project team has engaged on presenting a display which will be as informative, interactive and accessible as possible, to match visitors' needs. An outline and explanation of the reasoning behind the display layout and content is given.

Keywords: museum, visitors, Bronze Age, permanent exhibition

12.1. Introduction

The National Museum of Archaeology is housed in the Auberge de Provence¹, in the main street of Valletta, Malta's capital city (Fig. 12.1). At present, the museum has approximately 195 m² of permanent display space. Located on the ground floor, the present display takes us on a walkthrough of the Neolithic period covering a span of time which goes from about 5200 to 2500 BC. Starting from Malta's first settlers, it shows how their culture evolved into something quite unique. This is a period during which Malta's megalithic monuments – listed by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites – were built.

¹ The Auberge de Provence was originally built for the Provençal Knights of the Order of St John in 1571. It is one of the most stylish baroque buildings still distinguishable in Valletta. Due to its importance it has been scheduled by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority which means that any intervention on the building fabric needs the permit of this authority.

Work is currently underway on the museum's upper floor so that another five halls of permanent display areas, covering an area of 400 m², are opened to host the subsequent Bronze Age, Phoenician, Punic, Roman and Byzantine periods. The aim is to give visitors enough information about all these periods whilst acting as a catalyst to a number of museums and archaeological sites found in the Maltese islands. It is planned that the Bronze Age hall, which will cover 68 m², will be opened to the public by the middle of 2011.

12.2. Museums and visitors: past and present

Museums are one of the principal means whereby people can gain access to their history². But what do people expect from a visit to a museum? As Principal Curator of the National Museum of Archaeology, this is one question I pose especially when analysing what can be improved at the museum, how new audiences can be attracted to the museum whilst working towards visitor satisfaction and encouraging repeat visitors. Unfortunately not many museum visitor surveys have been carried out locally and most of those carried out abroad were conducted inside the museums, therefore leaving the non-visitor out of the picture. Non-visitors are silently saying a lot by not visiting and we should be aware of their reasons for doing so.

A brief overview of the history of museums, with an emphasis on museums in Malta, will help us understand why museum visitor numbers are not as high as they could potentially be. Malta's first public museum opened its doors in 1903 at Palazzo Xara in Valletta, after a very successful exhibition which coincided with the Duke and Duchess of York's royal visit. This took place some twelve years after a letter entitled 'WANTED – A museum for Malta' featured in *The Malta Times and United Services Gazette*, in which the author not only reproached local people for not taking

² Merriman 2000: 139.



Figure 12.1. The National Museum of Archaeology.

care of their heritage, but also asked why Malta is without a museum, stating that: ‘such an institution is not a luxury; it is a necessity ... The idea that a museum is simply a store house of curiosities has long since been discarded.’³ A small part of the local collection was put together by the Maltese knight Giovanni

³ Gambin 2003: 17.

Francesco Abela in the first half of the seventeenth century and displayed in his country house. Those allowed to see the collection were probably acquaintances of Abela, besides visiting antiquarians and other dignitaries. The collection was eventually transferred to the Public Library in 1811 and a selection of it was put on display. Even in this case the collection would have only been seen by those literate people who would have ventured into the Public Library. Such a scenario, whereby places housing collections were seen as places for the elite and learned individuals, was not only a local occurrence, but seems to have been the case all over the museum world at this time⁴.

In 1955 the Auberge de Provence was designated to house both the Archaeology and Fine Arts collections, with the former occupying the ground floor and the Fine Arts taking up the upper floor. As both collections started growing, the Fine Arts collection was moved to Admiralty House in South Street, Valletta, and in 1973 the museum was renamed the National Museum of Archaeology. In 1995 it was decided to close the museum for a period of time in order to embark on the Permanent Exhibition Project which essentially meant refurbishing the museum and updating the display. At the time the display consisted of showcases with numerous artefacts inside them, either labelled individually or as a group (Fig. 12.2). No other interpretation accompanied the artefacts. Although the artefacts were a gold mine for researchers and academics, the accompanying labels were more often than not too scholarly to be understood by the general public. The museum reopened its doors in 1998, with the Neolithic period display that was considered to be very fresh and accessible to any visiting audience (Fig. 12.3). We feel that this text is still too academic and longer than the standard text cited in museology studies⁵. Since then, improvements have been made at other Heritage Malta sites and museums to ensure more readability of the artefacts, providing a storyline that can be understood by more diverse visitors (Figs 12.4, 12.5).

⁴ McLean 1997: 10; Merriman 2000: 85.

⁵ Museum Practice 1997: 64



Figure 12.2. The display at the National Museum of Archaeology before 1995.

This brief overview on the development of museum displays gives us an idea why museums were, until quite recently, considered as “boring places” that one had to visit, most often on compulsory school trips. Bourdieu⁶, claims that the family in which a child is reared, influences the child’s future performance. Children who are exposed to museums are more likely to visit museums when they grow up. On the other hand, if a person visited a museum at a young age and had a negative experience, the likeliness is that the same person would not be inclined to visit museums as an adult. In a survey carried out in 1985 in Britain,⁷ it was found that 35% of the people surveyed associated museums with libraries, 34% with monuments for the dead, 11% with schools, 10% with churches, and 3% with community centres; the

⁶ Bourdieu, a social theorist, cited in Merriman 2000: 79.

⁷ Merriman 2000: 63. The survey was conducted on both visitors and non-visitors.



Figure 12.3. The display on the ground floor at the National Museum of Archaeology inaugurated in 1998.

remaining 7% associated museums with other places. This is the challenge that museums are faced with nowadays: to break away from the exclusively scholarly minded and able image that people often have of museums. To do this, museums need to move away from the concept of instruction for academics to a space in which the concept of edutainment (education and entertainment combined) is achieved. Museums also need to upgrade their display to meet visitor expectations, whilst enticing new audiences to visit museums as a most positive experience.

In 2006, a survey was carried out locally in order to understand what the public, both visitors and non-visitors expect from museums in general⁸. The survey showed that 66.5% of those

⁸ The survey was part of a thesis entitled *Museums and Audiences – Bridging Gaps* which I submitted in part fulfilment for the degree of Masters of Arts in Cultural Heritage Management. The survey was conducted on 250 locals and covered all museums in the Maltese islands, with the National Museum of Archaeology taken

interviewed had at some time visited a local museum, an encouraging datum by any degree⁹. Out of these, 35% had visited the National Museum of Archaeology at least once¹⁰. One of the questions asked was how interviewees spend their free time. In both categories (visitors and non-visitors) ‘family outings’ garnered the most percentages with 56.2% and 51.1% respectively. If museums want to attract more local visitors, then this is surely something that needs to be taken into consideration. Museums need to market their product as a potential option for a family outing, by providing activities for the whole family, as a group. Leisure time in today’s fast-paced society seems to be diminishing whereas places offering leisure services are increasing. With this in mind, museums have to compete with other leisure industries whilst at the same time maintaining the edutainment concept. Such a concept should appeal to parents/guardians who usually try to find means of informally educating their children.

Part of the survey also sought data relevant to the extension of the permanent display at the National Museum of Archaeology¹¹. The following is a summary of the salient points which emerged from this survey and which were taken into consideration when planning the extension of the permanent display. When interviewees were asked to select their preferred means of how information should be disseminated, 75% chose audiovisuals, 43.7% chose text with images on interpretative panels, 29.7% said they prefer audio guides, 18.7% chose guidebooks, and 18.7% chose catalogues. 98.4% of the interviewees agreed that the display should have elements of interactivity, with some respondents claiming that children and youths are very attracted to such interactive material and that they understand more when they touch

as a case study. Specific questions related to it were asked especially in view of the enlargement of the permanent exhibition to be hosted in the upper floor of the museum. The survey was conducted by phone in order to reach non-visitors as well.

⁹ Merriman 2000: 64, states that in any year, between 47 to 58 % of the British population visits museums. An Italian survey shows that 41% of the population are museum goers (Rabinovitch 2003, cited in Black 2005: 19).

¹⁰ Sultana 2008: 50.

¹¹ The questions posed covered the whole extension of the permanent display and thus were not just intended for the Bronze Age display.



Figure 12.4. The display at the Domus Romana which was inaugurated in 2005.

things. They also pointed out that instructions are very important to help those who are not familiar with interactive equipment¹².

When the interviewees were asked if they had any general suggestions to make in view of the Permanent Exhibition Project, 40.6% answered with suggestions which included the following: interactive spaces, especially for children; different types of media; simple language; help at hand by staff; security, and consideration for a wider audience which includes persons with disabilities and the illiterate. When asked to indicate what they thought should be exhibited in these halls, only 62.5% gave an answer. Out of this, 80% said they expected to see original artefacts related to the particular historical periods, without mentioning any specific artefacts. The remaining 20% maintained that there should be audiovisuals and different types of media to explain the way people lived in the past, also referring to such themes as religion, traditions, and clothing.

¹² Percentages add up to more than 100 due to multiple answers being provided by interviewees who chose more than one medium.



Figure 12.5. The interpretation panels at the Domus Romana.

12.2.1. Media and facilities throughout the display

The work on the Permanent Exhibition Project is a collective effort which involves the input of many divisions within Heritage Malta and even of specialists from outside the agency. At the start of the project all those involved met to discuss the message that we want to convey and how this is going to be implemented¹³. The feedback that was gathered from the survey was also taken into consideration.

Since audiovisuals rated the highest as preferred means of information dissemination, as a project team, we have made it a point to supplement textual information with audiovisuals. The Bronze Age display will in fact have two audiovisuals, as explained below. Some of the interpretation panels will have digital frames so that we are not limited to the amount of images we would like to

¹³ The Project team is mainly made up of Curatorial, Project Unit, Exhibitions and Design Unit, Maintenance Unit and the Communication Unit within Heritage Malta. As a consultant, the Heritage Malta sought the services of Dr David Trump (Curator of the Archaeology section of the Museums Department between 1958 and 1963) to assist us with the concepts, text, and choice of artefacts for the Bronze Age display.

show due to space restrictions or clutter on the interpretation panel. Audio guides are also being considered to form part of the visitor experience. Statistics show that locally there are still people with a very low level of literacy and audio guides are one way of addressing this problem¹⁴. Research has shown that museum visits increase with the level of education people have¹⁵. The higher the level the more likely one is to visit a museum. From the survey conducted locally the trend is the same as can be seen from the table below¹⁶:

	Non-visitors		Visitors	
	Males %	Females %	Males %	Females %
Primary	18.5	18.5	6	9.3
Secondary	76.1	73.9	70.5	74.9
Tertiary	–	6.5	20.2	15.8
Missing system	5.4	1.1	3.3	–

Table 12.1. Visitors and Non-Visitors profile according to level of education.

Museums need to work towards breaking this trend by making available different media which will cater for all walks of life. Different levels of information need to be available and it will then be up to the individual to source the preferred means. The media will range from cartoons within the interpretation panels to guidebooks with more detailed information. Guided tours shall also be given their due importance since a lot of people need immediate feedback and this two-way communication mode will also cater for illiterate or semi-illiterate people who would not be able to read the

¹⁴ In 2005 the overall rate of illiteracy in Malta stood at 7.2% of the whole population (as reported in the *Times of Malta*, 27 January 2011). The term illiteracy described individuals who could not write a complete sentence in Maltese or English.

¹⁵ Merriman 2000: 43, Merriman 2000: 80.

¹⁶ Sultana 2008: tables 11, 33 and 34, reproduced in one table.

text. With regard to interpretation panels, it has been decided that the maximum number of words must not exceed 150 and be written in simple language. One might argue that 150 words per interpretation panel is not enough to incorporate all the necessary information, but the intention is to have supplementary media which will accommodate individual needs. Each panel shall have text in Maltese and English and the bottom part of each panel will include a cartoon sketch which will summarise the message we want to convey and, at the same time, make the display more child friendly. When making a display accessible for children one is automatically making it accessible for a wider range of audiences. Museum personnel need to keep in mind that at times it is not just a matter of age but also the familiarity with the subject. This means that a child might be more conversant with a subject or theme that an adult may find difficulty with. With regard to child-friendly measures, we shall also have a room with various activities which relate to the periods being displayed, for we concur with the belief that: 'Learning in early childhood is of greatest importance because it establishes patterns of acquisition of culture that remain with us throughout our lives.'¹⁷ Moreover, accessibility is a term that is very much at heart at the National Museum of Archaeology and is tackled both from the physical and intellectual aspect¹⁸. Indeed, the National Museum of Archaeology became fully accessible to persons with mobility impairments in the last quarter of 2007¹⁹. It is our intention to provide portable stools in the museum since space constraints do

¹⁷ Anderson 1999: 73.

¹⁸ In the 2006 National Strategy for Cultural Heritage, (*Strateġija Nazzjonali dwar il-Patrimonju Kulturali*, [2006], *Ministeru għat-Turizmu u Kultura*, Malta: 19) accessibility covers a number of issues and includes various issues and matters: the conservation and display of artefacts; education which needs to cater for all levels of education; reinforcement of values such as cultural identity, gender equality and cultural diversity; physical and intellectual access for disadvantaged sectors of society, and the establishment of research agendas to generate new knowledge and update information. The curatorial teams from Heritage Malta hold discussions with the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities on a regular basis in an effort to provide a positive museum experience for persons with various impairments through the use of different types of media.

¹⁹ A ramp was installed outside the main door in Republic Street and the necessary arrangements were made to increase the power supply of the museum to cater for the lift, thus providing access to the upper floor.

not allow us to have sufficient seating space integrated in the display areas. In this manner we are trying to cater for visitor comfort as well. We shall also be integrating a number of interactive exhibits. As much as possible we have integrated elements of interactivity which will, as studies have shown, facilitate visitors in their understanding²⁰.

In the display used for the Bronze Age room there shall be an interactive weaving loom which the visitor can work and weave. Clear instructions shall accompany the weaving loom. Apart from helping visitors understand more, interactivity captivates one's attention span²¹.

Objects recovered from an archaeological excavation are best understood in their context but this is not always possible. A site has to be excavated for it to be understood and therefore artefacts have to be unearthed and cannot be left in situ for a number of reasons including conservation issues and theft. This lack of context has long been felt by museum personnel and is addressed by producing, whenever possible, excavation photographs showing artefacts in situ, having reconstructions and also video footage of archaeologists explaining the sites. In this manner we are moving away from cluttering showcases with similar artefacts, as was commonplace in the recent past, and instead showing representative examples recovered from the site. It is evident that the focus has to be on the collection by taking into consideration the requirements of the artefacts which, by museum standards, would encompass conservation and the display environment. It is very important, nevertheless, that museums address the needs of the audiences by providing stories that these collections can tell. McLean sums up this concern aptly: 'Instead of only placing our objects on pedestals, it's time we placed our visitors on pedestals as well.'²² Our

²⁰ Hooper-Greenhill (1994: 145) has shown that visitors tend to remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see (including pictures, film, diorama), 70% of what they say (including participating in a discussion or giving a talk), and 90% of what they say and do (including handling and talking about objects or using interactive exhibits).

²¹ Studies have shown that when interactive material formed part of a display, the average time spent by visitors at an exhibit increased from 13.8 to 23.8 seconds; Melton 1936 cited in Hein 1998: 143.

²² McLean 1993:5, cited in Black 2005:7.

concerns respond to the common needs of museum visitors drawn up in 2001 by the USA visitor Services Association which compiled a list, termed the ‘Visitors’ Bill of Rights’ which assembles what museums should aim at gratifying.²³

12.2.2. The Bronze Age display at the National Museum of Archaeology

The aim of the permanent display is to give enough information to the visitors so that they get an overview of the Bronze Age in Malta and to make sure that the museum acts as a gateway to those local Bronze Age sites which are accessible to the public. Related to this is the wish to give visitors a most positive experience according to the expectations discussed above. The main challenges encountered relate mainly to limitations of space imposed by the historic building. No structural changes are permissible and the display has to be accommodated within the layout of existing rooms. The choice and the amount of artefacts reflect these limitations.

The Bronze Age period in Malta, which starts about 2400 BC and ends with the permanent settlement of the Phoenicians in Malta about 700 BC, does not provide as many bronze artefacts as one would expect, when considering the label used to designate the period. The principal metal artefacts are the daggers and axes found in the cemetery levels of the Tarxien temple complex and another dagger found at Ghar Mirdum, a cave site located in the limits of Dingli. However, it is not only the metal artefacts that are important for this period, but other materials, including the perishable ones such as textiles, food and wood. Material evidence – and the lack of it – help us gain an insight into the way people lived during this period.

²³ Rand 2001: 13-14 cited in Black 2005: 32. These include: comfort (‘Meet my basic needs’), orientation (‘Make it easy for me to find my way around’), welcome/belonging (‘Make me feel welcome’), enjoyment (‘I want fun’), socialising (‘I came to spend time with family and friends’), Respect (‘Accept me for who I am and what I know’), communication (‘Help me understand and let me talk too’), learning (‘I want to learn something new’), choice and control (‘Let me choose; give me some control’), challenge and confidence (‘Give me a challenge I know I can handle’), revitalisation (‘Help me leave refreshed, restored’).

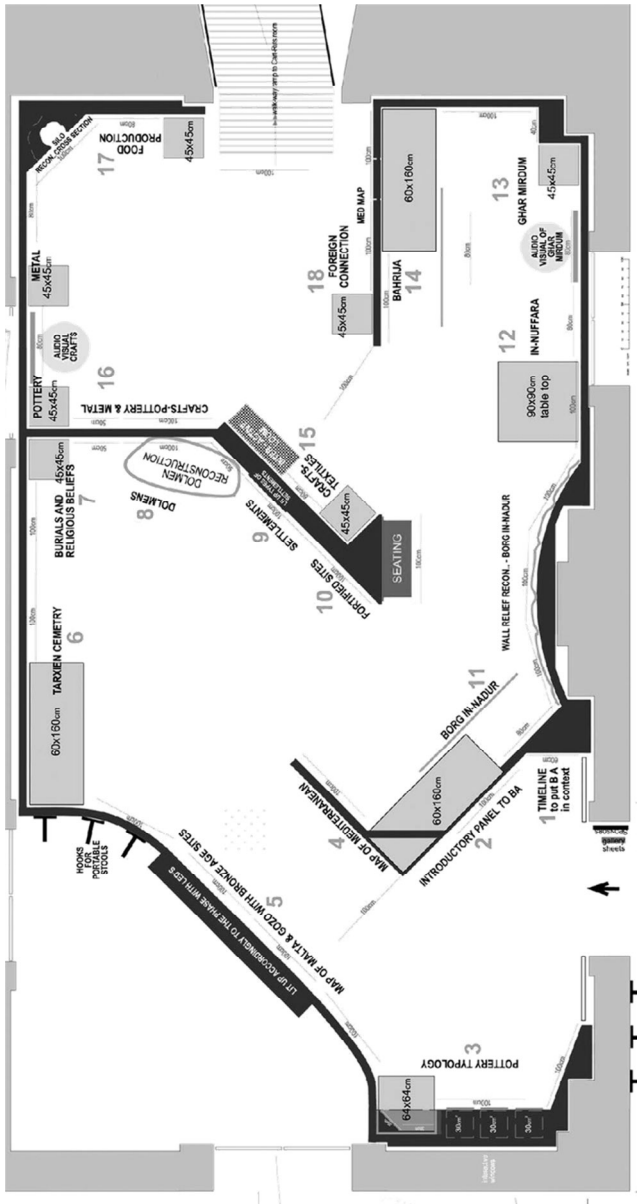


Figure 12.6. Proposed layout of the Bronze Age room display, drawn by the Exhibitions and Design Unit, Heritage Malta.

The layout of the display (Fig. 12.6) is designed in such a way that it provides a continuous visitor flow. When it came to deciding whether to have a diachronic (that is, chronological) or a synchronic (that is, thematic) layout, we decided to combine both. In discussing how one should create exhibitions for learning purposes, Blais points out that ‘both approaches provide a suitable context for learning but it is important to keep a balance between the two within an exhibition and across a whole museum’²⁴. Chronology is very important in archaeology since it provides a sequence of periods, at times also of sub-periods, within a timeline. On the other hand, a thematic display facilitates visitor comprehension through themes with which they are familiar.

As can be seen from the display layout (Fig. 12.6), the first image to greet the visitors will be a timeline to put the Bronze Age into a temporal context. Such a timeline will recur in each subsequent room so that the visitor can, at a glance, know the dates of each phase in absolute terms and relate this to the periods which came before and which follow. So, although the timeline will be the same in all the rooms, the period specific to each room will be highlighted.

The next panel will briefly introduce the Bronze Age by explaining basic differences between this period and the previous Temple period (Neolithic) displayed on the ground floor. Moving on, one will be able to see the first showcase which will show the visitor the difference in pottery types. We felt that it was essential to make visitors aware of how archaeologists use pottery recovered from a succession of layers to arrive at a relative chronology of a particular site. In this case we will be replicating the “layers” in the showcase, by displaying a succession of pots from each phase (Tarxien Cemetery phase, Borġ in-Nadur phase, Baħrija phase) placed one on top of the other, including one from the previous Temple period (at the bottom) and one from the subsequent Phoenician period (at the top). Next to this showcase, three flaps will be integrated in an interpretation panel. Opening each flap will reveal a pot representative of each phase. On the underside, each flap will carry more detailed information about the characteristic

²⁴ Blais 2004: 31.

shapes, decoration and fabric that differentiates one pottery style from the other. The use of such flaps provides a simple but immediate means of interactivity, enticing visitors, including children, to spot the differences between each pot.

Two large maps placed opposite each other will flank the visitor route. One will show a map of the Mediterranean, putting the Maltese archipelago in spatial context and the other will show a map of Malta and Gozo with all the Bronze Age sites marked according to the one of the three phases they represent, illuminated at the push of a button. This not only allows interactivity to take place but introduces visitors to a variety of site names which recur throughout the exhibition as well as allow them to comprehend the preferred choice for settlement at this time.

The next space will deal with Tarxien Cemetery as a site and with the theme of Burials and Beliefs. When the Tarxien temple complex was excavated between 1915 and 1917, a layer of ash and burnt human bones was uncovered in the first season of digging. This layer contained numerous artefacts – including personal ornaments, anthropomorphic figurines, highly decorated pottery, and above all the metal daggers and axes – which were very different from the ones recovered from the layer below belonging to the Temple period. At the time, the excavator and curator of the museum, Themistocles Zammit, immediately recognised the area as a cremation cemetery dating to the Bronze Age. This ash layer also provided us with the choice of colour scheme to adopt for the Bronze Age room: a warm light grey.

Synonymous with the Maltese Bronze Age are the dolmens. These structures are usually associated with funerary rituals even though scanty archaeological finds have been unearthed from beneath them. We have decided to reconstruct a dolmen in order to show visitors the type of structure up close since many locals have a misconception of the word “dolmen” and confuse it with what archaeologists term a “trilithon”. The diorama should help to put this right. After giving an overview of funerary rituals and associated structures, another panel will explain the different settlement types known for this period. The panel devoted to Fortified Sites explains briefly these types of sites and introduces visitors to one of the main Bronze Age sites discovered in Malta,

namely Borg in-Nadur. The site itself still retains an impressive example of a fortified wall, a part of which shall be reconstructed within the display area. Next to this reconstruction there will be a showcase which will hold an array of artefacts recovered from this site. Archaeologists have shown that the wall defended a village of oval huts which would have accommodated a community running into a few hundreds. A number of querns and rubbing stones discovered on the hut floors suggest that agricultural activity took place here²⁵. The large number of rock-cut pits which are found along the shore below the site were probably used as storage spaces for the produce, if not vats for retting textiles.

In the next space, one will be able to see artefacts from three other sites, namely Nuffara (Gozo), Ghar Mirdum and Bahrija. The Ghar Mirdum showcase will be accompanied by an audiovisual showing original film footage of the exploration of the cave site taken by the explorers in 1965²⁶. Moving on to the last section of the display, the visitors can learn about craft technology of the Bronze Age. Textile and pottery production and metal making shall be explained through the use of an audiovisual, which will depict crafting using ancient techniques. Apart from the interpretation panels and the artefacts chosen to illustrate these crafts in more detail, we shall have a reconstruction of a vertical weaving loom, with loom weights of the type found on several sites, which the visiting public can use to weave²⁷.

The last section of the exhibition will be presenting food production and foreign connections. Evidence of food-related artefacts, such as querns, animal bones, carbonised beans and pottery vessels, will be displayed along with a reconstruction of the type of rock-cut bell-shaped silo pit which has been discovered in numerous Bronze Age sites in Malta and Gozo. As can be seen

²⁵ An example of such querns shall be displayed with the section which gives information about evidence of food-related artefacts in the Bronze Age.

²⁶ The footage was filmed by Malta Television as part of a programme called *Din il-Gimgha*. A copy of the footage was made available to Heritage Malta by the Public Broadcasting Services.

²⁷ Wild 1998: 33. Since we do not have direct evidence from Maltese sites of what a Bronze Age weaving loom would have looked like, we decided to go for a very basic one. The interpretation accompanying it will alert visitors to the fact that the prehistoric looms of Malta may have been different.

from the choice of themes, we have made a conscious attempt to discuss topics that visitors will be familiar with, such as how and where people lived and the crafts used in order to produce daily necessities. Before exiting the room we shall present, through archaeological remains which include imported material consisting mostly of pottery, the contacts that the Bronze Age settlers in Malta kept with different regions, especially with regions in south-east Sicily.

12.3. Conclusion

As soon as the Bronze Age room opens to the public a new task will kick in: that of evaluating the display according to the feedback we shall receive by visitors and from the generation of new knowledge based on discoveries or re-interpretation of data (like that contained in various papers in this book). The museum already has a visitors' book which we evaluate once a month to see what things are liked and disliked, and what is thought to require improvement. This feedback will allow us to gauge how the display has been received by the visiting public. Moreover, we intend to take on board any valid suggestions which may be applicable for the rest of the Permanent Exhibition Project, work on which continues as I write.

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