



# **The maritime heritage of Malta: past, present and future**

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## **Abstract**

The concept of this paper materialised from the need to introduce those attending the conference to the host country's history and heritage as seen from the perspective of the sea. This initial introduction was then adapted to act as a platform for a discussion on various aspects of the islands' maritime heritage. Through this paper the author intends to highlight some of these aspects that are either partly overlooked or simply ignored all together.

Concrete solutions to the various problems that exist can only be reached through an organised effort conducted by various local bodies. This paper may act as food for thought with regards to the most pressing question, being the identification of what needs to be done. Only once this is established can we truly focus on the how.

## **Introduction**

This paper can be considered as an overview of the island's past with an emphasis on the maritime activity that Malta has witnessed. This will be followed by a discussion on the present state as well as the future study and management of this important part of our heritage.

However, the island's past in maritime terms is no small matter. In fact, one of the marketing slogans used by the Malta Tourism Authority in its campaign to attract more visitors to our shores is '7000 years of history'. It would be rash for me to attempt an in depth survey of Malta's maritime heritage in the few pages I intend to present here.

When one considers the geographic position of the Maltese Islands it comes as no surprise that they have, throughout the ages, been a hub of maritime

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activity in the Mediterranean. The archipelago's strategic position at the centre of this sea has ensured a steady influx of seafaring people and nations, who throughout the ages have helped to shape the island's history and to a certain extent its identity. As such, it would be a mistake to attempt an understanding of the islands and their people without taking into consideration the role and influence of the sea.

## 2 Prehistory

In prehistoric times the first inhabitants of the islands must have crossed over from Sicily using rafts or simple vessels such as dug out canoes. Aspects of early man's relationship with the sea are depicted in the fish relief of Tarxien temple (c.3000–2500 BC) as well as the ship graffiti found at the same place of worship. These graffiti have been attributed to the Bronze Age and dated to circa 1600 BC (Casson 1995: fig.31) but this interpretation is currently being reassessed. Early indications of this new research appear to push the date back by at least another millennium. Another factor to take into account was the relationship between the temples and various bays and other sites of navigational importance. A current study places these sanctuaries within a broader maritime cultural landscape, which partly reflects the role of the sea in the choosing of sites for the erection of prehistoric temples (Grima 2002).

In the Bronze Age, vessels visited the island to procure the fine linen produced by the inhabitants, apparently an established and thriving industry on the island. Sites such as the 'silo pits' in Birzebbuga attest to intense commercial activity during this period, although exactly what type of commerce was carried out remains a matter of debate and has yet to be ascertained. (see Sagona 1999 and Gambin forthcoming). However, the presence of these remains within the largest harbour in the south of the island leads one to believe that trade must have played a crucial role in the economy within which the complex operated.

Visiting traders brought with them essential goods not available locally, such as metals, as well as market utility goods including pottery from the Aegean. Evidence suggests that trade also extended to precious metals and other luxury goods. Jewellery recovered from graves show that the islanders were not only able to afford such goods but were also very much in touch with the various techniques and trends being developed away from their shores (Cutajar 2002). The fact that the inhabitants imported not just the goods but also the techniques demonstrates that the islands were a centre of cultural and commercial cross-currents from quite early on in their history.

However, the first to use the Maltese islands as a major staging post for trade and shipping activity were the Phoenicians. Initially visiting as traders they eventually colonised the islands and made ample use of the numerous harbours available on Malta and Gozo. The islands provided an ideal stepping stone, be it as an essential stop over for the east-west trade conducted by the Phoenicians across the Mediterranean and beyond, or on the shorter but still important north-south route. The Phoenician phase of Malta's history must have seen the development of a population well attuned to maritime activity.

### 3 Phoenicians, Carthaginians and Romans

Towards the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC the Phoenician colony of Carthage came into prominence and took over as the main trading centre as well as naval power in the Mediterranean. Malta now came to play an important role on the north-south trade between North Africa and Mediterranean Europe areas, especially Sicily and Southern Italy. Archaeological finds from both an underwater context as well as from land finds attest to the existence of this trade.

Shipwrecks off the Gozitan coast were initially investigated in the 1960s and have brought to light the importance of this little island in Punic times. The island of Gozo must have been used as an essential stop-over between Carthage and various destinations in Italy as well as in the Eastern Mediterranean. Amphorae from these wrecks point to cargoes from North Africa probably originating from more than one vessel. During this period there existed a number of maritime sanctuaries demarcating places of navigational importance, such as headlands and havens. One such example is the Punic sanctuary at Ras il-Wardija built away from the main settlement of the island but high up on a cliff edge visible to seafarers approaching Gozo from present day Tunisia. This site must also be understood in its relationship to the now silted port of Xlendi. Together, the sanctuary and harbour provided an essential stop over in the central Mediterranean.

Numerous Punic tombs discovered on both Malta and Gozo have shed light on the lifestyle of the inhabitants as well as their settlement patterns (Said-Zammit 1997). Although the majority of tombs were found in the vicinity of what must have been a thriving urban centre situated in and around present day Mdina, numerous other tombs are spread throughout the rest of the island including rural and harbour areas. The latter areas include present day Marsa and Salina Bay. This points towards a population focused on both agriculture and trade. One may even be tempted to say agriculture geared towards trade, a notion which is gaining in popularity (De Angelis 2002: 299 and Holden and Purcell 2000: 349). I state this because the material remains from this period indicate a well-to-do society that could afford to bury its dead in a relative luxury.

The Punic Wars saw the islands fall into the hands of the emerging Mediterranean superpower of the time, the Romans. During the Roman period Malta and Gozo enjoyed a prosperous spell derived mainly from the local textile industry and sea borne trade. Ancient writers such as Diodorus Siculus attribute the islands' thriving economy to their geography, topography and the enterprising spirit of the inhabitants. A wealth of archaeological sites from this period bears out Siculus' observations. These range from the Roman Domus in Rabat to the country house at *San Pawl Milqi* (Locatelli 2002). Other remains, especially those around one of the main ancient harbours today known as the Marsa, have been lost to expansion of harbour works and other industrial projects over the last two centuries. Written records of these extensive remains are currently being reviewed by the present author as part of a broader research programme.

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The sea around the island has produced some important archaeological remains, which have helped shed more light on the islands' maritime past. Both shipwrecks and loose finds confirm the volume of substantial maritime traffic. A Roman shipwreck dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD and partly excavated in 1967 (Frost 1969) yielded a varied cargo, including mortaria from Syria, amphorae from Greece and glass frit from Aquilea (Parker 1992: 274). Perhaps this vessel was calling at Malta to sell some of the goods, as well as to purchase some local cloth, oil or honey. Although this may be an over simplification of the interpretation of a shipwreck, the cargo is an apposite example of a type of trade that came to be known as cabotage. The role of Malta, with its convenient location and excellent harbours, must be seen within the wider framework of the complex connectivity that existed within the Mediterranean.

### 4 **Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages**

Subsequent periods of the islands' history which have been somewhat overlooked include the Byzantine, which saw the island used as a stop-over for both the empire's navy as well as her trade. Contemporary accounts describe how Belisarius called on the island with his fleet. Recent underwater investigations as well as the reinterpretation of past finds are beginning to shed light on this intriguing phase of the island's past. It would seem that the harbours were in continual use throughout a period which has until recently been considered as sterile and inward-looking. It is hoped that continued investigation of these harbour sites will continue to expand our knowledge of the somewhat neglected Byzantine legacy of these islands.

The Byzantines were ousted by the Arabs, who in turn established themselves on the island. That vessels continued to make frequent use of the harbours is evidenced by the island's numerous Semitic place names with maritime connotations such as *Marsa*, meaning harbour, and *Mgarr*, meaning a loading place. However, nomenclature alone is insufficient without the archaeological evidence; and archaeology has in fact started to unearth new information that is aiding in the development of new perspectives and attitudes for this period (Cutajar 2001). Both underwater and terrestrial finds point to a maintained maritime traffic and connectivity linked to markets in North Africa as well as southern Italy and Sicily.

After a transitional period starting in the last decade of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and culminating with the expulsion of the last indigenous Muslims in the early 1200s, the islands fell within in the political, cultural and economical influence of Europe and Latin Christendom. Contrary to what has been written in the recent past (Luttrell 1975), throughout the rest of the Middle Ages the archipelago found itself on important trade and pilgrimage routes. Documentary evidence points to vessels calling at the harbour on their way from the eastern Mediterranean to Italy (Wettinger 1993: 35). Again, archaeology is providing new information on how people lived, including objects imported from overseas, suggesting a degree of exchange based on the maritime activity witnessed in various harbours around the islands (Cutajar: 2001). Ships visited the islands to

pick up the locally-grown cotton (Wettinger 1982: 3), slaves (Lopez and Raymond 1990: 116) as well as to drop off grain and other supplies.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century the island was given to a series of 'Counts of Malta' as a fiefdom to the admiral of the Sicilian fleet. This led to Malta being used a centre for various maritime activities, including trade and piracy. One of these counts was Henry Pescatore, who used the island as a base for his ventures into the world of Mediterranean politics... which, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, meant little more than trying to carve out a kingdom and hence a source of income. In Henry's case he attempted to wrest the island of Crete from the Venetians. What is of significance to this discussion is that Malta was able to provide, at least in part, logistical support and manpower to large sea-borne offensives (Abulafia 1975: 112)

The continued strategic importance of the Maltese islands in the Middle Ages is attested to by the fact that one of the most important naval battles of this period was fought here. In 1283 the Angevin and Aragonese fleets met at the mouth of main harbour of Malta (Mott 2000). Contemporary accounts speak of numerous vessels sunk or lost (Wettinger 1993: 37) thus providing an interesting lead for local archaeologists to explore the area for what would surely be a worthwhile find.

## **5 The knights**

The arrival of the knights in 1530 gave increased impetus to the maritime character of Malta and Gozo. This because many of the local inhabitants found employment with the Order's navy as well as other auxiliary services related to shipbuilding and victualling (Muscat 2001). Enterprising individuals took to trade and corsairing, fitting out locally built vessels and sailing to all corners of the Mediterranean and beyond. It would not be an exaggeration to state that corsairing as an activity affected the bulk of the islands' inhabitants. All those who were able to invest in this enterprise by purchasing bonds and shares in the exploits of a particular vessel. Most of these were bought in kind by the likes of bakers and carpenters (Earle 1974: Chapter Six). In the absence of any social taboo linked to corsairing activities, well-to-do locals invested cash into the voyages of the corsairs. One can truly say that this particular maritime activity had such far-reaching social and economic effects that it can be indeed be considered as inseparable from contemporary society.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Maltese traders were well known as far a field as the coasts of Spain where they established trading centres (Vassallo 1997). The island itself became something of an entrepot, with vessels calling here to unload Crimean grain or simply to use the islands' quarantine services. Warehouses were specially constructed by Grandmasters such as Pinto to improve facilities for traders and ship owners.

The knights' period was marked by the extensive expansion of the harbour areas including the fortifications to defend the urban centres which grew around the numerous creeks. The island also witnessed exponential demographic growth as well as migration from the rural to these same urban areas. People moved not



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only for the security provided by the walls but especially for the opportunities afforded by the towns' proximity to the sea. So renowned were the seamen of these islands that the Royal Navy called on their shores in the latter years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century specifically to recruit hundreds of local men.

## 6 **The British**

When the islands were taken over by the British, the latter found a population attuned to a life bound to the sea, as well as an infrastructure that complemented the requirements for their powerful navy. Not only were seamen already employed with the Royal Navy, but rope makers, carpenters and sail makers made their skills available to the naval establishment on the island. The British developed and expanded the maritime services and structures that had been started by the Order of St John and also established new ones, such as the Dock Yard and the breakwater at the mouth of the harbour. Such massive projects continued to attract people to the harbour areas, and in the case of the breakwater, some crossed over from Sicily specifically to work on its construction.

However it was not just the British that took advantage of the island's strategic position. Locals invested in ships and trade and were also quick to exploit opportunities when these presented themselves. One such opportunity was provided by the opening of the Suez Canal which helped transform the island into an essential coaling station. Local firms were set up to transport coal on lighters from various depots onto waiting vessels. Some of these firms still exist today, and continue to offer a variety of maritime services.

## 7 **Discussion**

In penning this brief account I have been careful to ensure that the main protagonist, along with the sea, has always been Man. We must be wary not to allow the grandeur of history to sweep man aside. Throughout the various phases of the islands' history the inhabitants have accumulated a wealth of knowledge that include boat building, making of fish traps, salt harvesting and a series of other activities related to the sea. Here one must not overlook the language spoken by a people whose lives have always been intricately linked to the sea. Over the centuries they have developed their own place names, folklore and prayers: these are as much a part of our maritime heritage as the highly visible material remains such as the naval dry docks and the Order's buildings on the Birgu waterfront.

I shall now move on to the second part of my paper, which deals with present attitudes, as well as the future potential of our maritime heritage.

On this island, we are blessed – or, if one would prefer to be cynical, cursed – with a vast cultural heritage, a substantial part of which has a maritime link of one kind or another. Difficulties arise when one considers the management of this segment of cultural heritage, for the benefit not only of the locals, but also of the numerous visitors who grace our shores each year.

Since gaining independence in 1964, Malta has continued to be active in the maritime sphere. The Freeport, yachting and cruise liners are amongst the activities to have grown substantially in the past few decades. With the proposed development of additional marinas, a new cruise liner terminal and the expansion of the Freeport, the future of maritime Malta looks set to expand. It will not be an exaggeration to claim that a substantial part of this recent success has been built on a past accustomed to the maritime world. One of the most consistently asked questions in this regard has been; how can sites such as historic harbours be revitalised without running the risk of losing any of the existing heritage? The answer, like the problem itself, is not always simple so let us take up the notion of whether a historic harbour can ever be commercially viable.

## 8 Historic harbours

It would be helpful to first pose a few questions that will help determine the nature and dynamics of historic harbours.

What makes a harbour historic?

- Continued use over long periods of time.
- Participation in historic eras/ phases such as the industrial revolution or more specific aspects such as the slave trade.
- The witnessing of an historic event such as an invasion, major battle or the occupation and use by an important maritime power.

Why have some historic harbours lost out and declined? Some of the reasons contributing to the decline of harbours are:

- Environmental: Silting, rivers becoming un-navigable.
- Technological: New ships may be too large to use the harbour.
- Political: Decline in importance of the power using harbour.
- Economic: Decline in demand for goods shipped or services provided from the harbour.

How can historic harbours become economically viable once again? One can consider three alternatives:

- Modernisation:

This involves capital investment to bring the harbour up to date and in a position to be competitive. The difficulties with this option vary from the huge injection of capital needed for modernisation to the potential lack of suitability for modern needs. Also, the use for a specific harbour may simply no longer be in demand.

- Maintenance and conservation:

This option would keep the character of the place but change its economic role. Such a project would appeal to a certain type of investor, as they would be handed an area already rich in character and history. Difficulties: Finance is again a stumbling block. The investors must take into consideration the expense of conservation and working in an historic environment. Another difficulty could be the refusal of the locals to accept change.



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- Redevelopment: The creation of a new town in place of the old. Again the investment would be large but the major stumbling block is that the historic buildings and facilities of the old harbour would be lost.

## 9 Case study: Grand Harbour of Malta

As already established in the first section of this paper, the Grand Harbour has nearly always featured in the maritime history of the islands. It has been in continual use since at least Punic times and has also witnessed many historic episodes such as the naval battle of 1283 and the great siege of 1565. It would not be an exaggeration to define the Grand Harbour as a historic harbour *par excellence*.

### 9.1 Reasons for the decline of the Grand Harbour

- Political: The withdrawal of British forces resulted in the departure of the main economic force in the area.
- Technological: The growth in use of bulk carriers has rendered many wharfs within the harbour inadequate for the needs of modern vessels. This has led to a modern day site migration to a new port in the south of the island.
- Social and economic: Mainly due to the above-mentioned reasons, many persons were forced to seek employment away from the maritime tradition. The destruction caused during the Second World War also acted as a push factor. As a result of this the standard of living dropped and the area became run down and to some extent depressed.

### 9.2 Positive features

Many historic buildings are still intact and the area has a huge concentration of material heritage linked mainly to sea. It is also picturesque and has a lot of potential as a tourist and cultural destination.

Several aspects of maritime culture continue to exist around the creeks of the Grand Harbour. These include traditional boat builders, water taxis as well as a host of tradesmen honed in the provision of maritime services.

### 9.3 Proposals

There are two main government-backed but privately financed projects aimed at regenerating the area. The project includes the construction of new apartments, a hotel, casino, shops, restaurants and a yacht marina. Some of the above are in place; others are in an advanced state of construction whereas some aspects of the project have yet to begin.



#### **9.4 Threat or opportunity?**

In my opinion there are both the positive and negative sides to this project. The negative aspects include the wrong use of historical buildings and the construction of certain structures in a modern style. Positive aspects include the use of the harbour in a maritime context and the potential regeneration of a depressed area. Locally, these projects have been subject to much controversy and it is not my intention use this platform to enter the fray. I will therefore proceed to the opportunities provided by the project insofar as the research of the maritime heritage of the area, as well as Malta in general, is concerned.

A few years ago these projects were rightly seen as one of the major threats to the submerged cultural heritage of the Maltese islands: “the most single threat to the underwater archaeological resource in Malta is that posed by development work. This includes coastal redevelopment to create leisure facilities, dredging of harbours and water-ways, the installation of marina pontoons, the building of breakwaters and the dumping of building material. In Malta, this problem is most critical in creeks and harbours” (Grima and Depasquale 2001: 359–360). Here it must be noted that most of the projects carried out prior to the early nineties were done at a time when the authorities were not very sensitive to the preservation of the island’s cultural heritage.

The proposed projects discussed above have on the other hand come at a time when the island and its economy are ripe for such investments; however, it is unacceptable that these be carried out at any cost. Being such a high profile project in a historically and socially sensitive area the developers were asked to conduct and submit an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). Dialogue between all concerned parties brought about an awareness regarding the necessity to include archaeology as one of the salient aspects within the EIA.

An independent archaeological team undertook the surveys under strict terms of reference (TOR) issued by the Planning Authority, after consultation with the National Museum of Archaeology (NMA). Throughout the archaeological project constant dialogue was maintained between archaeologists and the NMA to ensure that all potential impacts were studied and assessed. Areas of research included a geophysical survey of the whole of Dockyard Creek, as well as specific sites chosen for test excavations. These trenches were chosen keeping in mind where moorings and other structures would be placed on or within the seabed.

It is not my intention to discuss in detail the results of this project but rather to highlight some of the positive features to emerge from this collaboration. For one thing, it was the first large scale Archaeological Impact Assessment (AIA) directly related to submerged cultural heritage. It is hoped that similar projects planned for the future will be able to use this AIA as a starting point with regards to standards required and working parameters. The institutions involved in the setting of these parameters can look at the results achieved and build on them. Of course, no two sites are the same and when considering future plans and changes one must always keep site-specific exigencies in mind.

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Due to the nature of underwater work, archaeological projects in this field are known to be expensive and for this reason have often been overlooked altogether. Malta, with its numerous terrestrial sites in need of conservation and management, has been no exception. Now that AIAs are being carried out one must acknowledge the significant contribution these are making with regards to the archaeological record. It can be argued, with some justification, that archaeological objects are best left *in situ* (Valletta Convention: Art. 4). However, considering the existing need for certain types of investments, such projects provide the opportunity for the gathering of information that may otherwise prove unaffordable and thus out of the reach of present and future researchers.

It is very important to point out that under no circumstances should this situation ever be used to the advantage of the developer. The latter can never be permitted to fund unrelated research and simultaneously ignore what is required of them by law. It therefore stands to reason that proactive and constructive dialogue is to be held between the necessary institutions to prevent what may be seen as attempts to interfere with the proper scientific studies required. In order to do this it would be preferable if professional archaeologists formed a representative body to guard the interests of a field that has often been overlooked and over-ridden. Such a body would also be in a position to participate in discussions regarding standards of work required and other ethical matters that could eventually be implemented as standard.

## 10 Other threats, other opportunities

What other lessons can be drawn from these ‘forced’ partnerships? The underwater archaeological resource is but one of many facets of the islands’ maritime heritage and in no way should others be overlooked. Efforts should be made to set up bodies that draw on a variety of resources to ensure that aspects of our heritage that are currently under threat are not only studied and recorded, but also revived.

One such aspect is that of traditional boat building. For years both locals and visitors have taken the coloured fishing boats that grace our seas for granted. The importance of these boats can be gauged by the amount of marketing campaigns that have included their image and by the non-quantifiable number of holiday snaps taken back by visiting tourists. Just as the gondola is a major symbol for Venice and the Venetians the local *dghajsa* and *luzzu* can also be considered as such for Malta and the Maltese. It is therefore imperative to inject new life into an otherwise floundering tradition. To make matters worse the last of the boat builders now have to compete with boats made in the ‘traditional’ shape using fibreglass. For reasons of practicality, many opt to replace their old craft with these new unconventional ones. I believe that incentives such as lower licence and registration fees should be given to those who opt to maintain the traditional wooden vessels.

The Maritime Museum of Malta has carried out an excellent job in collecting various examples of the islands’ traditional craft. These are housed in the reserve



collection and are in dire need of restoration. From here I plead to all those concerned to work towards the restoration of these boats. Such a project should be able to count upon help from various institutes including the University of Malta, which, through the Mediterranean Institute, is very active in the field of maritime heritage. I am confident that students and volunteers will welcome the opportunity to work alongside traditional boat builders. Courses could also be offered to a number of persons willing to pursue this craft further. Ultimately, some of the vessels may be made seaworthy thus offering the visitors to the museum a sailing experience of a kind that has long died out. Such opportunities exist elsewhere, one of the finest examples being the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde.

Another aspect alluded to earlier, and which is also slowly being eroded, is the oral tradition of the local fishermen and seafarers. These persons have a wealth of knowledge that has been passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation, and includes place names specific to the coasts, prayers and charms, legends, underwater topography, as well as an in-depth knowledge of localised currents and wave patterns. I must point out that the hardship of a life at sea, together with increased opportunities on a modernised island, has seduced the younger generations, which would otherwise take over from their parents and grandparents. It is this ageing generation that must be interviewed and recorded to ensure that their knowledge is at the very least kept in a repository for future reference.

On a more positive note it is a pleasure to highlight the fact that certain rowing techniques that are particular to these islands are being preserved mainly through the continued popularity of the regatta, the bi-annual rowing races held in the Grand Harbour. These are well contested and of late some youngsters have been returning to the sport thus ensuring that certain skills will be passed down to the next generation. The same cannot be said for other skills such as sailing and sail making, which have registered a rapid decline in the post-war years. One of the last of the sail makers is still living and there are plans to record his skills as well as attempt to make a set of sails for a traditional vessel. This exercise will hopefully pave the way to the relearning of the art of sailing a local lateen rigged boat such as the *firilla*.

## Conclusion

To conclude I would like to dwell on the role of education for the future appreciation and management of the islands' maritime heritage. From a young age children must be taught about the role of the sea in our history and in shaping who we are today. But it is also essential to expose children to the various aspects of our maritime culture, such as our traditional boats, that are so often taken for granted. Projects in collaboration with institutions such as local councils could serve as focal points to encourage research by young students, as well as to provide a platform for the sharing of information with the general public.



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For some time archaeologists have faced a depletion of evidence through the destruction of or theft from archaeological sites, and the field of underwater archaeology is no exception. The increase in popularity of scuba diving over the past few decades has led to the looting of numerous sites. This situation has resulted in a certain animosity between the local diving community and archaeologists. Today, we face the task of extending our hand to try and encourage persons to come forward and share their knowledge of sites and objects held in private collections. Persons who knew no better in the late 60s and 70s are now coming forward with objects and information that will go a long way towards piecing together the situation of the underwater archaeological resource in our coastal waters. It is also imperative to educate both local and visiting divers to report finds to the appropriate authorities so that these may be studied scientifically.

The work that lies ahead is long and hard but also full of opportunities. We must aim to continue building on our vast heritage in the fields of education, tourism and culture. However, this must be done with caution and sensitivity in order to avoid the repetition of past mistakes, and to ensure that we preserve this fascinating aspect of our heritage for future generations.

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