

An Orante that praises no more: a case for endangered archaeological sites

Anton Bugeja¹

1. Grupp Arkeologiku Malti, PO Box 31, Hamrun HMR 01, Malta

INTRODUCTION

For more than twelve centuries a group of catacombs at Zabbar¹ remained virtually unknown. It was only in the early eighties that they were rediscovered and documented for the first time. Only one of the tombs was investigated, revealing an interesting graffito of a stylised human figure which was interpreted as a representation of an orante. As the other four tombs in the area were 'full of stones', further examination could not be undertaken. The nearby housing estate, already present at the time of discovery, continued to expand in the ensuing years, covering the area containing the hypogea. No action was taken to preserve the sites and it is likely that during the construction work a number of tombs were destroyed.

Today, just twenty years after their discovery, there is no trace of the Xaghra ta' Santa Duminka Hypogea.

Keywords: conservation, minor sites

Any future progress in understanding Malta's archaeological heritage depends on a revaluation of the remains pertaining to the cultures of the past. Preservation of the sites is of utmost importance, ensuring accessibility to further studies and examination by newer techniques or under different investigative objectives.

To accomplish this entails the knowledge of the site location and identity of the various remains, appropriate conservation of the artefacts found and architectural features present. Immediate and effective protection is also essential to protect the local heritage from the ever increasing pressures of insensitive development.

Site conservation is a priority today and much has been done in the past years to conserve the larger sites of the Maltese archipelago. The collapse at Hagar Qim and Mnajdra have been attended to and the stability of the facade at the Ggantija temples temporarily secured by the erection of a scaffolding. Despite considerable financial loss, a sensible decision to close the Hal Saflieni Hypogea for restoration purposes has been acted upon. There are also plans to provide a protective covering to the megalithic temples and catacombs near the Xarolla

windmill. Although much remains to be done, things appear to be moving in the right direction.

It is however the much larger number of sites scattered in our countryside that are in a greater danger of being destroyed. Their number is overwhelming, making Malta only second to Rome as the area with the highest density of archaeological sites. These remains include the larger number of the thirty-six temple remains, sixteen dolmens, at least six bronze age settlement sites, eight classical buildings and over six hundred phoenician tombs. Enriched by such a patrimony the authorities appear bewildered by the conservation needs of these sites.



Figure 1: Location of the five tombs at ix-Xaghra ta' Santa Duminka, Kalkara (Buhagiar 1986: 253)

Preservation of archaeological sites, no matter how insignificant and incomprehensible they appear at present, is of considerable importance. Future excavation of such sites might throw new light or even challenge present concepts of our reconstruction of the archipelago's past. Short of excavation, the mapping of these remains provides an understanding of community distribution on the local landscape (Renfrew 1973; Said-Zammit 1997).

Problems

The above considerations are certainly shared by a wide section of the more cultured section of the public but action is not always consistent with these opinions.

It is a fact that a number of monuments have been illegally destroyed over the years, the only evidence for which being the various rumours that occasionally reach the academic world (Table 1). As examples one can refer to the tombs known to have existed near the Zejtun school and a number of others that have been destroyed at Naxxar and Mgarr (Catania 1999; Deguara 1999).



Figure 2: Xaghra ta' Santa Duminka tomb location projected on modern map² (Survey Sheet - 5871)

This unfortunate situation has not been restricted to the illicit concealment of archaeological remains. The policy adopted in the past to continue construction works on minor sites following their excavation has certainly inflicted irreversible damage on the local heritage. In the eighties the museum authorities had allowed a local archaeological group to excavate a number of Phoenician tombs at Santa Margherita in the limits of Mosta. Following the excavation most of the tombs were destroyed when the area was built up as part of a social housing project (*personal communication* Joseph L. Cilia). The construction of a terraced house claimed the remains of a roman building at Iklin, which was only explored during a 'hasty excavation' (Bonanno 1983). Similarly two of the three remaining megalithic temples at Kordin were destroyed during factory building. The list of archaeological sites

succumbing in some way or another to building projects is unfortunately far from exhaustive.

For the surviving archaeological remains site relocation remains a difficult problem. The purpose of excavations in the earlier part of the twentieth century was concerned with the documentation of the pottery and architectural features of the archaeological remains, often omitting details on their site location. Site plans accompanying the Museum Annual Reports are exceptions resulting in a situation where the relocation of sites remains a difficult and often unsuccessful task.

Neolithic	Bronze Age
Mixta Caves	Xlendi Dolmen
	Racecourse Street Tomb
Temple	Marsascala Menhir
Xrobb l-Ghagin (part of)	Il-Hofra Menhir (?)
Buqana Tomb	Safi Dolmen
Hal Far Megaliths	Cave at l-Istabal, Marsa
Ta' Vnezja Tomb	Il-Brolli (?)
Busbesija Tomb	Hal-Farrug Niche
Id-Debdieba	
It-Tumbata	Classical
Ic-Cnus ta' San Gwann	Zejtun Roman Cisterns
Tat-Tomna	Ghar Barca Hypogeum
Ghajn Zejtuna	Xaghra ta' Santa Duminka
Kordin Temples I,II,IV,V	Birmigga Tombs
Marfa Stone Circle	Ta' Kandja Hypogeum

Table 1: Sites that have been lost, damaged or destroyed in the twentieth century

In a number of reports and publications where site plans are included, other problems are encountered in the final relocation of the sites themselves. The survey carried out by Evans in the early seventies remains the hallmark for the study of the prehistoric remains on the island (Evans 1971). This study however, has its difficulties when it comes to site relocation. The co-ordinates given for each site refer to an area of hundred square metres, often too general to find the particular remains. The map used in this survey is also rather difficult to obtain, let alone use to find the sites. Occasionally as in the case of Ghar Mir dum the co-ordinates given are erroneous. Despite thirty fruitful years of research and a number of new discoveries following the publication of this survey, no further general reassessment of the prehistoric antiquities has been undertaken.

The situation with the Phoenician heritage on the islands is not much better. Over the past centuries

over six hundred and fifty phoenician tombs were documented, most of them already rifled at the time of discovery (Said-Zammit 1997). Although this number of tombs is certainly a conservative number of the original, scores of these tombs have since been lost. The building industry has certainly claimed the majority, others being lost due to insufficient information on their whereabouts. Relocating the Phoenician burial sites remains problematic despite two recent doctoral publications on the period; the catalogue of the tombs and their contents is only available in spanish and the map indicating their location is hardly legible (Vidal Conzález 1996).

A similar problem faces the local Roman heritage. Construction of the runway at Luqa has claimed a number of hypogea (Trump 1990), while others were not available to a survey carried out in the mid-eighties (Buhagiar 1986).

It is only recently that the medieval heritage of our islands started to receive its merited attention, leaving sites belonging to this period particularly vulnerable. Ghar il-Kbir was for many years threatened by works in a nearby quarry but fortunately enough was saved in appropriate time. A less favourable situation appears to concern the Mixta caves in Ghajn Abdul and Ghar San Pietru. Quarrying and changes in the terracing have altered the landscape around the former site while quarrying has claimed the source of the spring's water to the latter cave (Buhagiar 1997). The possible cave church at Ghar Hanzir (Plate 1) may soon become inaccessible by rubble that is accumulating at the entrance (Haslam & Borg 1998: 172).

Back filling an archaeological site, whether for conservation purposes or otherwise, is useless, if the knowledge of its whereabouts is subsequently lost or forgotten.

The case of the Xarolla Catacombs lends itself as a typical example. The discovery in the mid-nineties of the Roman hypogea was an important find, but was not the first at this location. It is improbable that the hypogea were not noted during the construction of the windmill and later during quarrying activity in the area. They were mentioned by Caruana (1898) in the late nineteenth century and rediscovered again in 1928 when a note on them was included in the Museum Annual Reports. This however did not save them from destruction during shelter excavation in World War II and provision of services in later years. In this case it was not difficult to relocate the hypogea as they were known to exist under a well known landmark. It was rather the will to preserve or the framework for conservation that failed. Currently

being studied, the catacombs at Tax-Xarolla have to be considered as a rare example of site 'preservation', which unfortunately does not occur to many other remains.

Proposals

Awareness of the problems facing our heritage is diffuse but survival of the archaeological remains depends only on the implementation of possible solutions.

To avoid further destruction of vulnerable sites there is an urgent need to identify and catalogue all areas of archaeological importance. Such lists are already in existence but may not be comprehensive (Table 2) and new sites may still have to be added (Said-Zammit 1997: xi). In this respect it is very encouraging to hear that the Planning Authority intends to update its database of archaeological sites. Reports of new discoveries are now also being provided by the Maltese Archaeological Review, but these are unfortunately once more unaccompanied by details on site location and lacking in useful details that would be of value in any future studies referring to these remains.

On completion of cataloguing the different sites, a problem arises regarding the people who should have access to such information. It is a well known fact that in the past years looting of artefacts of value occurred following information on places of cultural interest given on the media. Sites of archaeological value were also targeted in acts of vandalism. The value of providing information for educational purposes and for creating greater awareness has always to be considered in the light of the eventual benefit to the sites themselves. The final solution to this problem rests on finding a balance between the possibility of site destruction (or loss secondary to insufficient knowledge on its whereabouts) and the damage possible through making such information available to the public.

The setting up of the Planning Authority has certainly gone a long way to protect sites of archaeological significance. The various remains are scheduled and classified according to their relative importance and development is refused, accepted or adapted according to the impact on the site.. This policy should certainly be continued in the future but improvements here are still possible. More effort should be made on site monitoring as it is not uncommon to encounter construction work without the necessary permits.

Areas with possible archaeological potential need also to be identified and any construction activity supervised. In this category one would include Mdina, the Citadel and Rabat (on both Malta and Gozo) because of their promising potential for classical archaeology. A buffer zone around the major sites does not only preserve a context to the site themselves but protects any uncovered remains that may still be present in the area. This policy should be extended at other sites such as Qallilija and Borg in-Nadur where recent agricultural and recreational activity respectively has encroached dangerously over these two sites.

A time has come to improve the compensation given for landowners of known or newly discovered archaeological sites. Incentives, including financial, may be necessary to encourage reporting of sites as it is well known that current legislative measures are often not enough to deter destruction of remains of archaeological importance. Education and sensitisation of the public together with promotion of reconciliation between organisations of contrasting interests will certainly assist in the reporting of newly discovered archaeological remains.

A need to change the current legislation regarding the involvement of local councils in the management of archaeological sites has long been overdue. The local councils can certainly monitor far more effectively the archaeological sites within their locality than possible by the limited staff at the museums department. Local councils may also provide the necessary manpower to open sites that are not usually open to the public. The opening of the Tal-Mentna catacombs to the public is a case in point. Certainly any decision by the local administration should be guided by the expertise of the Museums Department to ensure that no damage results during such activities.

Temple	Classical
Iklin Megalithic Remains	Xaghra ta' Ghar is-Sigra Tombs and others
Ta' Raddiena	Tas-Santi Roman Tower
Borg I-Gharib ³	
	Medieval
Bronze Age	Ghar San Brinkaw
Misrah Sinjura Dolmen	Ghar Hanzir
Ta' Ghammar Menhir	Ghar San Pietru
Hal Far Menhir	
Fuq Wied Filep Dolmens	Other
	Ta' Alla u Ommu Ruts

Table 2: Sites until recently not scheduled or marked as area of archaeological importance

An additional advantage that can be gained through the local councils is the channelling of financial resources to protect and preserve archaeological sites. Minor sites might serve to enhance the localities' identity and provide landmarks in any tours or walkways planned to promote the local heritage.

With most of the major sites probably already described, interest in recent years has focused on past social phenomena and landscape archaeology. Improvement in each of these two fields depends on the relocation of as yet undiscovered, much smaller sites including settlement areas. A comprehensive field survey to discover such sites might well provide the materials necessary to answer our questions of the near future.

Conclusion

Minor sites will certainly offer an opportunity to deepen our knowledge of the archipelago's heritage in the future. Although publications and hypothesis explaining our archaeological remains have been flourishing in the past years one only hopes that minor sites are preserved to a time when they are 'called' to reveal what has remained silent for so many years. Only in this way can we ensure to go beyond our culture-biased explanations and nearer to a real understanding of the Maltese Islands in antiquity.

Notes

1. Originally described in Kalkara, the area containing the tombs is now found within the limits of the Zabbar Local Council.
2. Some difficulty was encountered in trying to relocate the tombs on a modern map. The possibility of the tombs still existing in a field to the east of the housing project was investigated but no trace of the tombs was found.
3. Megaliths enclosing a field to the east of the scheduled site

References

- Bonanno, A. 1983. Two archaeological sites recently discovered at L-Iklin. *Hyphen [Malta]* II: 5
- Buhagiar, K. 1997. The San Pietru Cave-Settlement at San Pawl tat-Targa. *The Sunday Times*, 26 th July: 42 - 43

Buhagiar, M. 1986. *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs and Related Burial Places in the Maltese Islands*. BAR International Series 302, Oxford

Caruana, A.A. 1898. *Ancient pagan tombs and christian cemeteries in the islands of Malta. Explored and surveyed from the year 1881 to the year 1897*. Malta

Catania, P. 1999. *In-Naxxar - Titwieliet fl-Istorja*. Malta

Deguara, A. 1999. *L-Imgarr, il-hajja u l-hidma ta' niesu mill-qedem sa llum*. Malta, Colour Image

Evans, J.D. 1971. *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands: a Survey*. London, The Athlone Press.

Haslam, S.M. and Borg, J. 1998. *The River Valleys of the Maltese Islands, environment and human impact*. Malta, The Islands and Small States Institute of the Foundation for International Studies

Renfrew, C. 1978. *Before Civilisation*. London, Penguin Group

Said-Zammit, G. 1997. *Population, land use and settlement on Punic Malta: a contextual analysis of the burial evidence*. BAR International series 682, Oxford

Trump, D.H. 1972. *Malta - An Archaeological Guide*. London, Faber & Faber

Vidal Conzález, P. 1996. *La isla de Malta en Epoca Fenicia y Púnica*. BAR International Series 653, Tempvs Repartvm, Oxford

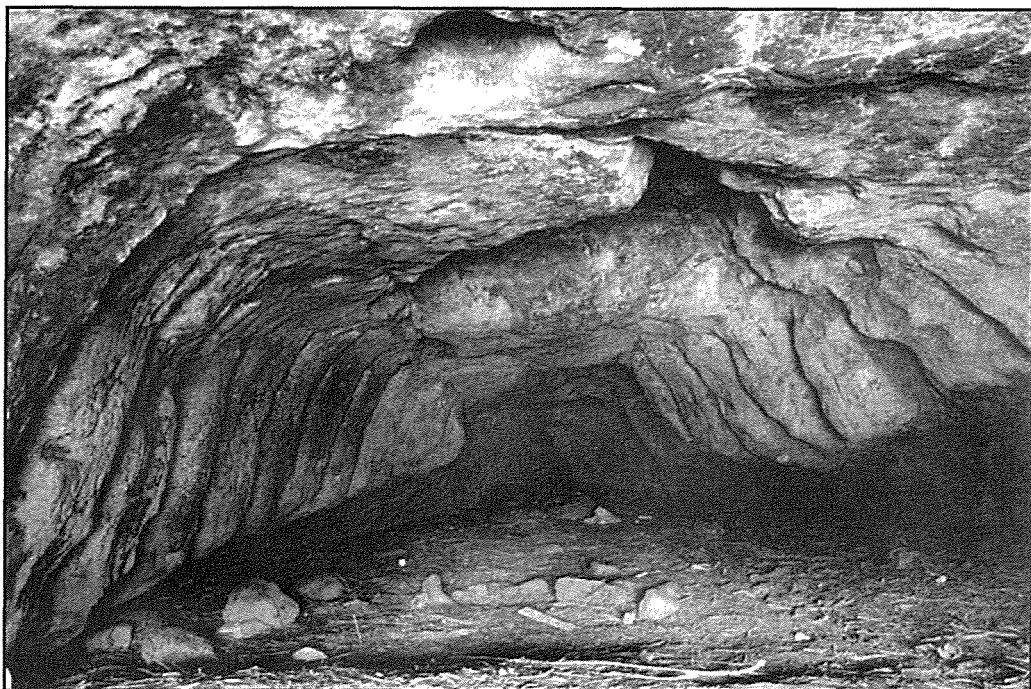


Plate 1: Ghar Hanzir, a medieval site that may soon become inaccessible (Photo: A. Bugeja)