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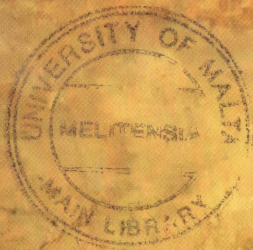
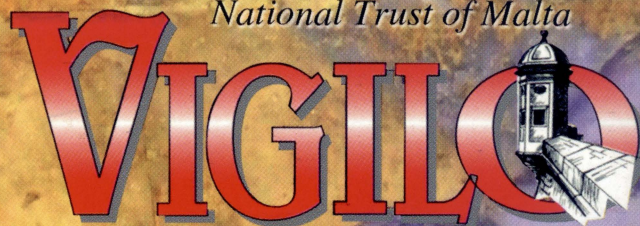
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NEWSPAPER POST

DIN L-ART HELWA

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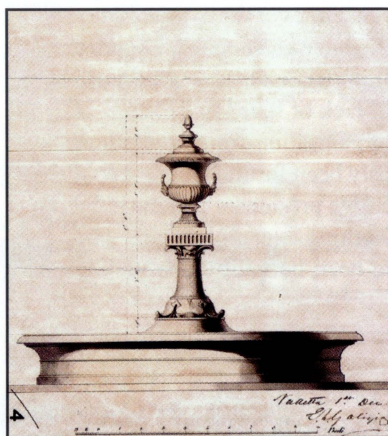
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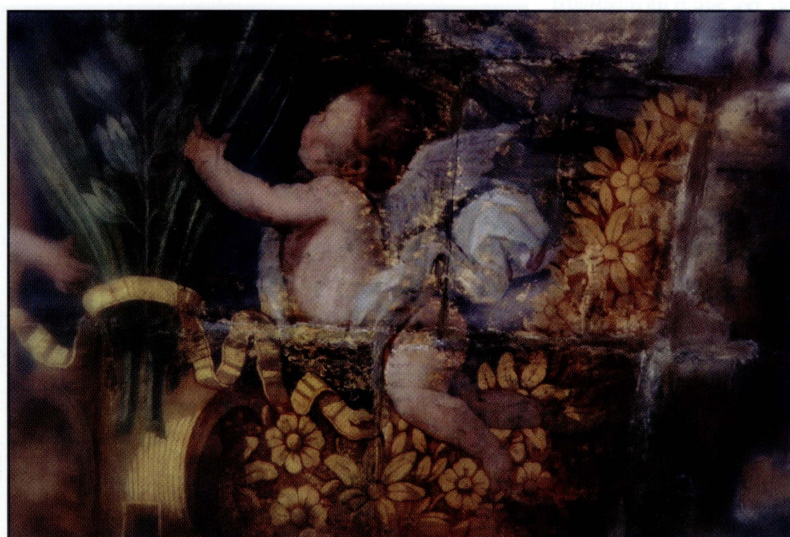
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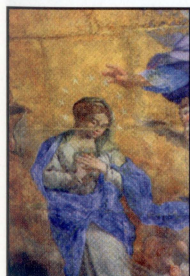
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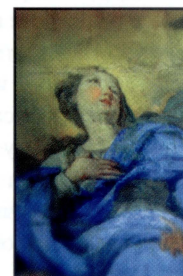
FRONT COVER

The depiction of the
Coronation of the
Blessed Virgin on the
ceiling of Our Lady of
Victory Church



BACK COVER

The depiction of the
Assumption
on the ceiling of
Our Lady of
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The Żejtun Roman Villa Conservation Project

This report was compiled
by the following:

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Nicholas Vella

The conservation and
research of the
Żejtun Roman Villa
is a project undertaken
by the University of Malta
in collaboration with
Din l-Art Helwa
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HSBC Malta Foundation

In 1961, while work was underway for the construction of the new village secondary school in Żejtun, ancient remains were discovered (Fig. 1). The archaeological excavations that began at the site in 1964 revealed a large cistern and some water channels, together with an area paved in stone slabs.

Eight years later, an annual excavation project, led by the Museums Department, began and in the course of short excavation sessions that continued until 1976, the remains of a Roman villa covering an area of about 2,000 square metres were revealed (Fig. 2). Various parts of the stone apparatus used in the production of olive oil were discovered, including the large stone block used to anchor the wooden screw that pulled down the large wooden beam used to squeeze oil out of the olive pulp (Fig. 3). A vat sculpted from a single stone block intended for the settling of the processed oil was also found. These remains were clustered around one room and constituted the industrial section of the villa complex. The residential area was discovered to the south. This consisted of three adjoining rooms, with floors of lozenge-shaped terracotta tiles. Some of the walls were revealed to have been plastered and decorated with paint. A second cistern, cylindrical in shape, was uncovered to the north. Other discoveries of note included not only a large array of pottery vessels and worked stone fragments but 44 Roman coins dated from between AD 222 and 361.

In the time of the Romans, villas were country estates centred on an impressive residence. Over the years, the remains of some 25 Roman villas have been found in the Maltese Islands and the Żejtun estate is one of two surviving Roman villa sites that comprise both a residential and an industrial area – the other being at San Pawl Milqi in Burmarrad. The archaeological significance of these sites cannot be exaggerated, particularly in view of the fact that some villa remains are either wholly inaccessible (Ta' Kaččatura in Birżebbuġa), have been covered over (Ramla l-Hamra on Gozo), or else have been destroyed (Tad-Dawl, on the outskirts of Kirkop, and Gharghur, and many more).

It is for this reason that the University of Malta has embarked on a multi-disciplinary research project to learn more about the Żejtun villa. In 2006, excavations were resumed by the University's Department of Classics and Archaeology following requests from successive school heads and Żejtun local council. Four trenches were opened up, incorporating parts of the limits of the 1972-76 excavation, as well as previously unexcavated areas. The primary aim of the fieldwork was to assess, record and publish the architectural remains and cultural material revealed in past excavations and other data arising from limited excavations. It was also realised that positive action had to be taken to protect the remains that were uncovered in the 1970s from further deterioration, in particular those that are of significant archaeological importance. For this purpose, a collaborative venture was established between *Din l-Art Helwa*, the University of Malta and the HSBC Malta Foundation to address these concerns.

opposite:

top

Fig. 2

English-language students
uncovering the tiled floors of
the residential area of the
Roman villa in 1972
(source: Heritage Malta/National
Museum of Archaeology archives)

bottom

Fig. 3

Elevated view of the press room
with anchor block (top right)
investigated in 2006
(source: Żejtun Villa Excavation
Project, University of Malta)

Fig. 1

Aerial photograph of the remains
of the Roman villa in the grounds
of the secondary school,
St Margaret College in Żejtun
(source: Armed Forces of Malta)





Conservation of archaeological sites

When material remains buried for a long time, it usually deteriorates to the point where it disappears (such as in the case of wood and textiles or skin and hair) or else survives as the result of an equilibrium being established between the material and its surroundings. This is what happens when stone, ceramics or bone survive. When an excavation takes place, this equilibrium is disturbed and the material starts to break down once again, the causes being chemical, physical and/or biological. Whether the material will continue to survive or disappears, depends on the care and attention we give it once it has been brought to light once again. Measures include both direct and indirect – or preventive – action. Indirect action is often preferred as not only does it *prevent* deterioration by acting on the causes of deterioration, rather than their effect, but it is also completely reversible, an important criterion in modern conservation.

Where archaeological sites are concerned, indirect measures fall into two main categories: the reburial of the site or its protection by means of a shelter. Both have their advantages and disadvantages. The main – but not the only – problem in the case of reburial is that the site is then inaccessible, both to scholars and to the public. Conservators also have no access to the site, and therefore regular monitoring is needed to detect any problems that may arise. The materials and methods used to rebury the site also need to be carefully chosen to avoid damaging the site in any way. On the other hand, reburial seeks to re-establish the conditions that had preserved the site in the first place and thus should be the safest and best way to preserve it in the future. Sheltering, on the other hand, has the advantage that it allows full accessibility to the site, while protecting it from excessive sun, wind and rain. It is important that the shelter does not create an environment around the site that could lead to extremes of conditions, for example temperature. In other words, it must not create a ‘greenhouse’ around the site. Great care must therefore be taken both in the choice of materials used and in the design of the shelter. Here again, monitoring of environmental conditions is crucial so that any adverse changes that may be taking place can be identified quickly.

Conservation concerns

The fact that the remains of the Žejtun villa have been exposed to the elements for the last 30 years has resulted in the widespread deterioration of the site. This is particularly evident in respect of the tiled floors in the residential part of the villa and especially the remains of the plastered walls, which used to show evidence of painted decoration that is now barely visible (Fig. 4d, e). Although some emergency restoration work was carried out during the

excavations in the 1970s on one of the surfaces where tiles had been dislodged, no other measures, including preventive steps, have been taken since to safeguard the remains.

The causes of deterioration are multiple and interact one with the other. As is typical with archaeological sites, they are largely of natural origin, eg rain, soluble salts, wind, sun and vegetation. The action of these factors is even more harmful since it is cyclic. The annual growth of intrusive plants and trees is certainly a major cause for concern since it is damaging structures, as well as archaeological deposits. Roots grow within the gaps in the structures and slowly dislodge fragile tiles and fragments of stone and plaster (Fig. 4a, c). Rain causes the collapse of plaster fragments and the fragile parts of stone walls, while recurrent puddles have been observed to form in several areas inside the tiled rooms (Fig. 4a). Even the vat is full of water after periods of heavy rain (Fig. 4c). Although most of the deterioration observed on site is attributable to adverse climatic conditions, humans also have a role. Several stone blocks have been turned over by thoughtless individuals probably looking for snails, whilst the current fragility of the site makes the presence of visitors, even careful ones, somewhat risky.

Conservation project

The current project addresses the most pressing conservation needs of the villa. Special attention is being paid to the residential section, since this is clearly the most vulnerable and information-rich area of the entire complex. The project will include:

- 1) Recording, assessing and monitoring the site’s state of conservation;
- 2) Temporarily protecting the vulnerable parts of the site, while at the same time carrying out environmental monitoring;
- 3) Carrying out emergency conservation of the walls where there is an imminent risk of the plaster being dislodged or lost, and to the floors, where tiles are being lost;
- 4) Exploring ways of preventing the re-growth of vegetation;
- 5) Planning for the long-term protection of the site, including the erection of a permanent shelter over the residential area.

These tasks are demanding and only the constant collaboration of several entities will ensure the project’s success. The conservation plan has been coordinated by the University’s Department of the Built Heritage (Faculty for the Built Environment)





Fig. 4

(a) The residential area after the winter rains (b) the limestone vat filled with rainwater

(c) vegetation growing in the space between wall face and dislodged plaster layer, scale bar 10 cm

(d) state of painted plaster when it was discovered in September 1976, scale bar: 1 foot

(e) trace, arrowed, of red band on plaster in winter 2010, scale bar 10 cm (sources: a-c and e Żejtun Villa excavation project; d. Anthony Bonanno)

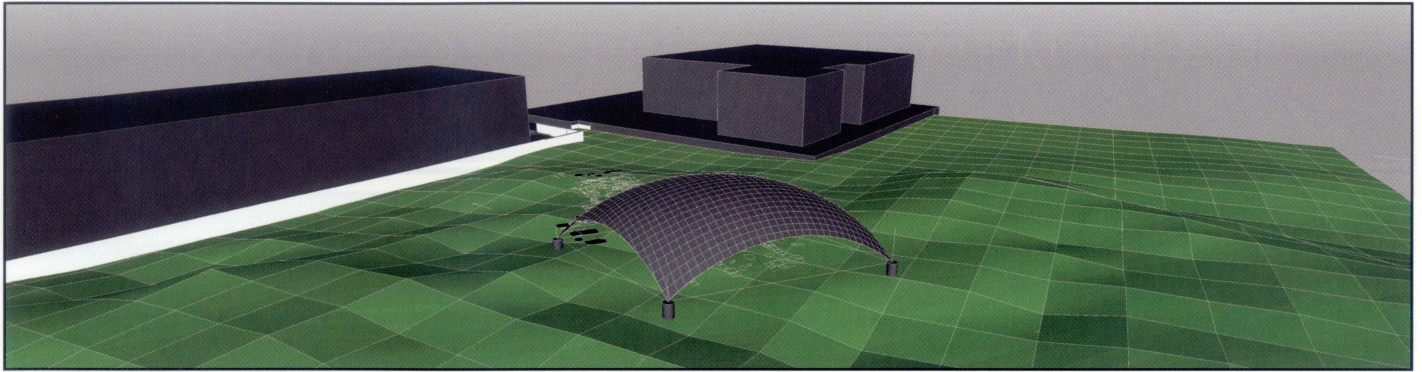


Fig. 6
Technical drawing of the temporary shelter to be erected over the residential area of the Roman villa (source: Kane Borg on behalf of design team members).

and drawn up in collaboration with the Department of Classics and Archaeology. The recording and assessment of the site condition was carried out in collaboration with the Conservation Division of Heritage Malta (Fig. 5). Students of the Faculty for the Built Environment, supervised by Prof. Alex Torpiano, are designing the temporary shelter that will protect the residential part of the villa from the harmful effects of rainwater and solar radiation (Fig. 6). Earlier this year, a group of enthusiastic volunteers from HSBC and university students cleared the entire site from overgrown vegetation (Fig. 7). A plan to actively involve a number of schoolteachers and pupils from the local school in specific aspects of the current conservation plan is also in the pipeline, and a seminar will be held by *Fondazzjoni Wirt iż-Żejtun* in March next year to raise awareness of the remains of the Roman villa and cultural heritage in the area.

The way ahead

What has been described in this article is only the start of a long process that has to be maintained if the remains are to survive. There has to be continued monitoring of the environmental conditions both inside and outside the shelter, and regular maintenance of the site itself, including the periodic removal of weeds, and targeted interventions such as the reapplication of mortar and the reattachment of loose tiles. It is only with our continued commitment to the conservation of the site that these important remains will survive to act as a source of valuable information about our past and a source of enjoyment for everyone.

Acknowledgements

The Żejtun Villa Conservation Project started as the result of a conversation between a research assistant at the University of Malta, Maxine Anastasi, and a former executive president of *Din l-Art Helwa*, Martin Galea, in 2008. Since then it has developed thanks to a number of partnerships, involving students, professionals and volunteers, from the University of Malta Faculties of Arts, the Built Environment and Engineering (in particular, Dr John Betts and Ing. Maurizio Fenech); the HSBC Malta Foundation and the HSBC employees who volunteered to clear the site (coordinated by Martin Scicluna, Josef Camilleri and Doriette Camilleri); at *Din l-Art Helwa*, successive presidents and council members (especially Martin Galea, Petra Bianchi, Simone Mizzi, Martin Scicluna and Maria Grazia Cassar); at St Margaret College (formerly Carlo Diacono Secondary School), particularly the current headmistress (Anna Spiteri) and the previous one (Maria Ciappara), together with the College Principal (Josephine Mifsud) and the Foundation for Tomorrow's Schools (Charles Farrugia).

The students from the Faculty for the Built Environment involved in designing the temporary shelter are Kane Borg, Claire Carter, Francesca Falzon, Kurt Sammut Alessi and Joeaby Vassallo. The students following the degree in conservation at the University of Malta involved in documenting the state of conservation of the remains under the supervision of architect Ruben Abela and conservators Frank Chetcuti, James Licari, Ruby Jean Cutajar and Joanne Dimech are Clayton Bonello, Chiara Galea, Claire Marie Scerri, Annetto Schembri, Francesco Sultana, Luca Tufigno and Jane Marie Vella. The project has been undertaken with the permission of the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage and we thank Anthony Pace and Nathaniel Cutajar for their interest and help.

Fig. 5
One of several drawings showing the condition of the tiled floors inside the Roman villa based on data captured by conservation students in 2010 and transferred to a photogrammetric survey commissioned by *Din l-Art Helwa* (drawn by Joanna Hili Micallef).

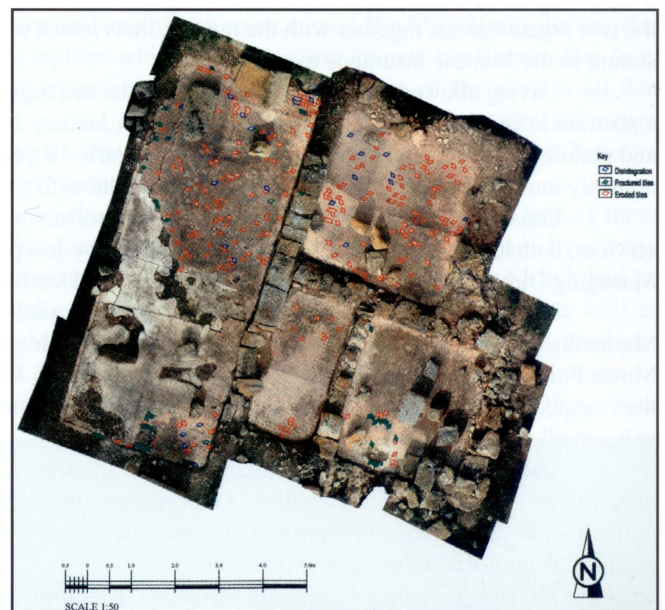


Fig. 7 - HSBC volunteers, students and archaeologists clearing the villa remains from vegetation in May 2011 (source: Roberta De Angelis).