

The Impact of Tourism on the Gozitan Archaeological Heritage

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PREVIOUS CONTRIBUTIONS ON SUBJECT

The impact of tourism on the archaeological and artistic heritage of the Maltese islands in general was discussed in a paper delivered at the *European Workshop on Cultural Tourism in Mediterranean Islands* held in Malta in October 1988 under the aegis of the Division for Higher Education and Research of the Council of Europe and the University of Malta in collaboration with the Mediterranean Institute of the Foundation for International Studies. The paper was published in *The Sunday Times* of Malta the following month (Bonanno and Buhagiar 1988).

In 1990 another Council of Europe workshop, entitled *Archaeological Parks and Cultural Tourism*, was organised in collaboration with the Foundation for International Studies and the Mediterranean Institute of the University of Malta. The theme of that workshop was in many ways related to that of the present paper, in particular in its fundamental objective, on which the present author, as academic adviser in the organisation, insisted, namely, the preservation, presentation and *mise en valeur* of archaeological sites. As the title clearly suggests, however, the workshop dealt with this problem from one particular angle: the interrelationship and mutual impact between the archaeological sites (archaeological parks, to be precise) and cultural tourism. The proceedings of that workshop remained unpublished, but one may refer to a paper by the present author read during a Council of Europe Workshop in Coimbra, Portugal, the following month (Bonanno 1992) in which, very briefly,

stock was taken of the major topics and points of discussion raised in the Malta workshop. Much of what follows reflects the contents and spirit of these two contributions, but with reference to Gozo.

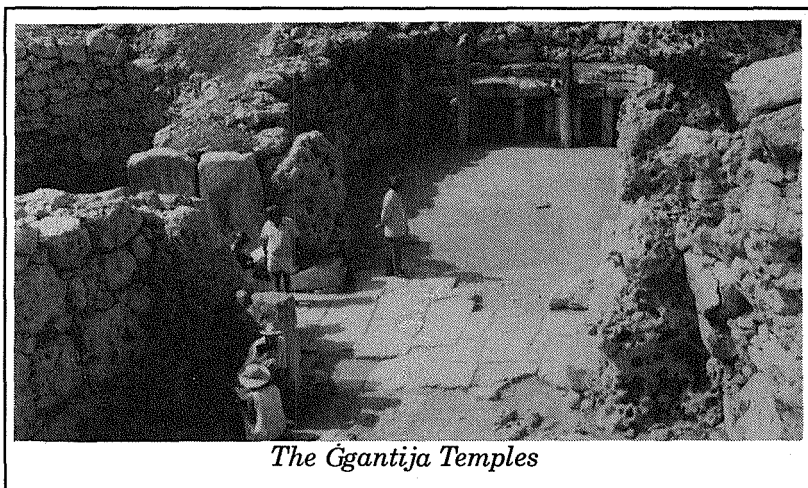
GENERAL IMPACT

Tourism, like all the other industries, requires an infrastructural set-up, which generates development (such as hotels, desalination plants, roads, cable and pipe ducts, etc.) that is by its very nature deleterious to both the natural and archaeological heritage. It is very probable that we have never reflected enough to realize that a considerable proportion of Gozo's archaeological heritage is still unexplored. It is still hidden, jealously protected by a thin blanket of soil, waiting to be uncovered methodically and scientifically by the patient trowel of the archaeologist.

With all the urban development taking place around us, we could easily lose it, or most of it, without even knowing. Who would have guessed, some twelve years ago, that the urban extension then planned for Xaghra, would have destroyed what eventually turned out to be an archaeological site of the greatest importance for the history of human culture on these islands? Modern development is extremely destructive of archaeological deposits; it makes a clean sweep of anything above rock surface that comes in the way of the bulldozer and other earth-moving machinery. Tourism development, therefore, will continue to contribute its share in this destructive process unless we set up the proper monitoring structures to inspect every hole that is dug, every earth-moving operation, especially in sensitive areas like Xaghra and Rabat, not to mention the Cittadella itself.

On the other hand, I regret to say that, in spite of all the earth disturbance that has taken place over the last thirty years for the implementation of touristic projects, I do not know of a single archaeological discovery in Gozo that was made as a result of this extensive development.

On the positive side, there is very little doubt that it was tourism,



The Ġgantija Temples

in particular the upmarket one, that has opened the local population's eyes to the immense value of the island's irreplaceable archaeological heritage, not only as an economic resource but also as a source of national pride and identity.

Ġgantija

The emphasis in the recent past on mass tourism, however, has also had its toll on Gozo's visible archaeological heritage. The site which has suffered most from this influx of tourists is the most frequented one, the Ġgantija temples. Hordes of visitors, not always sufficiently motivated ones, were - and still are - herded in quick succession through and around the temples, often trampling on vulnerable surfaces. The occasional graffiti could not be prevented.

The situation is now under much greater control. A wooden floor has been laid to protect the original stone and *torba* ones, and access is only allowed to the central passages, the rest being cordoned off. In this respect, Gozo has played a pioneering role compared with the sister island. It is only recently that Tarxien has seen a similar wooden floor laid on.

Besides, a project for the creation of an archaeological park for

Ġgantija is currently in hand, even if this megalithic complex has always been better landscaped than its Maltese counterparts.

Mention should also be made of a research programme currently being undertaken jointly between the Dipartimento di Storia dell'Architettura e di Restauro delle Strutture Architettoniche of the University of Florence and the Museums Department. This involves a thorough analysis of the processes of deterioration in the fabric of the Ġgantija building in order to propose effective and scientifically supported conservation methods (Cassar *et al.* 1989; Tampone *et al.* 1993). This project would probably not have materialised had the Ġgantija temples not achieved world fame as a tourist attraction. Conversely, the project has also benefitted, and will further benefit, tourists by identifying the unstable and dangerous sections of the building, making them more secure for visitors.

The Gozo Citadel

Practically all foreign visitors to Gozo pay a visit to the Citadel, which can be considered an extensive archaeological site, given the ruinous state of most of its buildings. I do not have any reason to believe any damage to this site has been caused by tourism, unless one judges the present level of commercialisation of some of its buildings as already beyond the accepted limit. I do not think this is the case, but the new building at the corner between Fosse Street and Melito Street, originally intended as some sort of catering establishment, should never have been allowed to be built. Again, we probably owe it to the touristic phenomenon that most of the restoration of old buildings in the Citadel was undertaken.

The Brochtorff Circle

Another site which has hardly started to be affected by tourism is the Brochtorff Circle which is currently being excavated by a joint team from the universities of Bristol, Cambridge and Malta and the Museums Department. We have only had the odd group of tourists, mostly German, visiting during every season of excavation; but I foresee pressures, in my view justified, to make the site accessible to the general public, including the tourist.

For the sake of those who have never heard about it, the site consisted originally of a system of underground natural caves utilised as a collective cemetery during the Maltese Temple period (c. 4000-2500 B.C.). The cave system was bounded by a circular wall of large standing stones with a monumental entrance (Malone et al. 1993). It is turning out to be one of the most important sources of information on mortuary ritual among prehistoric societies, not only for Gozo but also for the rest of the Mediterranean.

Right now, however, it presents itself as a huge gaping hole in the ground with only a few surviving features to break the bright yellow monochromy of the local limestone. For this reason, I would have seen little potential in the site as a tourist attraction. Nevertheless, when, on the occasion of the Council of Europe Workshop on *Archaeological Parks* mentioned above, I asked Dr Peter Addyman, the Director of the Yorvick Centre of the city of York (which is recognised by all as a financially, as well as educationally, successful enterprise) whether he saw any possibility for such a drab and unwieldy site to be converted into a touristically attractive feature, I was surprised to find him quite enthusiastic with regard to its potential. The implicit proviso was, naturally, that a substantial financial outlay was required as an initial investment to make it viable.

Since, however, it has been decided by all the parties involved in the research project to limit the excavation to its present extent, for practical as well as scientific reasons, it is strongly recommended that the site be left in its present, albeit uninspiring, state and to take all the measures to protect it from natural degradation and human manipulation of any sort. If funds are available, on the other hand, enough information has been recorded during the excavation to make possible the physical reconstruction of a copy of the original complex somewhere else, following the Lascaux cave example.

Ta' Ċenċ

The venue of this very seminar is the object of a polemic on the advisability or otherwise of developing such a large section of Gozo's unspoilt habitat, such as the Ta' Ċenċ property, for tourism pur-

poses. This is certainly not the right time and place to go into the whole saga of the polemic. I shall limit myself to say that, following the strong reaction from several environment and heritage conscious quarters, both local and international, the development project proposed some 3-4 years ago has been dropped. The Ta' Ċenċ area has since been earmarked as a "national park" in the Structure Plan and intensive discussions have been taking place, and are still in progress, between the owners of the land and the Planning Directorate of the Planning Authority to produce what I gather to be a limited, 'sustainable' touristic development combined with a "heritage park". Limiting myself to my field of competence, I believe that a happy compromise can be reached which could be beneficial to both the archaeological heritage of Gozo and a truly upmarket touristic development. Provided it is handled properly, judiciously and sensitively, a tourism infrastructure requirement might bring about the first proper heritage park of the Maltese islands.

Lately, while doing some survey work on archaeological sites in Gozo, I noticed evidence of manifestly unauthorised digging in various archaeological sites. As I am not in a position to establish the identity of the perpetrator or perpetrators of this illegal exploration, I can only hope that this is not the work of some over-enthusiastic 'special interest' tourists. This is certainly not the kind of culturally motivated tourist we would wish to host.

COMPUTER VISUALISATION

Finally, I would like to share with you some reflections on the current, state of the art developments taking place as a result of collaboration between scientists and archaeologists in their endeavour to solve problems connected with tourists and visitors in general. I have just returned from a seminar held in Bristol on *Computer Visualisation of Archaeological Evidence*. My participation in that seminar, as well as that of Mr Kevin Vella, Research Assistant in the Department of Computer Studies at our University, was made possible by the Maltese branch of the British Council, and is the outcome of a joint research project between the Universities of Malta and Bristol concerning the computer visualisation of the Ġgantija

temples and the Brochtorff Circle. Work on the project started last summer when a team from the University of East London conducted the preliminary on-site surveying and photogrammetry that will eventually enter into the specialised computer programme.

We have noted the deterioration of archaeological monuments from the intensive influx of visitors, who happen to be mostly tourists. We have even singled out the Ġgantija temples as one of the foremost victims of this threat. It is now firmly believed that this threat can be mitigated by making it possible to experience the archaeological monument without physically entering it. The system is intended to be interactive, thus allowing the user full discretion in deciding which way to move and what to explore visually. It is not difficult to foresee the enormous advantages such a system would provide in releasing most of, if not all, the pressure on at least the more sensitive parts of the archaeological monument.

There are as yet technological difficulties to be overcome, mostly connected with photo-realistic imagery and the use of parallel processing systems, but that is what scientific research is all about. There are, however, other difficulties of a more practical nature. In the first place, I am not sure how many tourists, especially the more seriously motivated ones, would content themselves with a computer experience, however realistic, instead of the real one. Once the decision to close a monument, or parts of it, has been taken for conservation reasons, however, there would probably be no better substitute than an interactive computer visualisation experience.

The second difficulty I foresee is intrinsic to the system itself. Being interactive it is limited to a single user at a time, and the cost of a system within the foreseeable future might be prohibitive for practical purposes. In view of this, the system could be extended to the big screen with, possibly and preferably, additional sound effects, producing experiences of recreating the past similar to those of recent cinema productions - such as *Jurassic Park* - or television ones - such as the *Quark* series on the human body broadcast by RAI. The main difference would be that the interactive factor is extended to the group undergoing the 'experience'. In which case one would be achieving a simulated conducted tour with the 'joystick' in the

hands of the group guide.

I would like to end my contribution with an appeal to the tourism industry, in particular the private sector, not only to manage itself in such a way as not to damage the archaeological heritage, but to be positively involved in the most proper management of this national resource by means of financial sponsorships of projects intended to develop and protect our archaeological heritage. By means of the present activity Löwenbräu is setting an example.

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