AN OUTLINE OF DEVELOPMENTS IN MALTESE ARCHAEOLOGY DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Anton Bugeja*

With Knights, French and British ruling Malta within months of each other, significant political turmoil characterised the opening years of the nineteenth century. It is indeed surprising that, at this turbulent time, diplomats were utilised to gain scholarly opinion on the Maimuna Stone.¹ In the following years, Malta passed through a period of economic growth, gaining strategic and commercial importance.² With Gibraltar offering access to the Mediterranean, Malta secured England’s supremacy in the East by securing control over the movement of maritime trade.³ The increasing frequency in shipping and its accompanying increase in Mediterranean packages made Malta a central point of departure for the Levant, maintaining this position for most of the century.⁴

Discoveries made in Egypt and Greece in the early 1800s attracted the interest of various antiquarians, making Malta feature as a port of call in voyages to these countries. Giovanni Battista Belzoni is known to have started his voyages of discovery and depredation in Egypt from Malta⁵

*Dr Anton Bugeja MD, a family doctor by profession, has a keen interest in Maltese antiquities and has been active as an amateur archaeologist for years. His publications include: Archaeological Sites around Tal-Bistra; Notes on the Archaeology and History of Dwejra and the Surrounding Area; Dr J. G. Baldacchino and his Archaeological Bequest to St George’s Parish Church, Qormi (Malta); Ancient Mosaic Pavement discovered at Notabile: A Historical Appreciation; and Fr Emmanuel Magri and the Antiquities of Gozo. His current areas of research concern the contribution made by amateurs to archaeology and the development of antiquarianism and archaeology in 19th-century Malta.

E-mail: antonbugeja@hotmail.com

2. M. d’Angelo, Mercanti intesti a Malta 1800-1825, Milano 1990.
while Henry Salt communicated details of his exploration within the pyramids to a correspondent in Malta. The well-known Elgin Marbles and the Aegina Marbles were on different occasions within the Maltese harbours. While news of foreign discoveries were often given in the Malta Government Gazette less attention was given to local antiquities at this time and descriptions of Malta make little reference to archaeological remains. Scholarly contributions continued to be provided by members of the Order of St. John. Louis de Boisgelin published three volumes on the history of the islands, bringing little novelty to the subject under study, repeating information published earlier and borrowing illustrations from Houel. An interesting development is seen in the work by the conventual chaplain and commendatore of the Order, Onorato Bres, who departs from the tradition of juxtaposing the ancient and the modern prevalent in the previous decades and focuses mostly on Malta’s ancient history. Remarkable is the sound approach adopted in parts of his work, managing to skillfully argue and forward well-reasoned conclusions and, at the same time, remaining sensitive to the teachings of the church and respectful authors like Giovanni Francesco Abela.

During this period, Sir William Drummond claimed that he had identified, on the basis of an inscription, the burial of Hannibal in a tomb found in the previous century at Benghisa but this claim was soon refuted. Meanwhile, ancient remains continued to be uncovered in the Maltese Islands as evident from an account given in the Malta Government Gazette mentioning the discovery of various ancient tombs yielding skeletons and funerary artefacts. Their mention, however, is only second to two more remarkable finds. At Rabat, sixty ancient vases and two ancient inscriptions in stone were found while, near Tal-Gawhar, a sizable coin hoard was discovered. As practised in those times, finds remained in private ownership.

A Maltese coin presented to William Henry Smyth in 1819 by the British Commandant administering Gozo, John Otto Bayer, is witness to the interest of the latter in antiquities, but Bayer’s better-known link to local archaeology comes through his decision to clear Ggantija with the aid of the local magistrate and Collector of Inland Revenue James Somerville in the following months. Indeed, this was an event that would realign local antiquarian research for years to come. Governor had now replaced grandmaster in the long history of the ruling authorities’ support of major works to uncover antiquities. This time, however, unlike at Marsa in the previous century, the clearing of Ggantija was the primary aim of a project whereby works were deliberately carried out in a site known to have an archaeological potential rather than related to the documentation of newly-discovered finds.

Ggantija and a nearby megalithic circle were partially cleared in the early 1820s. Three subsequent publications, namely by Mazzara, De la Marmora, go a long way to make up for Bayer’s failure to publish his account of the undertaking. Contrary to previous years, the lure for Egyptian antiquities brought more positive outcomes to the local archaeological scene. Three plates in Mazzara’s work showing Egyptian antiquities reveal that he was probably in Malta on his way to Egypt, the same destination behind the visit of Joseph Bonomi and Robert Hay who only left accounts of their visit to Malta and the Grand Tour, Malta 2009, 680-682.

16. MGG 311, 13 October 1819, 1896.
18. C.A. Barbaro, Degli avanzi d’alguni antichissimi edifici scoperti in Malta l’anno 1768, Malta 1794.
Veale Hennah, chaplain of H.M.S. Windsor Castle, finalised a plan of one of the buildings at Hagar Qim, giving details of stone dimensions, noting areas containing ornamentation and drawing what are now considered as the earliest representations of Maltese prehistoric pottery (Plate 1). Mention was also made of Mnajdra in the works of McGill and Zerafa, rekindling the interest shown towards this site by Houel in the late eighteenth century. More importantly, two months before Ambroise Firmin Didot completed another survey of Ġgantija, arrangements were already in place to excavate Hagar Qim. Once again on an initiative by a member of authority - this time governor Sir Henry Bouverie - works were carried out by the Public Works Department headed by Sir Vincent Casolani, supervised at the Governor’s request by J.G. Vance.

A year later, Mnajdra was excavated in what appeared to be a slightly more conservative clearing operation. No report of the excavations was ever published, the French archaeologist Charles Lenormant giving a small account and the first known plan of the uncovered remains (Plate 2). Later authors curiously mention conflicting

---

27. The Foreign Quarterly Review 52, January 1841, 212.
29. De la Marmora, 2, 22 fn. 1.
30. Such as in Treasures of Malta xii, 1, 29 as well as sketches and drawings listed in Grima, 16.
Heck’s publication remain a visual record of this spreading interest (Plate 3). Equally important was the fact that articles on Malta’s antiquities were appearing in different languages, namely English, Italian and German. This allowed scholarship on the Maltese megalithic remains to continue to develop in different countries, resulting in an ever-growing list of articles and books provided by foreign authors.

The short-term effects of unprecedented initiatives appearing in the mid-nineteenth century are probably the reason why history has as yet generally failed to consider in detail this period in the development of Maltese archaeology. Undertaking a voyage to secure antiquities for the British Museum, Charles Thomas Newton ended by leaving a noteworthy contribution to the island’s archaeology. Known to have promoted the collection of artefacts (including pottery) in the reconstruction of a country’s history, he obtained permission from Governor Reid to transport two cartloads of pottery to have them ‘cleaned and examined’ at the Bibliotheca, an initiative which saw the librarian asking the governor to order the necessary shelves divided in compartments to conserve these objects. Interestingly, the description given for the pottery obtained from Hagar Qim differs from that provided for the contents of one of the Birżebbuġa tombs in details and attribution, an early singular distinction ignored for decades with adverse consequences for the correct establishment of the islands’ early chronology. Claims by Swann of diggings at Hagar Qim in 1852 remain as yet unsupported by the sources he quoted or any other documentation.

Around 1842, the “basement of an ancient structure” close to Tal-Gawhar tower was discovered by the chief adjutant of the police Mr St John. Some years later, considerable interest was aroused by a discovery made in 1847 at Qasam il-Gewwiem by the American Consul in Malta William Winthrop

44. Newton, 6-7.
47. J.S. Swann, ‘Description of Ancient Rock-Tombs at Ghain Tiffiha and Tal Hurr, Malta,’ Archaeologia xi, 2, 1870, 492 fn. C.
49. The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences &c. 1323, 28 May 1842, 369. For further information on Mr St John see M. Gatt, ‘James Smith of Jordanhill and the first scientific record of Pleistocene elephant from Gozo,’ Treasures of Malta, xvii, 2, 2011, 94-95.
and the English officer Walter Loch. The details of the three subterranean interconnecting chambers were consequently described and planned (Plate 4), accounts of the find given and debated, often illustrated by a measured plan. In 1845, a sepulchral inscription was discovered at it-Tomba in Gozo but was secured by the Augustinian fathers to the disappointment of the librarian Cesare Vassallo who preferred it being donated to the Museum of the Bibliotheca. In 1853, several pottery items were found at Hofret ir-Rizz and in the environs of Rabat (Malta). In such situation where antiquities were frequently uncovered but often remained in the hands of private collectors or institutions, significant is a government notice issued to invite anyone owning ancient pottery related to the Maltese Islands to sell them to the Museum of the Public Library. Little progress was registered despite this far-sighted initiative.

56. MGG 1776, 30 September 1853, 161.

Although these discoveries and initiatives were remarkable in their own right, they failed to develop into a concerted endeavour. The lack of a local organisation that promoted, supported, and adopted a pro-active attitude towards the research and protection of antiquities was certainly one reason behind this situation. Abroad, Societies of Antiquaries had long been established in London (1717), Newcastle-on-Tyne (1813) and Scotland (1780), bringing about noteworthy advances in the subject. Indeed, even Malta had benefited from the interest shown by these societies, scholarly accounts on works undertaken at Qgantija, Hagar Qim and Mnajdra appearing in publications by the British Society of Antiquaries of London and the Institut Archéologique. By the first half of the nineteenth century, the formation of archaeological societies became a wider phenomenon and, with Malta seeing the birth of various societies such as the Società Economico-Agraria (1844), Società Medica d’Incoraggiamento (1837) and the Malta Society of Arts Manufactures and Commerce (1850-52), the establishment of a Maltese society dedicated to the study of antiquities was just a matter of time.

In the early 1860s, interest in geology, and to a lesser extent archaeology, led to frequent co-operation between various local and foreign researchers to the point that, by the end of 1865, a society was formed to deal specifically with these subjects. In the Society of Archaeology, History and Natural Sciences, Maltese and foreigners, members of the military and the civil service, protestants and members of the Roman Catholic faith, worked together to promote the study of archaeology and geology through research and excavations. Minutes of their meetings reveal wide-ranging and intensive works, the Society addressing its objectives by making plans of archaeological sites, organising lectures, preparing reports, issuing publications and commissioning inventories of geological collections and photographs of archaeological sites and artefacts. In view of its achievement, it is not surprising that the society is considered to represent a turning point in Maltese archaeology. Indeed, an organised society was a marked development over the correspondence and the occasional meetings of

57. Smyth 1829; Vance 1842.
58. De la Marmora 1836.
60. The author is grateful to Dr Claudia Sagona for discussions on the society.
61. NLM, Libr. Ms. 588.
learned men occurring previously. Noteworthy is the fact that a small group of people had temporarily replaced governor and grandmaster as promoters of archaeological research. The society appears to be the first in a series, pioneering initiatives which are considered a developmental milestone in the fields of archaeology,63 history64 and the natural sciences.65

The Society came to a premature end through death or migration of its most influential members but its legacy persisted into the 1870s.66 After years of explorations on the islands, Adams published an account of the studies he carried out in Malta, reserving a whole section to the island’s archaeology.67 On the other hand, Cesare Vassallo appears to have attempted a more complete account of the island’s history; in the end he only managed to publish a revised edition of his 1851 pamphlet on the island’s ‘Phoenician’ and ‘Egyptian’ periods,68 an account on the Roman and Early Christian Periods of Malta remaining unpublished.69 A successful and a noteworthy initiative by Vassallo70 was the publication of a guide to the Valletta Museum, translated into English a few months later by another member of the Society, Charles Augustus Wright.71

Publications by Fergusson72 and Oliver73 and a new edition of Gailhabaud’s work74 reveal the persistence of scholarly interest in the islands’ ancient remains during the 1870s and contain new insights and interpretations on the subject. Efforts to carry out new excavations during this decade, however, were few. In 1874, a catacomb in Marsa was discovered and surveyed75 while in 1878-79 excavations were carried out at San Pawl Milqi. The latter appears to have remained unfinished, an article by Michelangelo Marin Mizzi76 being the more complete account provided on the discoveries made. Despite these interesting works, very little was done during the decade to address the general neglect that affected the various archaeological remains in Malta.

This situation would radically change when, in February 1881, the remains of a Roman building were discovered outside Mdina. With Governor Borton assisted by a Chief Secretary who had supported archaeological initiatives years earlier,77 the road was paved to implement decisions taken by a purposely-set up committee to explore and investigate the remains. As a result, the remains were cleared and planned, the results being published a few months later.78 Innovative was the decision to raise a protective building over the mosaics and equally ground-breaking was the use of this construction to serve as a museum to exhibit the finds. With all these developments occurring at a time of rising nationalistic sentiments following the publication of the Keenan, Rowsell and Julyan reports, the discovered splendid mosaic pavements were undoubtedly appealing to whoever promoted the concept of patria at the heart of this movement. Prominent anti-refomisti proposed and were granted the establishment of a Permanent Archaeological Commission, which was responsible for the excavation, protection, restoration, and investigations of different archaeological remains for at least the next four years.79 When archaeology was threatened by development at Gherixem in the late 1880s, a further committee was set up to oversee the investigations.80 Contrary to the 1860s when scholars had taken the initiative to form a Society, in less than ten years three committees were in place to study and protect antiquities. If Bayer had excavated Ġgantija apparently without the assistance of a scholar and Bouvier had appointed J.G. Vance to supervise works at Ġaġar Qim, now successive governors selected a number of knowledgeable persons for committees to oversee archaeological explorations. In summary, government had not only become once again the main entity behind the promotion of research and management of archaeology, but was assuming this responsibility on a scale never experienced before.

63. C. Sagona, Punic Antiquities of Malta and other art objects held in Ecclesiastic and Private Collections, Ancient Near Eastern Studies Supplement 10, Leuven 2003, 5
68. Vassallo 1870
69. National Archives of Malta, CSG01-5872/1874.
70. Vassallo 1871.
72. J. Fergusson, Rude stone monuments in all countries; their age and use, London 1872.
75. Malta Times and United Services Gazette 2441, 5 September 1874, 2.
77. Namely Sir Victor Houlton who was Chief Secretary to Government in 1865 when the Society of Archaeology, History and Natural Sciences was formed.
78. A.A. Caruana, Recent discoveries at Notabile: a memoir, Valletta 1881.
DEVELOPMENTS IN MALTESE ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE 19TH CENTURY

In 1881, destruction assisted discovery in bringing up change. For the Colonial Office, which had become aware of the Maltese archaeological heritage through foreign scholars, damage to the local megalithic monuments triggered the commissioning of a report on local antiquities. The report of the newly-appointed librarian Antonio Annetto Caruana proposed a continuous attempt to classify finds and monuments. Caruana described the various antiquities of the islands, quoting and elaborating further the details provided by previous authors. Beyond the usual debating of arguments proposed by previous scholars, Caruana systematically visited many sites, recording and describing the contemporary state of those remains. Indeed, the Report may be considered as a benchmark publication in the documentation and survey of antiquities, with an approach that places scholarship alongside preservation in the dealings with ancient monuments and artefacts. When in his recommendations Caruana proposed that ancient pagan and early Christian antiquities should be sought to throw light on the ancient Phoenician colonies, an important moment in the transition from antiquarianism to archaeology is perceived. His recommendation to record the location of antiquities was far-sighted but remained unheeded for decades. In view of its contents, the Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiquities in the group of the Islands of Malta emerges as one of Caruana’s most important publications.

Yet what can easily be considered as Caruana’s finest writing was yet to come. Asked for more concise and specific suggestions to preserve Malta’s antiquities as requested in the original dispatch, the librarian compiled a short report exposing the philosophy that would characterize archaeological practice in the late nineteenth century. In this report, guardians and appropriate legislation were proposed to preserve the islands’ megalithic buildings. In a few years, the former were in place at the Rabat Museum and Hagar Qim. As to legislation, Caruana’s repeated pleas along the years remained unheeded. Beyond protection, Caruana aimed for restoration. The megalithic wall at Borg in-Nadur remains a vivid testimony to Caruana’s suggested method of re-bonding megalithic constructions by the use of smaller stones (Plate 5). The raising of fallen megaliths and the restoration of Hagar Qim to make it ‘look almost as complete as when ... originally constructed’ also ensued from Caruana’s suggestions and, together with what happened at Borg, can be considered as the earliest organized grand-scale restoration of a Maltese megalithic monument. The illustrations included in the publication on the works at Hagar Qim emerges as an early pictorial documentation of restorative interventions (Plate 6).

The librarian’s approach to uncovering and interpreting archaeological sites was remarkable and unprecedented. Already having criticized previous works in excavations he recommended ‘taking notice of the circumstances of each discovery’ and the observation of ‘particulars’, even if ‘minute’,

81. Caruana 1882.
82. Caruana 1882, 166.
84. A copy is found in NL.M. Public Libraries Letter Book from January 1, 1881 to 24th October 1885 (vol. 1), 62–64.
85. An early record of such work is illustrated in A. Mayr, ‘Die vorgeschichtlichen Denkmäler von Malta,’ Abhandlungen der Königlich Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 21, 1901, tafel X.
86. A. A. Caruana, Recent further excavations of the Megalithic Antiquities of Hagar Qim. Malta executed in the year 1885 under the direction of Dr. A. A. Caruana, Librarian, Valletta 1886, 1.
87. Caruana 1886.
88. Caruana 1882. 10.
In view of the above, it comes as no surprise that, of all the scholars and individuals who contributed to the island's archaeological scene in the late nineteenth century, Caruana remains the better known. Over the last two decades of the century, often assisted by Filippo Vassallo, he incessantly studied and recorded newly-discovered or purposely-explored archaeological remains. Other than for the occasional work revealing his interest in natural history, his ideas and researches on the island's megalithic remains, Roman antiquities, tombs, and hypogea often featured in local and foreign publications, the latter marking the entry of Maltese scholarship in British archaeological literature. Earlier Cesare Vassallo had replaced members of foreign societies as the main author contributing on local antiquities and now Caruana was doing that to a scale never witnessed before. Equally important was the fact that Caruana used the discoveries to elaborate and develop further his ideas on the subject, providing his conclusions in his later publications. Tombs and pottery were studied and classified in two separate publications, the synthesis of years of study and gathering of information. Caruana's Frammento Critico was a long-desired work presenting a reassessment of Malta's history as gathered from previous local historians, reinterpreted according to contemporary advances in the subject and latest local discoveries.

The opening years of the twentieth century were characterised by new approaches applied by Magri, Zammit and Tagliaferro to document and interpret archaeological finds, confirming and detailing the prehistoric dates of temples along the years. The Gabinetto delle Antichità attached

92. A.A. Caruana, Monograph of a stalagmatic cavern found at Xagħra, Gozo, in December 1888, Valletta 1888.
93. Caruana 1886; Caruana 1896a; A.A. Caruana, 'Further great stones, Gozo, explored in 1892', The Archaeological Journal 53, 1896, 140-142, [hereafter Caruana 1896b].
94. A.A. Caruana, Remains of an Ancient Greek building discovered in Malta in February 1888, with a plan of an ancient building in the field 'Nadur' between the villages Luca and Macabba, Malta, Valletta 1888.
95. A.A. Caruana, Discovery of a tomb-cave at Għarsiel, Selm. Gozo, in June 1884, Valletta 1884; A.A. Caruana, Recent discoveries of tomb-caves at Rabat, Naxxar, in January 1890, on the road of 'Tul-Virtu', Valletta 1890.
96. A.A. Caruana, el-Ġeriena tal-Liebra, Malta: a hypogaeum discovered in July, explored and described in October, 1884, Valletta 1884.
98. Vassallo 1851; Vassallo 1871; Vassallo 1876.
99. Caruana 1898; Caruana 1899a.
100. A.A. Caruana, Frammento critico della storia fenicio-cartaginese, greco-romana e bizantina, musulmana e normana-aragonese delle isole di Malta, Valletta 1899.
101. Caruana 1881, 23.
to the bibliotheca was transferred to Palazzo Xara and, with this move, the collection was transformed into the establishment responsible for the study and custody of Malta's archaeological heritage. With Antonio Annetto Caruana and Filippo Vassallo replaced by a department, an important milestone was written in the history of Maltese archaeology, a transition emphasised by the emergence of one of Malta's more prominent students of antiquities - Themistocles Zammit. If the opening of the nineteenth century was marked by political events, significant developments in archaeological practice at the turn of the twentieth century provide a convenient close to what can be considered to be an important chapter of antiquarian and archaeological research in the Maltese islands.

A thematic approach to the subject discussed in the present paper will appear in one of the publications on Luigi M. Ugolini currently being prepared by Dr Andrea Pessina and Dr Nicholas C. Vella.