

## CHAPTER 1

## MALTA'S ARCHAEOLOGICAL PAST

Relief, apprehension and curiosity may have occupied the thoughts of the first people to set foot on Malta's shore sometime around the late sixth millennium BC. There was risk in the sea crossing, but the goal, a landmass which barely registered on the horizon from their homeland, probably in Sicily, must have been within their maritime capabilities. Thus conquered, this journey may have been made often by early seafarers, often enough to gauge that the islands could support their way of life before they made the commitment to stay. From that point forward, the human occupation of the Maltese Archipelago has contributed to a remarkable tableau shaped by endurance, ingenuity and adaptation.<sup>1</sup>

Most travellers to the archipelago today find their way to historic Mdina and Rabat, two towns sitting cheek by jowl on high ground in the heart of the main island – one of its most historic and picturesque locations. Around this central vantage point, visitors can see the expanse of Malta stretching to its shores. Their first impression might be that the landmass is not great and that its landscape, verdant in winter but parched by harsh summers, shows the unmistakable imprint of lives lived through countless passing generations. Looking east, encroaching urban areas are a compact hotchpotch of yellow limestone buildings that dazzle the senses in the midday sun. They advance inland from the coast as an unstoppable tide of development. Roads are soon lost from sight among houses but can be traced as they thread their way through rural areas north and west. Though the roads beckon to be followed, Malta's western reaches are much less travelled.

Close to Mdina, the valley dips and rises west to the Mtarfa plateau, and beyond that, the island tilts upward. Agricultural production takes place within the confines of small land holdings clearly defined by dry-stone walling – stone is never in short supply in these islands. The demarcation between urban zones and the countryside is often abrupt, and remarkably, given the small size of the islands, it is still possible to have a sense of the remote in some pockets of the countryside. Travellers seldom make their

way to the western edge of the island, but what they miss is the dramatic cliff edge at land's end plunging into the vast sea which stretches out to an unbroken horizon. If visitors travel to the north island, Gozo, there is less development, the land is weathered to a series of distinct plateaus and the impression of the rural dominates the senses.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING OF THE ISLAND CULTURES

Past visitors to the archipelago were equally struck by its harsh appearance, but usually any negative first impressions dissipated as the traveller explored the islands. An overriding spirit of enquiry, engendered by the Maltese landscape, was captured by Sir Richard Colt Hoare in 1819:

Nothing can be more uninteresting than the first aspect of this territory, to those who enter it on the land side. An extent of country, rather hilly than mountainous; thousands of stone walls, dividing and sustaining little enclosures, formed like terraces; villages so numerous as to bear the appearance of a continued town; and the whole raised on a barren rock, with scarce a tree to enliven the dusky-tinted view; such are the objects which first meet the eye of a traveller. This cheerless scenery struck me the more forcibly, after having quitted so recently the fertile and verdant regions on the opposite coast of Sicily. Indeed, I could nowhere find a parallel to it, except in some parts of the dreary Contea di Modica. Yet this was the spot which poetry and fiction had assigned as the voluptuous abode of Calypso! However, nature under all her forms, and in all her productions, frequently veils beneath an unpromising exterior, singularities, and even excellencies, which awaken curiosity, and raise admiration. Such was the case at Malta.<sup>2</sup>

The geology of the Maltese Archipelago proved to be just as alluring to early travellers and scholars as its ancient human history.<sup>3</sup> Comprising three main islands – Malta, Gozo and Comino – its area spans a total of only 316 km<sup>2</sup> with additional uninhabited minor landmasses. Located in the central Mediterranean region, the position of the archipelago has long been recognised as economically, politically and strategically advantageous. Insularity must have been a defining quality for inhabitants who called the islands their home.<sup>4</sup> The sea forms both a barrier and a means of connectivity through maritime communication to not-so-distant neighbours: from shore to shore, Sicily lies some 80.5 km from Gozo; from Malta to Pantelleria, it is around 224 km; to Linosa, 132 km; to Lampedusa, 161 km; and to Tunisia, 303 km. Sea levels dropped by some 120 m during the last glacial period (from 70,000 BP), at which time Malta and Sicily were linked to Italy in a land mass referred to as the Hyblaean Plateau. If people did frequent these southern reaches of the European continent, however, they also withdrew into the large territory to the north rather than risk becoming isolated.<sup>5</sup> Around 12,000 BC, whatever narrow land bridges remained were permanently submerged, isolating Malta. Land links to Africa that might have afforded the passage of human and animal

migrations are unlikely on present evidence, with a 40-km stretch of open water forming a perpetual barrier.<sup>6</sup>

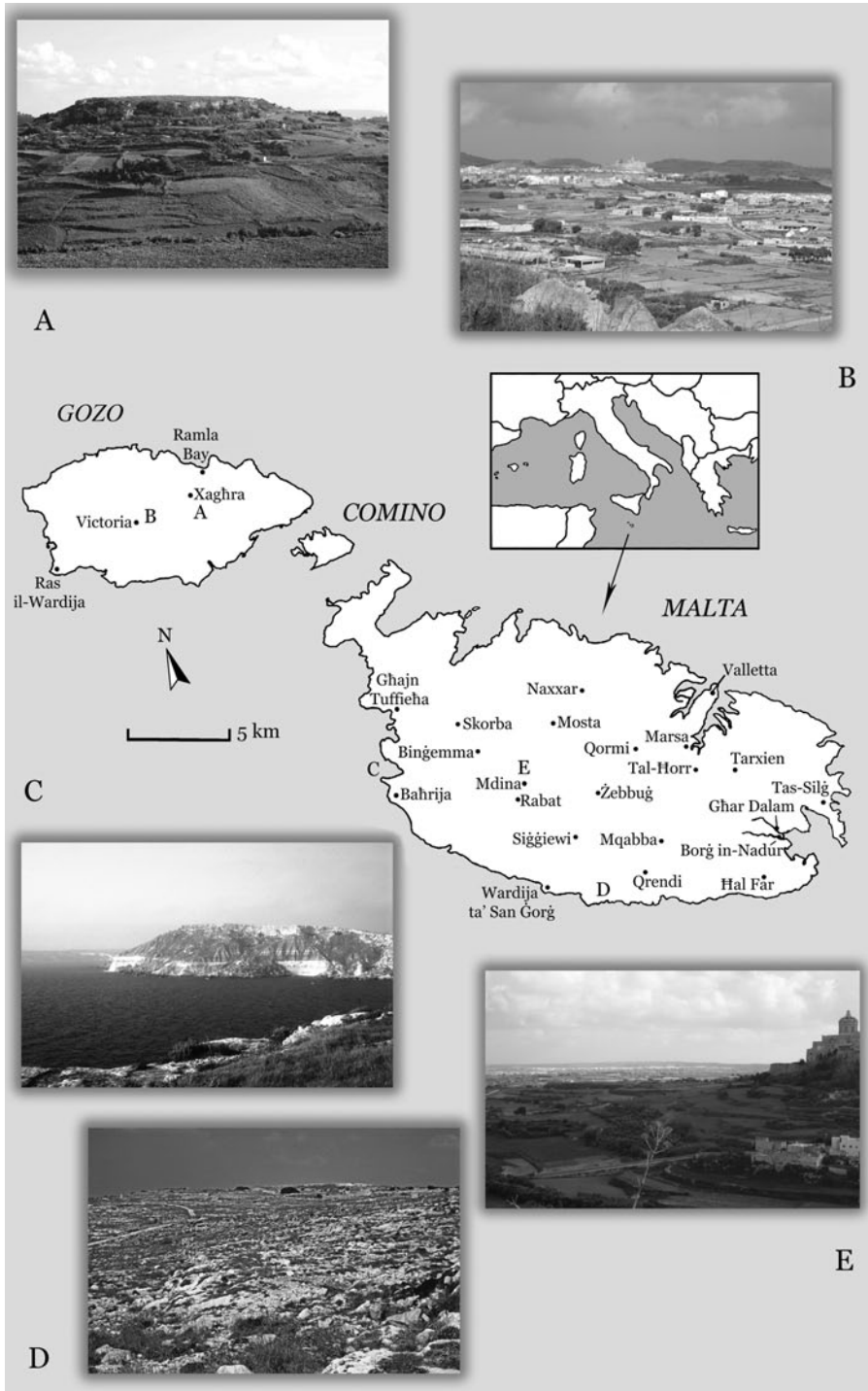
Geological components of the islands consist of layers of limestone – Lower Coralline, Globigerina and Upper Coralline – laid down as marine deposits. Blue clay (or marl), over which lies a greensand (sandstone) layer, is trapped between the Globigerina and Upper Coralline strata. Globigerina is softer than the other limestone deposits and varies in hue from whitish to rich yellow. It is the preferred building material in Malta, and a number of large quarries can be found on the islands which exploit these deposits and vary in thickness from 20 to 200 m.<sup>7</sup> This stratum, too, has been subdivided according to depositional layers into Lower, Middle and Upper Globigerina. Small amounts of chert (the term is used for the lesser-quality pale to very dark grey flint with a granular texture),<sup>8</sup> which forms in the local Middle Globigerina limestone deposits, were used for tools, but the islands are devoid of high quality-flint. All other materials, such as obsidian (volcanic glass), basalt and metals, found in ancient contexts were imported.

#### THE LAY OF THE LAND

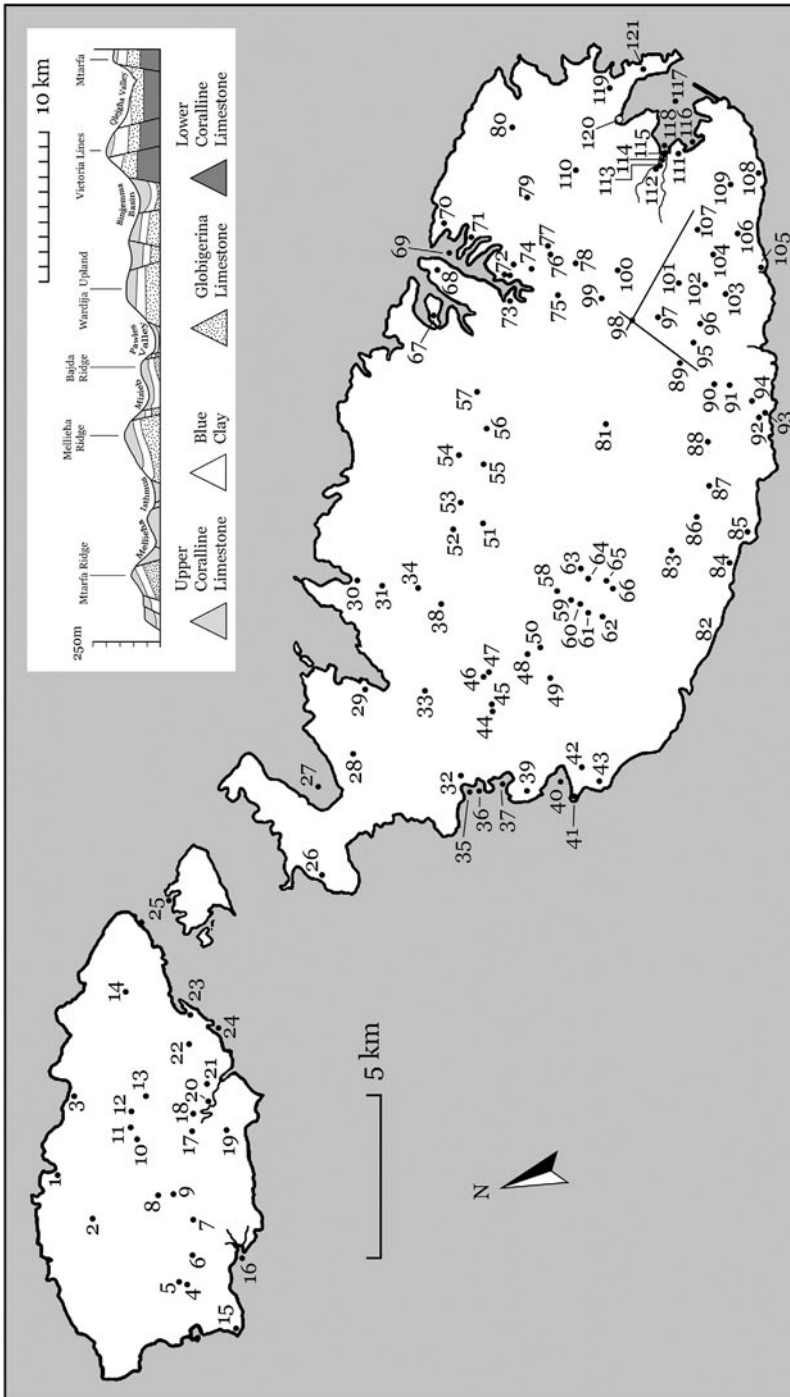
Malta was shaped by a series of uplifts and subsidence to form a tilted landmass, higher on the western side of the island, with dramatic eroded coastal cliffs rising abruptly to over 200 m above sea level and gradually sloping down to the east (Figure 1.1). The landmass is fractured by a series of smaller fault lines which lie approximately north-east–south-west, particularly evident in the western half of the island (Figure 1.2, inset). A major division is formed by the Great Fault line (along which are built British fortifications known as the ‘Victoria Lines’) in Malta spanning from Fomm ir-Riħ in the west to the eastern shore at the foot of Madliena Tower; north of this, smaller fractures have shaped the islands into a series of ridges and valleys (from south to north, Bingemma, Bidnija, Wardija, Bajda, Melliëha and Marfa Ridges). In southern Gozo, a fault line along a similar bearing formed the Ta’ Ċenc cliffs.<sup>9</sup>

As limestone decays, it forms fertile red- to brown-coloured terra soils. Historically, farmers have also made soil by breaking up the stone and adding organic material in the course of intensive land-use practices.<sup>10</sup> Generally, soil cover is thin, half a metre or less, with the deepest deposits accumulating in the valley floors. Erosion has had a significant impact, exposing the bedrock over large swathes of land in the west of the island.

Deep cores and other environmental samples have facilitated reconstruction of the climatic conditions from ca. 45,000 years BP in the central Mediterranean region, which is likely to have some bearing on climatic conditions in the archipelago. Though the chronological depth of these analyses exceeds the scope



**Figure 1.1.** Map of Malta: (A) View eastward to In-Nuffara (in 2007); (B) view west to Victoria (in 2009); (C) Fomm ir-Riĥ Bay, looking north from Ras ir-Raħeb, with geological strata visible in the cliff face (in 1998); (D) looking west across rocky landscape towards the Misqa Tanks area, near the prehistoric sites of *Ħaġar Qim* and *Mnajdra* (in 1991); (E) view eastward from Mtarfa to Mdina and surrounding fields (in 2013) (photographs by A. and C. Sagona; map by C. Sagona).



**Figure 1.2.** Map of Malta. Gozo: (1) Marsalforn, (2) Ta'Kuljat, (3) Ramla Bay, (4) Ghajin Abdul, (5) Il-Mixta, (6) Santa Lucija, (7) Kerċem, (8) Victoria, (9) Tac-Cawla, (10) Santa Verna, (11) Xaghra Circle, (12) Ggantija, (13) In-Nuffara, (14) Il-Hagra l-Wieqfa menhir, (15) R-as il-Wardija, (16) Xlendi Bay, (17) Xewkija, (18) Tal-Knisja, Mgarr ix-Xini, (19) Ta' Cenc, (20) Mgarr ix-Xini, (21) Ghar ix-Xih, (22) Ghajnsielem, (23) Mgarr, (24) Xatt l-Ahmar. Comino: (25) Santa Marija Bay. Malta: (26) Il-Latmija cave, (27) Mellieħa Bay, (28) Mellieħa, (29) Xemxija, (30) Burmarrad, (31) Tal Qadi, (32) Ghajin Tuffieħa, (33) Qala Hill, (34) San Pawl Milqi, (35) Golden Bay, (36) Ghajin Tuffieħa

of this study, of interest are findings concerning the Holocene period, which witnessed the rise of agriculture and animal husbandry in lands to the east, enabling human colonisation of remote island locations in the Mediterranean Sea. The Postglacial period (ca. 10,450–9700 BP) ushered in a warmer, humid climate, a result of which was that forest cover of deciduous and oak trees increased in the central Mediterranean region. Colder and dryer events punctuate the record at around 8400–8000 BP and ca. 6600–6000 BP, but the trend towards more arid conditions prevails and is especially marked in North Africa.<sup>11</sup> Whether Malta experienced the same degree of forestation is less certain, but pollen extracted from cores in the silted valley of the Burmarrad (from deposits 14 m deep) indicate that minor stands of *Erica*, *Pistacia* and *Quercus* were present in Malta in a mid-Holocene record characterised by dense scrubland. Analyses of cores taken from this and the Marsa regions have found that soil erosion from highlands led to silting in valleys and the mouths of waterways. Thinning of tree cover and loss of vegetation on slopes and higher areas may have been triggered by arid conditions or, equally possible, such changes may have resulted from land clearing after people colonised the island.<sup>12</sup>

Marl layers vary in thickness (up to 75 m in places<sup>13</sup>) and are especially apparent on the eroded coastal margins (see Figure 1.1). This clay source was exploited for pottery production and for architectural use in antiquity.<sup>14</sup> The

**Figure 1.2.** (*cont.*)

Bay, (37) Ġnejna Bay, (38) Bidnija, (39) Qala Pellegrin, (40) Fomm ir-Riĥ Bay, (41) Ras ir-Raĥeb, (42) Il-Kuncizzjoni, (43) Baħrija, (44) Mgarr, (45) Ta' Haġrat, (46) Skorba, (47) Żebbieħ, (48) Bingemma, (49) Nadur Tower, (50) Qallilija, (51) Mosta, (52) Fort Mosta, (53) Naxxar, (54) L-Ilklin, (55) Lija, (56) Attard, (57) Birkirkara, (58) Mtarfa, (59) Ġnien is-Sultan, (60) Ġħajn Qajjied, (61) Ġħajn Klieb, (62) Nigred, (63) Mdina, (64) Domus Romana Museum, (65) Rabat, (66) Ġħar Barka, (67) Manoel Island, (68) Valletta, (69) Grand Harbour, (70) Kalkara, (71) Birgu (Vittoriosa), (72) Kordin I, II, III, (73) Marsa, (74) Paola, (75) Tal Ħorr, (76) Ħal Saffieni, (77) Tarxien megalithic structure, (78) Santa Luċija, (79) Buleben, (80) Bidni, (81) Żebbuġ, (82) Dingli Cliffs, (83) Buskett Gardens, (84) Ġħar Mirdum, (85) Wardija ta' San Ġoġ, (86) Ġirgenti, (87) Laferla Cross, (88) Siġġiewi, (89) Ta' Wilġa, (90) Misraħ Sinjura, (91) Qrendi, (92) Misqa Tanks, (93) Mnajdra, (94) Haġar Qim, (95) Mqabba, (96) Ħal Millieri, (97) Tad-Dawl, (98) Malta International Airport, (99) Luqa, (100) Bir Miftuħ, (101) Ħal Kirkop, (102) Safi, (103) Żurrieq, (104) It-Torrijiet, (105) Wied Moqbol, (106) Tal-Bakkari, (107) Ta' Ġawhar, (108) Ġħar Ħasan, (109) Ħal Far, (110) Żejtun, (111) Birzebbuġa, (112) Ġħar Dalam, (113) Ta' Kaccatura, (114) Borġ in-Nadur, (115) St. George's Bay pits, (116) Pretty Bay, (117) Marsaxlokk Bay, (118) St. George's Bay, (119) Tas-Silġ, (120) Il-Maġħluq Harbour, (121) Delimara Peninsula (map by C. Sagona). (Inset) Cross section showing the geology of northern Malta, its stratified bedrock and fault lines (after Bowen-Jones, Dewdney and Fisher 1961; K. Buhagiar 2007).



impermeable clay layer, with the overlying greensand, traps rainwater that percolates down from the surface to form perched aquifers, which erupt as vital springwater sources. These springs compensate for the relative scarcity of surface water. Aquifers were further tapped at intervals by farmers in rural regions who developed subterranean water galleries, akin to *qanat* technology, that Keith Buhagiar suggests might date back to Roman and Islamic times in the islands.<sup>15</sup> None of the natural water sources can be classed as rivers; rather, weathered valleys (Maltese '*wied*') may carry water in streams, creeks or wadis, but because farmers have redirected the spring flows, many are dry. Large pits, cisterns and water channels which have captured and controlled water throughout the human occupation of the islands have been documented and will be discussed in the pages that follow.

#### THE LEARNED SCHOLAR, ANTIQUARIAN, ARTIST AND COLLECTOR

The merits of this central Mediterranean location were recognised by ancient classical scholars; Malta may not have been at the forefront of political forces in the wider known world, but the islands did not go unnoticed. Of the Phoenician settlers, their Punic descendants, Hellenised neighbours and inhabitants of the not-so-distant Roman heartland who influenced the course of history for the main islands of Malta and Gozo, there is some written account. Such ancient texts sketched a broad historical framework for the times in which they were written. But the Bronze Age and Neolithic inhabitants before them, the nameless generations, had to wait until the modern era for their history to be uncovered. Classical commentaries, notable among them works by Diodorus Siculus, Cicero and Ptolemy, concerning the islands that they knew as Melita and Gaulos formed a starting point for historical enquiry as early as the sixteenth century AD. In reality, a time before the Phoenician never really concerned the deliberations of the antiquarians. Theirs was a quest to accommodate history as it emerged from biblical, Greek and Latin texts. Early chronicles of the islands can be threaded with fanciful and legendary events, antediluvian notions and mismatched associations between historic accounts and prehistoric ruins.<sup>16</sup>

By the seventeenth century, an increasingly mobile elite emerged, for whom personal enlightenment could be measured not just by their writings but also by accumulated objects of interest which they gathered during their journeys. In many respects, it would be otiose to focus too deeply on the individuals who penned the first histories of the islands, as numerous studies have already done so with encyclopaedic fervour. Nonetheless, antiquarian accounts and artistic representations are still valued for their depictions of urban centres when the islands were less developed.<sup>17</sup> Some will feature throughout this work simply because the written accounts or sketches by these early scholars carry the

reader back to a time when development was modest and ancient ruins were still obvious in the landscape, before urban expansion at best hemmed in some relics of the past and at worst obliterated them.

Regarding Malta, the starting point for the early modern era is Quintinus (Jean Quintin d'Autun), whose description of the islands, classed as the earliest written account, drew on his personal observations made between 1530 and 1536.<sup>18</sup> What survived of early collections of antiquities, particularly those assembled by Giovanni Francesco Abela, later formed the nucleus from which the National Museum of Archaeology grew.<sup>19</sup>

GIOVANNI FRANCESCO ABELA (1582–1655)

Abela's intellectual pursuits led him to amass an eclectic array of imaginative curios of less reliable attribution and genuine artefacts from tombs, as well as objects he obtained from digging in ancient sites. The collection was effectively the first museum in Malta, housed in his *Villa di San Giacomo* in Marsa and arranged aesthetically with provenance factored into the order of artefacts.<sup>20</sup> Woven into the fabric of the collection and threaded through his treatise, *Malta Illustrata: Della Descrittione di Malta Isola nel Mare Siciliano con le sue Antichita, ed altre Notitie*, was the basis for lasting recognition of Malta's cultural heritage among scholarly society not just in the islands but also throughout Europe. Abela's book was the first systematic account of Malta's known history. Despite, or perhaps because of, the acclaim given to Abela's private museum, his collection was plundered in the decades after his death. What artefacts remained came finally under state care in 1811 during British rule and were first housed in the library, the site of the fledgling national museum collection in Valletta.<sup>21</sup> Judging by the sheer quantity of artefacts sourced in Malta, the most remarkable aspect is that the tombs, the source of many objects, appear to have remained largely intact until the 1600s.

A significant part of the scientific enquiry turned to the natural world. Although fossil bones appeared in early displays, including Abela's, they were explained as evidence of the giants written into classical narratives, notably the Cyclops of Homer's *Odyssey* and giants in Old Testament tradition.<sup>22</sup> By the nineteenth century, such interpretations could no longer be sustained in the light of decades of intense scrutiny of fossil remains which had exposed a rich faunal array of extinct species or ancestral remains of living animal species in fossil-rich deposits of Sicily and Malta. Giants' teeth, under close examination, were identified as belonging to pigmy elephants. Thomas A. B. Spratt and Andrew Leith Adams, in particular, while on duty in Malta (the former within the Royal Navy, the latter in the Royal Army Medical Corp), actively explored, identified and excavated caves or other fossil-bearing deposits.<sup>23</sup> Adams also made some observations regarding the archaeological sites



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00669-0 - The Archaeology of Malta: From the Neolithic through the Roman Period

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Excerpt

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Figure 1.3. Photograph reproduced from the *Letters Book of the Archaeological and Geological Society of Malta 1860* (society scrapbook). Members of the society (including two women) photographed among the stones of the unexcavated site of Hagar Qim. (Courtesy of the National Library of Malta.)

in the islands, recorded in his *Notes of a Naturalist in the Nile Valley and Malta*, published in 1870.

#### HISTORY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

A strong Maltese identity grew within the political disquiet of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries AD. The islands benefitted from the development of port infrastructure, which, in turn, became the focus of growing urban hubs, but the population chafed under the constraints of foreign rule. Malta was governed by the knights of the Order of St. John (1530–1798), experienced a brief French interlude under Napoleon (1798–1800) and subsequently became a British possession (officially from 1814 to 1964). Each regime tried, to varying degrees, to mould the island population to comply with foreign sensibilities on socio-political and religious levels. Throughout this time, the value of the archipelago as a strategic and economic mid-point in the Mediterranean steadily grew, and with growth came increased prosperity.<sup>24</sup>

Wider trends in scholarly pursuits and growing local sentiments towards cultural heritage crystallised in 1865 with establishment of the Archaeological and Geological Society of Malta (Figure 1.3).<sup>25</sup> Although the society lost momentum in the course of the next decade, its members, nonetheless, contributed significantly to the identification and documentation of the islands'

fixed and movable archaeological heritage. Most importantly, the association comprised a cross section of society – Maltese and European – whose names appear in numerous accounts of discoveries made in Malta and Gozo. From its inception, key figures in the movement appear to have both stimulated the government's recognition of its obligations and acted upon the resulting official concern for the historic and archaeological record. In 1881, the Council of Government established the Permanent Commission for the Inspection of Archaeological Monuments.

Antonio Annetto Caruana's contribution, in particular, should not be overlooked. Although dated now, his lengthy government-commissioned reports, written during the 1880s and 1890s, do give a reasonably clear account of the known archaeological sites and an overview of the ancient artefacts which had found their way into government and private hands.<sup>26</sup> No less important during this time was the quest to document inscriptions found on the island. Among them was a pair of monuments with bilingual texts that were instrumental in the decipherment of Phoenician alphabetic writing by Jean-Jacques Barthélemy, facilitated by the accompanying Greek version. One of these monuments was eventually deposited in the Louvre after it was given to the French king, Louis XVI, in 1780 by Emanuel De Rohan, Grand Master of the Order.

Caruana was forthright in pointing out the failings of past governing bodies to preserve historical sites, condemning the loss of artefacts of national importance which had been spirited away from the islands, and scathing about the continuing trend for discoveries of the day to remain in private hands.<sup>27</sup> He made concerted efforts to track down ancient objects held in various government departments, found during the course of building the islands' defences and infrastructure, so that they could be brought together under the protection of the National Library.<sup>28</sup> While it could be said that through the publication of his reports, Caruana effectively put the British government on notice not to repeat the failings of the past, it is also the case that the sense of protecting ancient remains was matched in Britain itself, resulting in the 1882 Ancient Monuments Protection Act. This movement was carried to the lands of the Empire and was manifest in, for instance, the Archaeological Survey of India and the establishment of an Archaeological Department in Burma.<sup>29</sup>

Notwithstanding his positive steps towards consolidating and safeguarding the cultural heritage of the island, Caruana was a product of his time and a theological education; history to him was bound to the biblical narrative. Depending on one's interpretation, Caruana either could not or would not consider a period in Malta earlier than the Phoenicians, who figured in the biblical accounts. But no amount of Christian zeal could sustain the link he made between the prehistoric megalithic structures in Malta and Gozo (ca. 3600–2500 BC) and the Phoenicians of the first millennium BC.<sup>30</sup>