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# The known unknown: identification, provenancing, and relocation of pieces of decorative architecture from Roman public buildings and other private structures in Malta

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*In archaeology a narrative or story is usually reconstructed on the basis of a meticulous study of material. In normal circumstances, the physical material constitutes the known, while the actual story remains the unknown until the material is deciphered and put in context. When it comes to certain aspects of Roman architecture in Malta, and especially the architecture of public buildings, the story is somewhat reversed. This is because we know of the presence of public buildings but the actual physical evidence of such structures has for long remained unknown. This study seeks to provide a story, one that gives a provenance to some of the most important architectural elements found in various local collections, thereby bringing to the attention of researchers a corpus of data that has hitherto been little known.*

The architectural decoration of the Maltese Islands during the Roman period has been considerably overlooked by most scholars. However, as shown in a recent unpublished study, several local collections hold more than 376 fragments which can say a lot on the evolution of architectural decoration in Malta during the Roman occupation (Cardona 2010). Unfortunately, the nature of past documentation, the lack of proper legislation, and the uncontrolled movement of fragments within collections have led to the loss of provenance of numerous fragments. Most importantly, this has led to the obliteration of evidence of Roman public buildings in the main city, of which no clear physical evidence survives. Epigraphic evidence allows the identification of public buildings which are, however, still relatively unknown as no physical remains could so far be precisely connected with these structures. The possible connection of some of these architectural elements with public buildings would thus be of significant importance to the archaeology of Roman Malta.

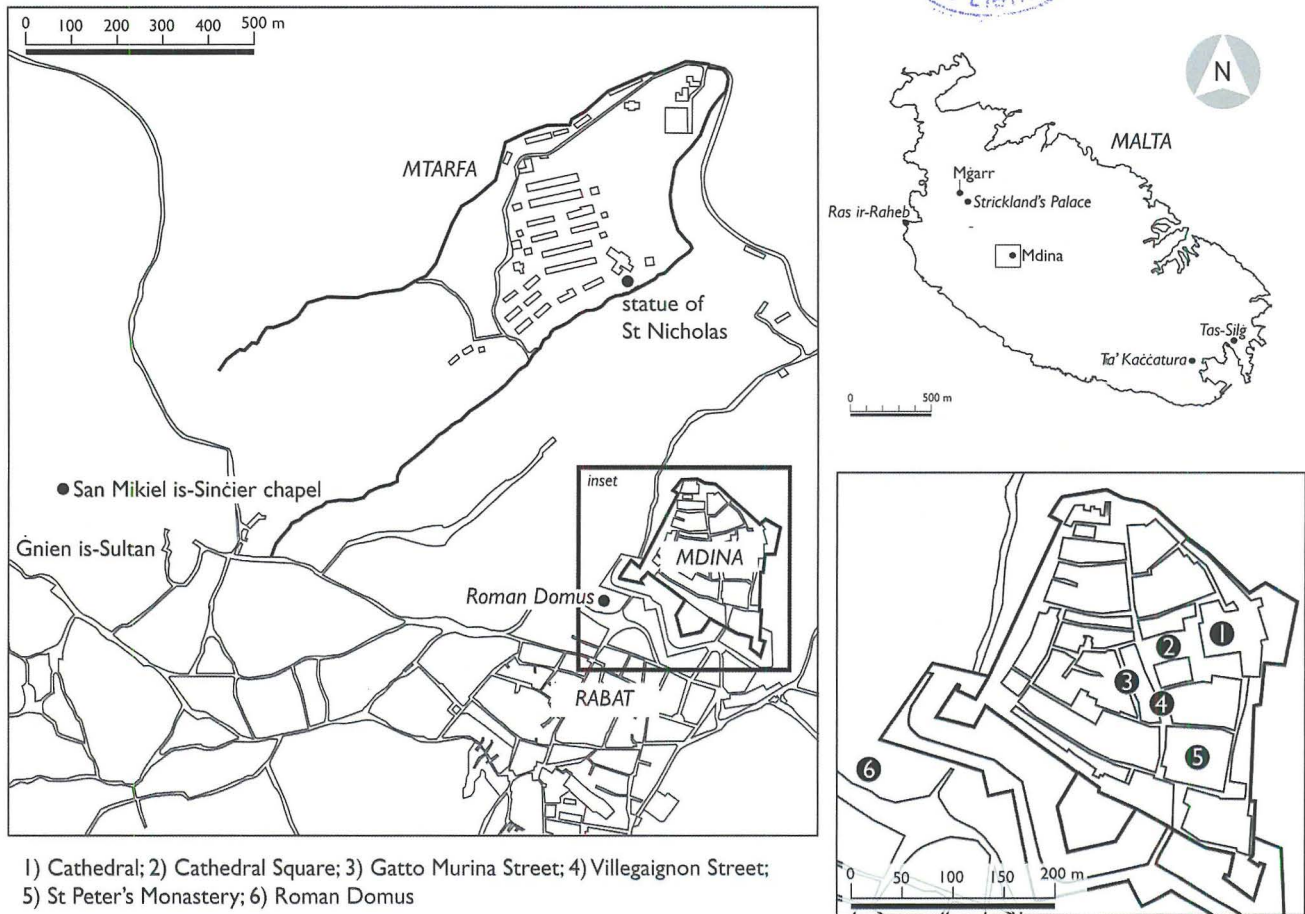
On the other hand, private buildings are well known from the archaeological remains uncovered and recorded in the last century or so. However, the same problems of documentation and legal protection have also meant the loss of some valuable information and fragments. An example of such a loss is that of the telamon found at the seaside villa of Ir-Ramla

l-Hamra, Gozo, (Ashby 1915, 72), the whereabouts of which have long been unknown.

## **Roman public buildings: what do we know?**

We can assume that like any other Roman settlement in the Mediterranean, Malta would have had its share of public buildings. Epigraphic and other written evidence, in fact, prove that this was so. The first evidence comes through the writings of Cicero whose oration against Verres in 70 BC mentions the plundering of the temple of Juno (Astarte) by Verres. In his speech, Cicero remarks that this temple was internationally renowned and revered by pirates and Numidian princes (Verr. II.4.46, 103, 47, 104; Greenwood 1928). This temple has been identified with the remains at Tas-Silġ, excavated by the Missione Archeologica Italiana and, more recently, by the University of Malta. Materials resulting from the excavations carried out by the two institutions are being studied and will be published shortly (Cardona forthcoming; Bonzano 2007). They will not therefore be dealt with in this paper.

The earliest epigraphic evidence for a public building comes through the so-called Chrestion inscription that has been dated by Abela (1647, 207) and Bonanno (2005, 204) to the Augustan period.



1) Cathedral; 2) Cathedral Square; 3) Gatto Murina Street; 4) Villegaignon Street; 5) St Peter's Monastery; 6) Roman Domus

**Figure 1.** Location plan of the major sites mentioned in the text (drawn by David Cardona, digitised by Maxine Anastasi).

Found in 1613 on Mtarfa Hill (Abela 1647, 207-9), it records the restoration of the temple of Proserpina by Chrestion, freedman of Augustus and procurator of the Maltese Islands (CIL X, 7494; Bres 1816, 226-7; Caruana 1882, 88; Ashby 1915, 229; Bonanno 1992, 16) (Fig. 1). Another public building is mentioned in a second-century AD inscription found in 1747 close to St Peter's Benedictine monastery in Mdina. This inscription records the construction of a temple dedicated to Apollo and the payment of parts of it by a private benefactor, namely the podium, floor, four columns of the front portico, and the flanking pilasters (CIL X, 7495; Ciantar 1772, 131; Caruana 1881, 10; 1882, 89; Ashby 1915, 30; Bonanno 1992, 16). Another inscription, found next to the same monastery in 1868, records the construction of a marble temple with its cult statue and all of its decoration by a certain Claudius Iustus, patron of the municipality (CIL X, 8318; Caruana 1881, 11; Bonanno 2005, 206). Although the name of the deity to whom this temple was dedicated is missing, the close proximity of its discovery to the 1747 inscription, as well as the similar

title given to the patron led Albert Mayr to believe that the two inscriptions actually commemorated the same building but it will never be possible to confirm this as both have been permanently removed from their original location (cf. Ashby 1915, 31-2).

**Roman public buildings: what do we have?**

We have seen what evidence we have for the presence of public buildings in Roman Malta but what has actually survived of these structures? Up until recently it has always been believed that nothing exists of these public buildings apart from the remains at Tas-Silg and possibly those at Ras ir-Raheb (tentatively identified with the remains of the temple of Hercules given coordinates in Ptolemy's *Geography*; cf. Vella 2002) (Fig. 1). A considerable amount of information can however be gathered from scholars writing in the course of the seventeenth century and later. In 1647, for instance, Abela records that 'Indi per tutte le strade di essa [Mdina] si vedono colonne di marmo, altre





**Figure 2.** Photograph of the statute of St Nicholas in Mtarfa with Mdina in the background (photograph by David Cardona).

intere, altre in pezzi, cornicioni, piedestalli, e capitelli, e altri vestigie di fabbriche antiche [...]’ (Abela 1647, 32). We can thus conclude that in the seventeenth century the streets of Mdina, and especially the cathedral square, were littered with fragments of marble and other architectural pieces. Abela is also the first historian to place the temple of Proserpina on Mtarfa Hill, where he places several cornices. More architectural fragments from this temple were seen by Abela next to the church of San Mikiel is-Sincier at Ġnien is-Sultan outside Rabat (Abela 1647, 209).

Another important scholar is A.A. Caruana who wrote in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. His reports are a treasure trove of information on the remains of possible public buildings found during the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Among the most notable of the finds he mentions various fragments uncovered next to the Benedictine monastery in Mdina and during the construction of nearby Casa Azzopardi. This material includes several marble capitals, ornaments, and other large marble slabs (Caruana 1881, 10-11; 1882, 89). Caruana also joins Abela in placing the temple of Proserpina at Mtarfa. He actually goes further by

locating the temple on the spot of the present statue of St Nicholas (Fig. 2). However, he also writes that when he inspected the site he found nothing but holes dug in the floor (Caruana 1882, 88).

The documentation left to us by these two scholars alone provides enough evidence to place substantial remains of a Roman public building in the vicinity of the Benedictine monastery located on Villegaignon Street in Mdina. The question to ask is what happened to the numerous fragments mentioned by Caruana and Abela, and especially the fragments scattered along the streets of Mdina? Some of the answers to this question can be gleaned from Caruana’s own writings.

The discovery of the Apollo and Iustus inscriptions and the archaeological material discovered with and around them happened in an age in which no laws existed for the safeguarding of cultural heritage. Consequently, there was no control over what happened to archaeological material. In fact, Caruana (1881, 10-11; 1882, 89; 1899, 282) clearly states that the remains that were found on the Apollo site in 1710 and 1747 were eventually scattered among private collectors. Among these, Caruana mentions



three Corinthian capitals that ended up in the Sant Fournier collection (Caruana 1882, 89). Two marble pillars found during the digging of foundations for Casa Azzopardi were sawn off and used within the construction of the same house. The remaining marble blocks were used for the altar tables of the chapels of the Blessed Sacrament and the Crucifix in the Mdina Cathedral, St Paul's Grotto, and the thresholds of the churches of the Holy Souls and the Franciscans in Valletta (Ciantar 1772, 130-5, Caruana 1881, 11). Moreover, some of the marble remains visible in Mtarfa were apparently used for the coat-of-arms installed by Grand Master Carafa above the main entrance to Auberge d'Italie in 1683 (Bres 1816, 351; Caruana 1881, 10; 1882, 88; 1899, 281), and at least some of the marble adorning the entrance of the Castellania in Valletta seems to have been taken from the same remains (Caruana 1882, 88). One particular column was transferred to Villa Sant in Hal Lija to build a trophy (Caruana 1899, 282). In fact, it still stands in the garden of the same house (now Villa Ajkla), complete with an inscription commemorating its transfer from the Cathedral Square in 1852 (Fig. 3).

Most importantly, Caruana also mentions the transfer of six marble architectural fragments from the streets of Mdina to the then newly built Museum

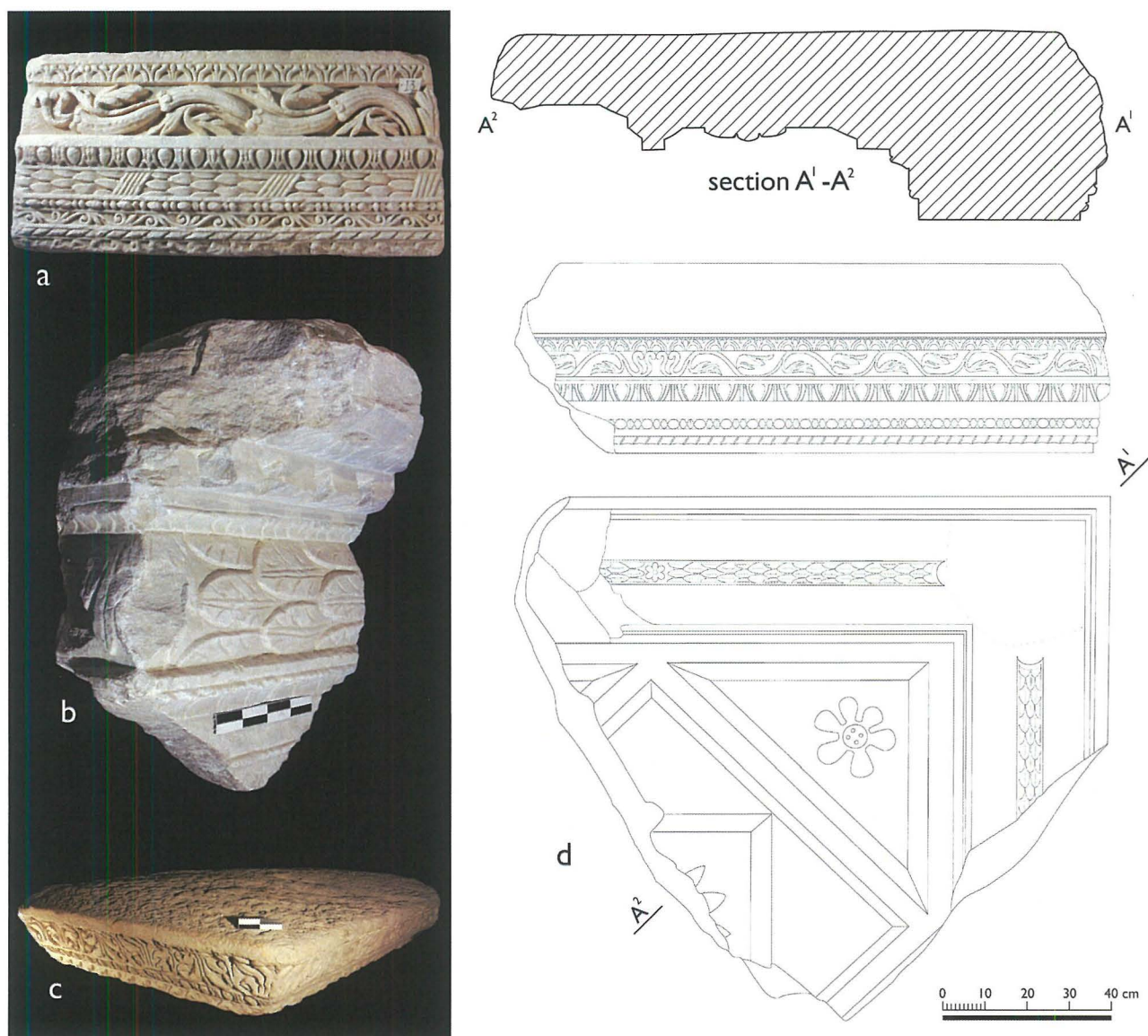


Figure 3. Photograph of the cabled column transferred to Villa Lija, now Villa Ajkla (photograph by David Cardona).

Cardona cat. no.	Description	Current Location	Page reference to Cardona (2010)
F64	Decorated attic base	National collection, HM	576-7
F307	Attic base with no plinth	St Peter's Monastery, Mdina	578
F370	Plain attic base	Howard Garden column and cross, Rabat	579-80
F143-4	Fluted shaft	National collection, HM	581-4
F146	Fluted shaft	Palazzo Falson, Mdina	585
F147	Fluted shaft	Villegaignon Street, Mdina	586
F148	Plain shaft	Gherixem spring, Rabat	587
F306	Cabled shaft	St Peter's Monastery, Mdina	589
F325	Fluted shaft	Private collection, Rabat	661-3
F328	Fluted shaft	Shop – Inguanez Street, Mdina	591
F362	Roped shaft	Villa Ajkla - Hal Lija	592-3
F190	Fluted shaft	St Agatha's Museum, Rabat	588
F26	Corinthian capital	National collection, HM	594-5
F71	Ledged capital	National collection, HM	596-7
F72	Ledged capital	National collection, HM	598-601
F73	Corinthian capital	National collection, HM	602-3
F1	Marble entablature	National collection, HM	604-6
F2	Marble entablature	National collection, HM	607-10
F57	Marble entablature and soffit	National collection, HM	611-4
F58	Marble corona	National collection, HM	615-6
F82	Marble cornice	National collection, HM	617-8

Table 1. A list of architectural fragments that may have originated from Roman Melite (HM stands for Heritage Malta).





**Figure 4.** (a) marble architrave and frieze F2; (b) corner marble entablature F1; (c) marble corona F58; (d) archaeological drawing of marble entablature and soffit F57 (photographs and drawings by David Cardona).

of Roman Antiquities in Rabat (Caruana 1899, 281). The descriptions given for these six items are either very short or non-existent, but it is still possible to identify four of these fragments with pieces that are in the National collection of Heritage Malta. These include a Corinthian architrave F2 (Fig. 4a), an architrave decorated with foliage and pearls F1 (Fig. 4b), the corner of a marble corona F58 (Fig. 4c), and a marble soffit and entablature F57 (Fig. 4d) (Table 1).

The location of these fragments within the streets of the old capital also receives confirmation through some visual documentation. First among these is Abela's historical account which is accompanied by drawings showing a couple of fragments of which at

least one (Abela 1647, 220) can be identified as F2. By way of comparison, the lithographs of Houël who visited the archipelago between 1776-9 provide more information. Among the most instructive of these lithographs is his plate 261.1 that shows the architrave and cornice fragment F2 (Fig. 4a) and corona F58 (Fig. 4c) placed on top of each other. F2 is, however, shown as a corner, whereas the surviving piece is not. Moreover, the decoration is shown running in the opposite direction from that of the surviving fragment. On the other hand, in the original sketch now held at the Hermitage (Pecoriano 1989, 338-9) the decorative scheme is exactly the same as seen on the actual fragment. The mirror effect might therefore





**Figure 5.** (a) decorated Attic base F64; (b) dentilled cornice F82; (c) ledged Corinthian capital F71; (d) pediment fragment F325 with the base of an acroterion carved out of the same block (photographs by David Cardona).

be due to artistic licence that Houël took so that his piece would fit into the final configuration of the lithograph. A second drawing (plate 261.2) shows three fragments identifiable with base F64 (Fig. 5a), ledged capital F71 (Fig. 5c), and capital F73 (Fig. 6). These last two capitals are also shown in two of his unpublished sketches (Pecoriano 1989, 239-40 and 254). A third sketch (Pecoriano 1989, 604-6) shows yet another architectural fragment, identifiable with the now broken piece, F1 (Fig. 4b).

More visual evidence of the architectural fragments that lay in the streets of Mdina comes from a watercolour and a drawing by Michele Bellanti (1807-1883). The two drawings show different angles

of Gatto Murina Street (Fig. 1) in front of the Palazzo bearing the same name (figs 7a, b). Interestingly, Bellanti also includes five architectural fragments lying along the sides of the road. Of these, three can be identified with capital F73 (Fig. 6), cornice F82 (Fig. 5b) and corona F58 (Fig. 4c) (Table 1).

All this evidence seems to point out that the area of Mdina between Palazzo Gatto Murina and the Benedictine monastery once held substantial Roman structures, as recent excavations seem to confirm (Bonanno 2005, 161, 217). Moreover, although the exact identification of Casa Azzopardi is still elusive, it is highly possible that this house was later incorporated within the present Casa Inguanez, which seems to





**Figure 6.** Corinthian capital F73 (photograph by David Cardona).

have been enlarged by integrating three separate houses, and which seems to have the entrance located towards the back of Bellanti's streetscape.



**Figure 7.** A watercolour and a drawing by Bellanti showing various architectural fragments lying in Gatto Murina street (reproduced by courtesy of Heritage Malta).

Written records show that some marble fragments were shipped to the Maltese islands in the sixteenth century (Freller 1997, 45, 111; 2004, 88) thus casting doubts on the local origin of such elements. However, it is highly improbable that someone would acquire such large and heavy marble elements, transport them to Mdina, only to leave them along its streets. It is thus more likely that these fragments originally formed part of structures present in the Roman city of Melite. The problem still remains that the surviving architectural elements cannot be attributed to any of the temples mentioned in the inscriptions found. Given that most elements are carved in marble it is fairly plausible to think that they formed part of public buildings. Moreover, three of the elements mentioned above (F2, F57, and F58) have the same decorative scheme, which suggests that they originally formed part of the same structure.

If one follows the same reasoning that the materials found in Mdina most probably originated from ancient structures in the same city, it would then be possible to increase the number of known pieces by another 12 (Table 1). To these must be added a relatively unknown marble fragment (F325)





**Figure 8.** (a) the plain column shaft F369, at the Chapel of San Mikiel is-Sincier at Ġnien is-Sultan (photograph by David Cardona) and (b) column fragment from a silo pit in Mtarfa (photograph reproduced by courtesy of Heritage Malta).

(Fig. 5d) now housed in a private collection in Rabat. Although this was recovered from a field in front of Strickland's estate in Mġarr, this place of discovery is not thought to be the original findspot (*pers. comm.* Dr D. Micallef). This piece remains, however, the only marble element that can be connected with certainty with a temple, not only because it is in marble but also because it is part of a pediment complete with the base of an *acroterion* – elements which the canons of Roman architecture strictly set as a symbol of divinity and royalty (Thomas 2007, 23-5).

The site of the possible temple of Proserpina at Mtarfa remains elusive. Only one fragment of a fluted marble column shaft (F281, Cardona 2010, 619) (Fig. 8b) recovered from a rock-cut silo pit at Mtarfa together with fragments of a Punic cornice (Mallia 1974, 51) survives from the area. Likewise, only one shaft incorporated within an internal pillar of the church of San Mikiel is-Sincier (F369, Cardona 2010, 633) (Fig. 8a) survives from the numerous marble fragments mentioned by Abela around this church (Abela 1647, 209).

### Private houses

Unlike the situation where Roman public buildings are concerned, private structures are plentiful and are much better documented. Nonetheless, there still remain a number of architectural elements that continued to pose questions up to recently. Among these are fragments within the National collection, the provenance of which was not previously known. Others had been recorded in various ways (e.g. reports, notebooks, and photographs) but have since been misplaced or thought lost.

The Roman villa of Ta' Kaċċatura in Birżebbuġa, (Fig. 1) the cleaning of which was completed by Ashby in 1915 (Ashby 1915, 52-66), is one of the most important and best recorded in Malta. The rooms of this villa give onto a small peristyle by 12 partly fluted Doric columns. Fragments of three such columns were in fact found during Ashby's excavations and recorded in a number of photographs taken during the same excavation (Fig. 9a). The whereabouts of these shafts were unknown after the photograph





**Figure 9.** (a) the three column fragments from Ta' Kaċċatura and (b) the puteal from Ta' Kaċċatura (photographs reproduced by courtesy of the British School at Rome, Thomas Ashby collection [php], TA-2230 and TA-2233); (c) reused, partly fluted column shaft F298 (photograph by David Cardona).

was taken and they had been thought lost. However, not only do these three columns still exist, but they can still be seen on the same site in which they were found, among the rubble that ended up in the cistern just below the peristyle (F295-F297, Cardona 2010, 85, 86, 401-3). Strangely enough, neither Ashby nor anybody else records a fourth column fragment (F298, Cardona 2010, 404) (Fig. 9c). One possible answer to this question may lie in the fact that this fragment was built into one of the walls (along corridor 16) and may have been overlooked. In his report Ashby also mentions the discovery of various fragments of a puteal, which he describes as a hollowed-up stone column with a concrete core (Ashby 1915, 56). However, a puteal usually signifies a decorated well-head and not a column (Hornblower and Spawforth 2003, 1280). Nonetheless, the fragments of this puteal had also gone missing after 1915 until a photograph

of these fragments was found in Ashby's photographic archive at the British School at Rome (Fig. 9b). Through this record it has been possible to identify one of the fragments (central fragment shown in Fig. 9b) with one piece in the National collection of Heritage Malta (F67, Cardona 2010, 400).

The remains of the *domus* at Rabat are also well documented even though the reports are not as detailed as those that Zammit published for his other excavations. The architectural elements known to have come from this site are numerous. The National collection contains two particular fragments from plain Tuscan engaged corner columns that have always been labelled as unprovenanced (Fig. 10). A photograph in the photographic archive of the National Museum of Archaeology shows a section of the structures to the west of the *domus* during excavations, with one of these column drums visible





**Figure 10.** (a) Tuscan engaged column from the Roman *domus* (photograph by David Cardona) and (b) the same as it was being excavated (photograph reproduced by courtesy of Heritage Malta).

as it was exposed (Fig. 10). It is therefore now possible to say that these two had been found in the structures around the Roman *domus*. It is possible that these Tuscan shafts formed part of a smaller house in this area but the style cannot as yet be precisely matched to the surviving remains.

### What next?

We have seen that although literary and epigraphic sources make reference to several temples and monuments present on the main island during the Roman period, very little has actually survived. Scholars mention that numerous architectural pieces could be seen in various areas within and around Mdina. Some of these pieces were even depicted in various drawings. The archaeological record has, however, produced very little concrete evidence of such public buildings. Through the careful examination of the written and drawn records and the identification of the fragments now held in various collections, the ancient Roman buildings start becoming better known. It is now possible to suggest that certain pieces are to be linked to buildings that once stood in the main city of Roman Malta. With the exception of the pediment fragment (F325, Fig. 5d) and unless more evidence is forthcoming, it is not possible to say what buildings these fragments are likely to have formed

part of. Nonetheless, the individual architectural pieces provide the opportunity for further study, not least of the evolution of architectural decorations in Malta. Furthermore, the fragments that can now be connected with well-known remains of private residences may themselves also shed more light that may confirm or question the interpretations given so far on the decorative schemes of these houses. It is hoped that the provenance of such material as well as the careful study of the various architectural schemes found on Roman remains in Malta and Gozo will reveal more about the tastes and customs of the ancients in this smallest of Roman outposts.

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