



## online features

### A Monumental Mandate

October 12, 2004

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Photographs by Andrew Lowell Slayman

*Heritage Malta has taken up the challenge of managing unparalleled cultural treasures.*



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The Neolithic Temple Hagar Qim, Malta, at sunset [\[LARGER IMAGE\]](http://archive.archaeology.org/image.php?page=online/features/malta/pegs/malta1.jpeg)

The paradox of the Maltese archipelago—five islands lying in the Mediterranean 60 miles south of Sicily—is how so much cultural heritage came to be packed into such a small area. This nation's vast heritage has been recognized for centuries. En route to Egypt at the behest of King Louis XVI of France, Charles Sonnini stopped at the islands in 1777 and made the following observation, "Before the island of Malta became the domain of the Brotherhood of St. John of Jerusalem, it had passed successively into the hands of several potentates. From the Carthaginians down to the Arabs it underwent a frequent change of masters; the vestiges of antiquity in it are accordingly not few." Sonnini wrote also that he saw in a library "a petrified bone of great size," which he took to be from a quadruped. When Napoleon's fleet ousted the Knights of St. John in 1798, Vivant Denon, one of the scholars accompanying the French expedition to Egypt, visited the library and noted "an etruscan vase found at Gozo, of the greatest beauty, both with respect to the earth and the painting. I likewise inspected a very large glass vase, a lamp also found at Gozo, and a kind of votive disk in stone, with a bas relief, representing, on one of the sides, a sphinx, with a paw placed on the head of a ram. The style of this latter object sufficiently denotes its antiquity."



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Architectural heritage abounds in Malta's capital, Valletta, from baroque churches and sixteenth-century fortifications, to more recent historical structures, such as this modern gun emplacement which has been converted into a restaurant.

While such artifacts were of interest, the megalithic temples on the two largest islands, Malta and neighboring Gozo, were of wonder. Early speculation about these Late Neolithic (3500 to 2500 B.C.) temples ran wild. In 1647, the antiquarian Gian Francesco Abela, vice-chancellor of the Knights, wrote that they were built by a race of giants descended from Noah. Jean Houel, an artist in Louis XVI's court, declared in 1787 that they were Phoenician, while Charles de Brochtorff, who painted the Ggantija temple and excavated at Xaghra in the 1820s called them "druidical." Despite an 1854 attempt by to claim them, and the Maltese islands, as remnants of Atlantis, by the end of the nineteenth century the temples were recognized as prehistoric structures.

If the Malta's monuments needed any international acknowledgment to mark their significance, that came in the closing decades of the last century. In 1980, UNESCO entered on its World Heritage list two Neolithic sites—the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, a subterranean burial complex, and Ggantija, one of the megalithic temples. In 1992, this entry was renamed "The Megalithic Temples of Malta" and expanded to include the temples of Hagar Qim, Mnajdra, Tarxien, Ta'Hagrat (also known as Mgarr), and Skorba. Also placed on the World Heritage list in 1980 was Valletta, the nation's capital. Valletta, named for the head of the Knights of Malta who led defense against the Turkish siege in 1565, is an architectural gem of baroque buildings and unparalleled bastions and ramparts. Sonnini called the Grand Harbor of Valletta "one of the largest and most beautiful in the universe" and claimed that the "fortifications which defend the port and city are the best in the world."



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Malta is famous for its megalithic temples such as Mnajdra, which is famous for its axially alignment; a prehistoric engraving at Mnajdra shows how the temples may have looked. Many of the temples are under the supervision of Heritage Malta.

Faced with this embarrassment of riches—from Neolithic temples to early Christian catacombs to World War II gun emplacements—and growing pressure from development and tourism, the Maltese government reorganized its approach to the past with the Cultural Heritage Act of 2002. Among its provisions, the act established Heritage Malta as the national agency entrusted with the management of national museums and heritage sites and their collections in Malta and Gozo. Heritage Malta began operations January 1, 2003, and later that year it spoke with its chief executive officer, Antonietta Caruana, and her assistant Suzannah Depasquale.



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Heritage Malta's portfolio of sites includes early catacombs. [LARGER IMAGE] [/archive/archaeology.org/issue.php?page=online/features/malta/issue/malta5.jpg](http://archive.archaeology.org/issue.php?page=online/features/malta/issue/malta5.jpg)

Heritage Malta (<http://www.heritagemalta.com>), according to its website, is "the national agency of the Government of Malta set up in 2002 under the provisions of the Cultural Heritage Act and entrusted with the management of national museums and heritage sites and their collections in Malta and Gozo, including seven UNESCO World Heritage sites." Heritage Malta reports to the Ministry for Tourism and Culture and is headed by a board, which includes governmental and nongovernmental representatives. Along with Heritage Malta, the Act created three other official bodies: the Committee of Guarantee, an oversight group; the [Superintendence of Cultural Heritage](http://www.culturalheritage.com.mt) (<http://www.culturalheritage.com.mt>), which functions as a regulatory body; and the [Malta Centre for Restoration](http://www.mca.edu.mt/header.html) (<http://www.mca.edu.mt/header.html>), the national institute for the teaching, training, research, and practice of conservation and allied fields.

The mandate of Heritage Malta is much broader than that of its predecessor, the venerable Museums Department. Again, from the Heritage Malta website, "Following the recognition of four key aspects of the national cultural heritage, namely management, conservation, interpretation and marketing, Heritage Malta bases all its activities bearing in mind that all our national museums and sites have an important role to play in education, learning, access and the generation of revenue to be reinvested in the heritage sector." "Although we're a new organization," comments Caruana, "we have a hundred years of history, to give us a solid foundation, but it gives us a lot of challenges as well."



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Ggantija Neolithic Temple, Gozo, is one of the UNESCO World Heritage sites for which Heritage Malta is responsible.

To some, Caruana might seem an unlikely choice to lead Heritage Malta, since she came to the job with a background in business, not in archaeology, restoration, natural history, or the like. "I think we all have to be humble enough to know where our strengths and where our weaknesses are," she comments. "Obviously my weakness is, I'm not knowledgeable about the sector. I believe in respecting people's expertise and making sure that people who know what they're saying can be allowed to speak up. So that's one thing that rings true, in manufacturing, banking, or anything, you know? If you don't bring the team together and respect the development of the team, there's nothing you can do."

The newly founded agency was put in charge of a portfolio of museums and archaeological and other sites. Among the former were the National Museum of Archaeology, the Inquisitor's Palace, the Museum of Fine Arts, National War Museum, and National Museum of Natural History (all on Malta) and the Museum of Archaeology, Natural Science Museum, Old Prison, and The Armoury (on Gozo). The latter include Ghar Dalam Cave, several Neolithic temple and mortuary complexes, a number of Roman and early Christian sites, and even a traditional windmill. Heritage Malta was also immediately faced with several large projects, such as the moving of its offices from the National Museum of Archaeology to new digs on Valletta's Merchants Street, to a comprehensive upgrade of conservation and facilities at the Tarden megalithic temple complex, to a complete revamp of the "Roman Villa" museum,

The old headquarters was in upper level rooms of the National Museum of Archaeology, which occupies the Auberge de Provence, the residence of the Knights who came from Provence. Heritage Malta's new abode is in the Old University Buildings in Merchants Street. Originally built beginning in 1595 as a Jesuit college, the structure was extensively remodeled in 1847 after a nearby powder magazine exploded. When the Jesuits were expelled in 1788, the college continued as the Public University of General Studies. It was closed by Napoleon in 1798. Since then it was used for a variety of functions, from a secondary school to the Air Raid Precautions Centre for the Valletta district in WWII. The newly restored building was inaugurated as Heritage Malta's home base in September 2003.



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Under a Heritage Malta project sponsored by the Bank of Valletta, the Tarxien Temples, Malta, will be conserved and protected and the site's visitor center upgraded. Early conservation work will be corrected as necessary.

A comprehensive plan to preserve the Tarxien site, a group of four megalithic temples, and improve that visitor's center there was undertaken with funding from the Bank of Valletta. Today, busloads of tourists overwhelm the small visitor's center, and the ruins, exposed to the elements, are deteriorating. The project's objectives are simple: preserve the monument for future generations, make it more accessible to a range of audiences, and enhance the surrounding urban residential neighborhood. The expanded visitor center envisaged in the proposal includes more exhibition space, plus a cafeteria, gift shop, activity center for kids, and offices. And then there's the shelter over the temples. The Tarxien proposal contemplates installation of a protective shelter for the main part of the site, covering an area of about 100 by 170 feet. Of course it has to protect the site, but at the same time it must have the fewest possible number of supports so as not to damage the site, impede pathways through it or interfere with visibility.

Another important project is the complete refurbishment and refocusing of what had been called Roman Villa and Museum of Roman Antiquities. Excavated in 1881, the site—a Roman domus (house) near Mdina—featured polychrome mosaics with geometric and figurative designs and sculptures. As a museum, the re-created Roman house left much to be desired. "Dim, dark, very oppressive. It was very 1880s, very Victorian," says Despasquale. The project includes the conservation of the site and the development of the archaeological ruins behind, she notes, adding that "we cannot really touch the building, it's actually a historic building itself. Although it is a reconstruction, although it may not be true to what they were in the past, but it is still something which is part of our history and we should be very proud of it, the way it actually has been developed, in the 1920s." But the museum had become a mix of exhibits, with assorted domestic, funerary, and agricultural artifacts and displays. The revamped Roman Domus will focus solely on domestic themes. In the future, other themes will be developed at other sites, for example, at the Roman agricultural villa at San Pawl Milq.



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The recently excavated subterranean burial complex at Xaghra, Gozo, stands in need of stabilization and conservation. [LARGER IMAGE] [http://archive.archaeology.org/2015/03/page-online/features/malta/030315\\_malta19.jpg](http://archive.archaeology.org/2015/03/page-online/features/malta/030315_malta19.jpg)

According to Despasquale, this decentralized approach "gives more people to see, it makes people understand a bit more, and we want to make sure that the information and the education we're putting on site reflects the site in itself. We're such a small island, it's ridiculous to actually concentrate everything within one institution, it just doesn't make sense. And one thing we really want to do is to link up the collections and the contexts from where they come. So, for example, if you go to the Hypogeum you see objects that are actually from the Hypogeum." In this scheme, she says, the National Museum of Archaeology is not the sole center, but serves as a tool for research and provides a broad view of what is going on throughout Malta.

Working with other government agencies is critical to the successful outcome of Heritage Malta's efforts. Some cooperation was built into the structure of the agency. "The chief executive of the Malta Tourism Authority is obviously on our board," notes Caruana, "so there is a direct link. Besides that, at various levels, our people have very direct dealings with the people at MTA. With the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, the relationship is a working relationship. Because we are both very young organizations, there are a number of gray areas that are cropping up and that we need to resolve as we go along." Heritage Malta also is working with the private sector and other entities. Among the other organizations and institutions with which Heritage Malta interfaces is the Fondazzjoni Wirt Artna or [Maltese Heritage Trust \(http://www.wirtarna.com\)](http://www.wirtarna.com), an ngo that administers several historic buildings and sites, ranging from the Neolithic temple at Kordin, to the baroque gate of the Cottonera defensive system of bastioned ramparts, to Fort Rinella, a British period Victorian fort. There's also the University of Malta's [Department of Classics and Archaeology \(http://home.um.edu.mt/classics-archaeology/about-us.html\)](http://home.um.edu.mt/classics-archaeology/about-us.html) and the [OTS \(Old Temple Society\) Foundation \(http://www.otf.org\)](http://www.otf.org), whose mission is to "foster international awareness and understanding of Malta's prehistoric heritage."



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Ghar Dalam has the earliest evidence for human habitation on Malta, along with fossilized bones of extinct pygmy hippos. The site and museum are administered by Heritage Malta.

"Heritage Malta is trying to focus its strategy on a number of key areas," says Caruana. "One is the educational and learning aspect in our museums and sites. The other is the accessibility. The other is tourism and economic potential. While we are culture rich, and I think most countries might really wish to have this kind of a history—7,000 years of history, what

with such a small country--we don't feel a sense of pride. Not in our nation, not in our history. We feel that as a nation that's been divided. We don't have civil wars or anything like that, but we've been very bipolar on many, many issues, from politics, to social class, to a lot of other things. Our culture is one thing that can help to unite the population of Malta. And we feel, as part of our mission, to create a sense of identity, a sense of awareness about what is ours, what is Maltese. So we hope to be able to develop a number of outreach programs with the schools, with the older generation as well, trying to get women more involved as well. Because we know that they influence the family very much in Malta."

Accomplishing this means being more active and inclusive as a general policy, adds Depasquale. "There are so many audiences out there. So many. The museums were definitely not socially inclusive. We need to go into society, and not expect society to come to us. We need to go and knock on people's doors and make ourselves heard. And knowing the Maltese and knowing how proud they are of little things, they will embrace all that Heritage Malta will be doing. But we can no longer exclude that partnership with society. We have to make sure that a partnership is obtained, and make people part of the development process and the understanding of what's going on at the sites." Public awareness is beginning to shift contends Caruana. "We are one island in the Mediterranean, which is pretty good for the country," she says, "But there are many good beaches, and the sun shines in other areas as well. Slowly, we are realizing that Malta has much more to offer than sun and sea. Our culture, our religious tourism, can actually play a strong role in promoting our island, and generating revenue, much needed revenue for our economic situation."



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Like this watchtower at Senglea, Heritage Malta keeps guard on the island's cultural treasures. [\[LARGER IMAGE\]](#)  
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**Mark Rose** is executive editor at ARCHAEOLOGY. Thanks are due to Antoinette Caruana and Suzannah Depasquale of [Heritage Malta](http://www.heritagemalta.org) (<http://www.heritagemalta.org>) and to Linda Enix of the [OTS Foundation](http://www.otsf.org) (<http://www.otsf.org>) for their help with this article. Travel to Malta to research this article was made possible by the Malta Tourism Authority. For more photographs by **Andrew Lowell Slayman**, a former senior editor at ARCHAEOLOGY, see [www.slayman.com](http://www.slayman.com) (<http://www.slayman.com>).

For more about Malta's heritage, see the ARCHAEOLOGY articles "[Decoding the Megaliths](http://archive.archaeology.org/0407/abstracts/malta.html)" (<http://archive.archaeology.org/0407/abstracts/malta.html>), July/August 2004, and "[Celebrating an Island Heritage](http://archive.archaeology.org/9707/abstracts/malta.html)" (<http://archive.archaeology.org/9707/abstracts/malta.html>), July/August 1997, and the [OTS Foundation website](http://www.otsf.org) (<http://www.otsf.org>) and the "[Megalithic Temples of Malta](http://web.infinito.it/utenti/m/malta_mega_temples/index.html)" ([http://web.infinito.it/utenti/m/malta\\_mega\\_temples/index.html](http://web.infinito.it/utenti/m/malta_mega_temples/index.html)) website maintained by Daniel Cilia.