

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS WITHIN HISTORIC CITIES

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We are meeting in Greece where, like in Italy, any excavation below surface level is bound to reveal archaeological remains. For the Greeks what I am saying may not sound to be of important but for many of us we do not tend to give importance to what lies beneath the surface. When we are working in our historical cities full of so much beautiful architecture and monuments that we tend to forget that most cities were built on the remains of older cities.

Being responsible for the seven most historical cities in Malta I must admit that in the past we have not given sufficient importance to what lies beneath the surface level of our towns. As I said we are too preoccupied with taking care of our rich architectural and monumental heritage. Besides the argument was always put forward that archaeology is the responsibility of the Museums Department and not of the urban regeneration office.

More than one year ago we have started a very major project in Mdina, our old capital. The project is aimed at the removal of all the overhead wiring, the upgrading of services [drainage, telephones, water, electricity and cable] and the eventual paving of the city. In planning this project our reaction was at first that, as usual, we turn to the Museums Department for assistance in making sure that the archaeological sector is looked after. Yet on discussion we took this time a different approach.

Mdina is today a city of only 400 inhabitants. As its name suggests it was founded, as we know it today, as an Arab city. Yet we know that the City existed [and in fact was much larger] during Roman times at least. The city is on a very high hill at the centre of the island and it is the most natural defensive place to place a city. Therefore there has never been any doubt that the hill must have been inhabited from very early times.

The problems involved in our project are tied to two other organisational problems. The first that the city is very important to our tourism sector and therefore the flow of tourism must somehow not be disturbed. Secondly the residents insist on the right to access to the city [which is limited to them and others with special permission].

We have therefore decided to include the archaeological part of the project as part of our own project, as it was obvious from the start that once we start to trench to put in the new services we will be coming across archaeological remains.

This created a new challenge for us as our office had never done this type of work. We did not want to have to call the Museums Department every time we found some remains. We wanted to have the archaeologist on site all the time so that the project is not delayed unnecessarily.

The solution that we eventually came up with was to utilise the services of young archaeologists who were graduated from University but who were not yet working as archaeologists. They formed a cooperative to take on the challenge of this project. Of course since the law gives the responsibility of archaeological remains to the Museums Department they have worked in close collaboration with them. [Since then the group has enlarged and taken over a number of other projects on behalf of the Museums Department which is very understaffed.]

Before we started the project an exhibition was held so that the public could understand what

we wanted to do and what we expected to find once the work was started. In fact this exhibition was quite a shock to many as Mdina has always been thought of primarily as a very important urban space and for its architecture.

Immediately we started the trenching works we realised how right we had been. From Day 1 we found an incredible amount of pottery, glass, iron bits, small bones and other material. We found various remains of walls, fortifications, towers and houses. We found pieces of Roman columns, Byzantine and Punic remains, and numerous items from daily life. We found that the level of the town during Roman times must have been at least two and a half meters below the present street surface.

We have aroused tremendous interest in our finds. Mdina has always been popular with Maltese for a short walk during the weekend evenings. With the news coming out about our finds, more and more Maltese turned up over the weekends to look at the latest finds.

Of course the residents are never pleased with the extra delays that the excavations create as it is obvious that each time we have a new find the actual project itself is delayed. Working in Mdina means working in a lot of small narrow streets. It is difficult enough to find the space to put in the service systems. [This part of the project in itself is very difficult to put together and we have had to adapt our know-how, normally linked only to restoration work, to handling engineering solutions]. The problems with residents, together with the challenges created by the flow of tourism, gave this project a very important element of management. In fact I can state that the managing of the project was the single most important aspect of the project.

The problems with residents were dealt with mainly through circular letters sent in every two weeks to inform them of the next phase of the project and through personal contact. A technical officer on site was particularly requested to try and tackle day to day problems with the residents and shop owners. At times I had to personally go on site to settle some question on which no agreement could be reached. We also asked the residents to take the opportunity to tackle some maintenance problems on their facades and a small grant was offered by us for such work.

The major challenge was the flow of tourism. We tried our best to direct the tourist flow through signage but in reality the tourist, especially when in a group, tend to ignore signage and still attempt to go where they intended to go in the first place. This created a lot of problems for us. The tourism authority requested us to give more attention to tourism and yet we simply could not hold up our project. We had to develop solutions every day depending on which part of the town we were working in. Again the main problem here was management and the project eventually took up much more of our time than originally planned.

Part of the problem related to tourism is the lack of cooperation by tourist organisers themselves. In spite of our plea, through various means, for them to use alternative routes they tended to ignore such appeals or state they had not heard about them. This created particular problems when working in some parts of the town such as in the area of the Main Gate.

Our archaeologists were also requested as much as possible to find the time to answer questions made by tourists. A considerable number of tourists did make questions and we felt that we had to try and give an immediate answer. Though this often delayed our work we felt that it was a necessary part of our work.

The work is now coming to an end. The main challenge remains now how to present these finds to the future visitor. Most of the remains had to be covered up again after study and very intense documentation. The narrow streets of Mdina did not allow us the possibility of leaving

them visible. Where possible services were rerouted away from the major finds.

We have however identified two areas which we would like to allow to be visible for the future. One is an area in the main square in front of the Cathedral: this area has mediaeval foundations above very big Roman blocks. The other is a very beautiful part of a Roman wall that formed part of some monument or temple. [There was also a third possibility of Byzantine foundations but it was felt that they would not justify enough interest.] The two sites have been temporarily covered but we have enormous pressure to move so that these temporary covers are removed. We have commissioned two studies about this, one local [with two ICOMOS members] and one from our Portuguese friends Joam Campos and Rui Losa. Some options have already been studied. Certainly any proposition will have its difficulty and one has to decide whether to give importance to aesthetic solutions or to ones that would conserve the site the better possible. One solution that has been suggested is to cover up the sites and have the possibility of looking in through a periscope.

We are also discussing the setting up of a small Museum to put in a lot of the finds [such as the pottery] that could be uplifted. We have also commissioned an archaeological map of the city.

Mdina has up to known been renown as a very important partly mediaeval partly baroque city. It is a well preserved city. We now know another important angle of the city, a city with very deep links to our past. Our project has helped scholars to understand what the city looked like before the sixteenth century. We now know much more about its importance in Roman and Byzantine times. We now need a good system of interpretation to ensure that what we have learned can be appreciated by those who visit it in the future.