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# Museums

(Period covered:

1st January, 1987 to 31st December, 1987)

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## 1. ARCHAEOLOGICAL SECTION

A stone conservation laboratory was set up within the Museum of Archaeology following the recommendation of Dr C. Price, a UNESCO expert sent over in 1982 to advise on the establishment of this laboratory. Several important items of equipment were received from UNESCO during 1987. These will enable the laboratory to function as a centre for the study of the problems concerning the deterioration of the prehistoric temples and their subsequent conservation, as well as carrying out conservation work on important stone artifacts. The laboratory is being run by Miss Joanne Cassar B.Sc. who was also trained in stone conservation at the University of Florence under a UNESCO Fellowship.

A rock-cut tomb was located and subsequently investigated by the Archaeological Section at Madliena early in March. On excavation the tomb proved to be a one-chambered shaft inhumation grave with a funerary platform at the back cut parallel to the entrance. The chamber, however, was found to have already been thoroughly rifled and only yielded some skeletal remains and a few potsherds of Punic type.

Considerable attention was given to the restoration and documentation of various items in the reserve collection of the national Museum of Archaeology with a view to further extending and improving the exhibited material in the Punic and Roman Halls of the Museum.

A long term research project on Maltese prehistory was initiated in June, with excavations on the prehistoric site at Xaghra, Gozo, known as 'Iċ-Ċirku'. These excavations, organised jointly by Cambridge University, the national Museum of Archaeology and the University of Malta, followed a preliminary resistivity and proton magnetometer survey carried out on the site in March.

The project, planned to be carried out in yearly campaigns on various sites in Malta and Gozo will study the economy and society of the builders of the megalithic temples, and will be set against the changing physical environment in Prehistory.

The main objective of the field work carried out throughout June, was the identification and the examination of a pit dug inside the megalithic circle at Xaghra in 1824 by Otto Bayer. The earliest description of this circle, of which only a few megaliths still survive, was given by Jean Houel, Court Painter to Louis XVI of France, who also illustrated its remains as they appeared in the late 18th century. The site became known as 'The Brochtorff Circle' after a watercolour view of Bayer's excavation painted by the noted German artist Charles Frederick Brochtorff who settled in Malta. Shortly after Bayer's excavation the pit was refilled with rubble.

Only a small area could be cleared in this year's campaign, but enough to show that Bayer left undisturbed Archaeological deposits at the bottom 3m below the present field surface. Other trenches within the circle have uncovered burials and potsherds of both the Temple Period and Bronze Age. One remarkable find is a fragment from a small bull's head in terracotta, finely modelled and probably belonging to the Tarxien phase of the Temple Period (c. 3000-2500 B.C.).

A second separate excavation was carried out on the remains of two prehistoric huts (reported to the Museum by Mr J Attard of Xaghra) cut into by house building on the Mġarr Road near Ghajnsielem. The largest and best preserved of these was an oval torba hut base about 7.5m x 5m with a central mud-brick pillar to support the roof. The second hut was of poorer quality construction and measured less than 2m in diameter.

The Anglo-Maltese effort ran extremely smoothly, and as the project is planned to continue for several years it is hoped to learn much more about the earliest inhabitants of the Maltese Islands.

Suitable iron railings have been designed to enclose the Mnajdra Megalithic Temples, and work on their manufacture was taken in hand. It is hoped to further protect these Temples by the employment of watchmen both during the day and night. Arrangements are also being made to provide the site and Haġar Qim with proper facilities including running water and a telephone service.

A good number of Phoenician items from the Archaeological Museum were prepared for eventual display at the international exhibition on the Phoenicians at Palazzo Grassi in Venice.

The cellar at the national Museum of Archaeology was cleared for the purpose of utilizing the area for exhibitions and structural works were taken in hand. This will provide a much needed Exhibition Hall planned on modern standards to satisfy a long-felt need. Work on



the restoration of the facade of the Auberge de Provence was also taken in hand, but progress on these projects was extremely slow as the workmen detailed to work on them were in fact also working on other projects.

### FINE ARTS SECTION

In the Fine Arts Museum, the construction of two rooms on the upper floor were completed. These will house the Joseph Briff and the George Borg Bequests and are expected to be opened to the public shortly.

An important medieval fresco at the Abbatija tad-Dejr Catacombs was ably restored and detached by Mr Alfred Briffa, one of the restorers in the Fine Arts Section, and will shortly be placed on permanent display at the museum of Fine Arts. This important fresco has for long been deteriorating and various foreign experts entrusted with its restoration had found it technically impossible to detach it. Its transfer to the Fine Arts Museum will preserve this unique fresco for posterity.

Another restorer, Mr George Farrugia, carried out restoration works on the ceiling of Verdala Castle, which had been unfortunately painted over in the past. He is also restoring a very old icon from the Greek Church in Valletta, which was almost completely destroyed in the last War. A number of paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts and from various Ministries were also restored.

The main entrance of Spinola Palace at St Julians was utilized as an Exhibition Hall, and Maltese artists can now exhibit and sell their works there.

An Exhibition of Maltese Contemporary Art was held at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, and Embassies abroad were provided with Maltese works of art, casts of archaeological items and photographs of the Island's cultural heritage.

A record number of exhibitions were held at the Fine Arts Museum and on the upper floor at the Museum of Archaeology.

The antique furniture exhibited in the Inquisitor's Palace at Vittoriosa was restored. It is intended to find a better location for the Folklore Museum at present housed in the same building.

### POLITICAL HISTORY SECTION

The Museum of Political History at the Auberge de France at Vittoriosa was temporarily closed with the aim of reorganising its contents to give a more balanced and comprehensive view of Maltese social and political history.

### NATURAL HISTORY SECTION

Preparations in connection with the opening of a new Museum of Natural History inside the Gozo Citadel were finalized early in January, and the premises were inaugurated at the end of the same month. This new Museum houses sections on evolution, a general introduction to the natural sciences, and sections on flora, birds, marine life and the earth sciences of Gozo.

Work on the extensions of the marine aquaria in the Museum of Natural History at Mdina were continued, and special shatter-proof glass was imported from Belgium. Water pumps, filters, crushed coral and aluminium framing are also being provided for this purpose.

Better lighting facilities were installed at Ghar Dalam, and structural works were also carried out to provide a more adequate space for office and storage facilities. New iron railings were installed inside the Cave.

An exhibition on the colourful world of sea-shells was held in June at the Gozo museum of Natural History. This remained open to the general public through the summer months.

At the Museum of Natural History at Mdina, the Friends of the Museum sponsored an exhibition. This included fossils, shells, birds, flora and fish, as well as water-colours and ink drawings prepared by members of the Society. The latter also donated an electronic typewriter and a photocopier to the National Museum of Natural History.

Throughout the year the Natural History Section mostly concentrated on the reorganisation of the Ornithology Hall. Ecological notes on the breeding behaviour and status of birds are being prepared.

Several donations were received by the natural History Museum during 1987, the more important being that of a Griffon Vulture from the Department of Agriculture.

### THE WAR MUSEUM

In the national War museum at St Elmo, a new annexe, previously used as a workshop, was renovated and utilized for display purposes. New better quality display units were acquired.

Many wartime items were donated by visitors during the year, including diaries, logs and experiences which are of great value to the archives.



It was unfortunate that Mr Philip Vella, Association Secretary, died at the end of the year after a long illness. His enthusiasm and dedication over many years has made the Museum the success that it is.

### **LASCARIS WAR ROOMS**

A further operations Room, 'The Filter Room' was completed and opened to the public. The combination of this room and the Fighter Control Room became a popular attraction during the year, not only to tourists but to Maltese Nationals as well.

Work has continued, although slowly, on the Combined Operations Room, in particular the large 28' x 20' wall map. Research on these rooms together with two further rooms is continuous as is the search for original equipment and uniforms.

J. ZERAFA  
*Director*

22nd April, 1988