

21 – Archaeological Sites

Hal Saffieni Hypogeum and Tarxien Temples

While the Chapter 20 itinerary takes advantage of the ‘North Tour’ sightseeing bus, supplemented by local buses, this itinerary makes most use of the ‘South Tour’. The first archaeological stop is Tarxien where there are two sites: the Hal Saffieni Hypogeum – or underground burial vault – and the Tarxien Temples, the historical setting for both of which is in Chapter 1. You have to book for a guided tour of the Hypogeum in advance, to limit numbers and thus minimise damage. It is in Burial Street, Paola, which from the Hop-On Hop-Off bus means going back and turning to the left. Get off at the same stop for the Tarxien Temples, but they are a fair walk back – turn to the right and find Neolithic Temples Street. It was not adequately signposted from the main road when we went; press the driver for precise directions and remember how to get back to the stop!

I exhausted my liking for caves in Crete, so have not visited the Hypogeum, but it is said to be special. It is from the Saffieni period, 3300–3000 BC, and the most fascinating archaeological find was the so-called ‘Sleeping Lady’, given pride of place in the Valletta Archaeological Museum and in literature.

Underground burial sites lend themselves to mystery and myth; the Hypogeum is no exception. One of the stories is more ‘concrete’ than the other because Harry Luke quotes in full the letter he received in the 1930s from two English women – their names discreetly withheld – passing through Malta on a steamer:

Sir,

Miss ___ and I visited the Hypogeum last Saturday morning at 11 a.m. We were taken down by a guide to join other visitors from our ship (the P. and O. s.s. *Balranald*) and, after finishing the last bit of their tour with them, we were asked by the guide to stay down there while he let them out.

We waited about five minutes, and then, as time was short, began to explore by ourselves. We had gone nearly as far as it is possible to go, and had reached the end of the pathway leading to the ‘Holy of Holies,’ when the lights were turned out and we heard the entrance door at the top shut and bolted. We called immediately very loud, and when no answer came realised it had been done intentionally and that we were in a pretty serious predicament.

After a very horrible twenty minutes spent groping about in the pitch darkness we found steps leading up to a room, in the farther corner of which was a glimmer of light. Eventually we arrived at the staircase and daylight.

At the top we tried to open the doors with two keys hanging on the wall, but finding them useless we waved them out of the bars of the doors and shouted our hardest to a girl leaning out of the window of a house

opposite. She saw us quite soon and came running across. The three of us pulling together forced the doors open, and at the same moment the guide appeared from a door at the side. We took no notice of his gesticulations, but went straight back to the bus and to the ship.

I enclose our entrance tickets and an order for five shillings which we should like given to the girl who came to help us, if she can be found. She was fairly tall, with dark bobbed hair, and was dressed in green. She could not talk any English.

Hoping we are not troubling you unnecessarily, and hoping also that anything of the sort may be prevented happening in the future,

We remain,

Your obedient servants,

[two signatures]

Luke traced the girl in the green dress, and gave her the 5 shillings but, writing his book years later, he could recall no other follow-up. I think I can work out what might have happened, but I leave it to you!

The other story concerned either a Miss Lois Jessup who worked for the British Embassy (there would have been no British Embassy in Malta; perhaps it was that in Rome) or a Mrs Constance Lois Jessop from New York – this in an account from the *National Geographic*. On a first tour to the Hypogeum, Lois saw some ghostly ‘tall humanoids’ processing in a layer beneath her. She made a second visit after 30 children and their teacher(s) had disappeared in the same passage that she had explored. But a new guide denied all knowledge. She noticed there had been a cave-in. Mothers could hear their children screaming but could not tell where from. It is perfectly safe to visit the Hypogeum today; although archaeologists found buried there the bones of 6,000 or so people from the Ħal Saflieni period, the only ghosts will be in your imagination.

The Tarxien Temples are quite different: their excavated remains are all above ground. The most striking find there was the lower half of a statue of a large figure known as a ‘fat lady’. A replica is in place, and a reconstruction of the original is in the Valletta Archaeological Museum. The controversy surrounding the sex of so-called ‘fat ladies’ is explored in Chapter 1. One of the terracotta figures Sara A Rich allies to midwifery in Neolithic Malta came from a rubbish dump outside the Tarxien Temple complex, and Diana Woolner found the graffiti of ships on a slab in one of the temples.

Tas-Silġ

The next archaeological stop of the bus is Għar Dalam but, as far as this itinerary is concerned, there are two sites before it, both of which I visited by car with a driver. The tour bus narration airily pointed out that ‘over there’ was once a temple of Juno. It meant Tas-Silġ on a slight incline just north-east of the fishing village of Marsaxlokk.

This site was not open to the public in the autumn of 2013, but a newspaper article suggested that it was only a question of time. In the meantime, you can request entry from Heritage Malta; but I found it possible to see the site without going in. Before you get to it, the little church – Our Lady of Snows (Madonna ta' Tas-Silġ) – is easier to spot. Bettina Dorell's daughter, named on the plaque outside as Angiolina Muscat Cassia Dorell, had it built in 1834, replacing an earlier one (Chapter 7). The text continues, 'The church had a small palace built next to it and the Marchioness left in her will that whoever decided to continue to provide spiritual services in the church would benefit from the property, fields and the palace she left.' Today, the palace is a monastery, but weddings can be held in the church

With the church on your right, don't go straight ahead, which seems the more obvious route, but slightly swivel and turn up to the left and, keeping left, you will find the archaeological site is then on both sides of the road. The Temple of Juno is, as Chapter 2 recounts, that connected with the Roman Verres; but there is a Phoenician layer beneath and a temple to Astarte, as Italian teams, including women archaeologists, have discovered. Other finds include murex shells used for dyeing cloth which links this site to the next on this itinerary. Neolithic finds, mostly pottery shards, have been excavated beneath the Phoenician layer, including a 'fat figure'.

Birżebbuġa, Borg in-Nadur and Għar Dalam

Of these three places, the Hop-On Hop-Off bus only stops at Għar Dalam. The adventurous could probably hike back to Birżebbuġa; or the local bus from Valletta (82, 85) is an option; mine was again a car.

The earliest Sicilians to arrive, in about 5000 BC, did so in the Birżebbuġa area, and the earliest finds of their presence are linked to Għar Dalam (Cave of Darkness). Chapter 1 tells of the women who lived there in Neolithic times and the women archaeologists, led by Margaret Murray, who excavated, starting in 1920.

The archaeologists stayed first at the Sailors' Hotel in Birżebbuġa. Of their 1923 visit, Gertrude Caton-Thompson, who appears first in the Introduction, writes of them renting a house there:

Only two bedrooms were available (the third we needed for store), so Dr Guest and I made the best of each other. The room by night was largely occupied also by fleas and mosquitos. What struck us as interesting was that all the fleas came to me and the mosquitos to her. We exchanged the position of beds standing in diagonally opposite corners to see what happened. Just the same. We fell to argument. She maintained that biologically we must belong to different blood groups: I maintained entomologically that mosquitos and fleas were as incompatible to each other as black to whites. We never got the answer.

It is revealing that as recently as the 1920s someone who, when older, was to become a leading archaeologist, could make such an unscientific assumption about racial differences. Margaret Murray and Edith Guest excavated the Bronze Age site Borg in-Nadur, Gertrude at Għar Dalam.

Claudia Sagona drew Birżebbuġa and Borg in-Nadur and, indeed, Tas-Silġ together in her article about cloth dyeing detailed in Chapter 2. The dyeing pits were on the foreshore at Birżebbuġa and in Borg in-Nadur, the murex shells were found at Tas-Silġ. It is fair to assume that women were involved in many of the processes of the textile industry.

Earlier than the Murray excavations, Elizabeth Douglas Van Buren excavated a Roman villa near Borg in-Nadur with Thomas Ashby in 1915 (Chapter 2). Although Ta' Kaccatura is not open to the public, you can watch a satisfying YouTube exploration of it. Elizabeth seems to be the earliest woman archaeologist in Malta, though governor's wife Helen Smyth attended Anetto Caruana's excavations at Ghajn Klieb between 1890 and 1892 (Chapter 2), and Donna Luisa Strickland those of Albert Mayr at Mnajdra in 1901 (Chapter 1).

As you enter Birżebbuġa, there is a sign; take the turning right up a small hill and wiggle round to the left and you come to the fence around Borg in-Nadur (Fortress on the Nadur Hill). Once again, you could approach Heritage Malta to enter, or you could view from the gate.

Tamara Marks and her husband lived in airforce accommodation in Birżebbuġa at the beginning of the Second World War (Chapter 15).

Għar Dalam and its museum are on the main road, the next Hop-Off stop after Marsaxlokk, and open to the public.

Hagar Qim and Mnajdra

These sites are said to be in Qrendi, but they are within the boundary of the village and the Hop-Off bus drops you on their doorstep. A church in Qrendi and the nearby Maqluba depression are in Chapter 22 itinerary. If you were travelling by car, it would make sense to do them all together. A local bus is also an option.

Excavation started at Hagar Qim, which dates from the Tarxien period (3000–2500 BC), in 1839 and it was assumed for some time to be Phoenician; indeed, those travellers who rushed to see this marvel thought that it was. Lady Frances Egerton wrote in 1840:

One afternoon we devoted to a ride to Crendi where there are some lately discovered and most curious Phoenician remains, wholly unaccounted for and incomprehensible. They have more similarity to Stonehenge than any other place I have seen but they are unlike that.

At much the same time, Lady Grosvenor wrote of finds she had seen in the public library, which predated the Archaeological Museum:

Here ... are placed the wonderful little idols, lately discovered at Crendi, eight miles from Valletta and supposed to be Phoenician; they are about the size and shape of some of the fat Chinese porcelain monsters, but made of stone, about six inches high, and headless. By the appearance of the holes in which the heads were fixed, they must have been of metal. The ruins in which they were found, were only lately discovered, in the middle of a bare plain, and partaking of the Druidic character, are curious and inexplicable.

And **Isabella Romer** (1798–1852), English novelist and travel writer, wrote of the excavations in *A Pilgrimage to the Temples and Tombs of Egypt, Nubia and Palestine in 1845–6* (1846) that they ‘brought to light the remains of what is supposed to have formed part of either a Phoenician Temple, or a place of sepulture ...’. And **Eliza Gardner** (1820–1878) called her drawing, seen here, ‘Phoenician ruins, Crendi’. She was married to William Bethell Gardner of the Royal Horse Artillery, and they seem to have arrived in Malta in 1847. Their infant son Alexander was buried in the Msida Bastion Cemetery in 1848. Together the couple produced *A Series of Views in Malta* (1852), she the drawings, he the text. The headless ‘Venus of Malta’, whose sex is definite, was found at Hagar Qim and several ‘fat’ figures whose sex is open to discussion (Chapter 1).

Mnajdra is 480 yards due west of Hagar Qim, down a paved slope towards the sea. Its three structures, the excavation of which started in 1840, are smaller and better preserved – discounting vandalism in 2000 which has been repaired. The upper structure dates from the Ġgantija phase



54. Phoenician Ruins, Crendi (Hagar Qim) by Eliza Gardner, from *A Series of Views in Malta*, courtesy of Yale Center for British Art Paul Mellon Collection (file no. 2038523-0002)

(3600–3200 BC). One interpretation, reported by Juliet Rix, is that the plan of one of these temples ‘suggests a primeval form with the worshippers entering the womb-like entrance in a rite of fertility’. The second figurine from which Sara Rich drew her conclusions for ‘Midwifery and Neolithic Malta’ (Chapter 1) was found here.

This is the last archaeological stop on the South Tour route.

Mġarr

The North Tour, which you may have made use of from Valletta to Mdina, has one more archaeological stop, Mġarr. You may need to be quite keen to get off, though this area is important archaeologically and, as Juliet Rix notes, there is a good restaurant in the village.

The Skorba site, excavated in the 1960s, is linked to the Grey Skorba Phase (4400–4300 BC) and the Red (4400–4100 BC). From the Mġarr Phase (3800–3600 BC) evidence of huts and, therefore, a Neolithic village, have been found. From both phases recognisably female figurines have emerged. I suggest how women may have lived then in Chapter 1. Parts of the site are behind wire netting, others are in private, farming, hands. The situation may change, as may archaeological finds. It is worth monitoring these online when planning a visit.

Archaeological Museum, Valletta

This very easy to spot museum in Republic Street is in continual development and, thus, improvement. You may be disappointed if particular figures are at exhibitions abroad, as the ‘Sleeping Lady’ from the Saflieni Hypogeum was in the autumn of 2013. But she was back the following year and is really very special, lying there in a room of her own. Make sure you peer round and look at her back, and note the traces of red ochre. You can get replicas of her, sometimes in the museum shop, but I decided against in the end. A better representation is contained in the wonderful photographs by Daniel Cilia in Isabelle Vella Gregory’s *The Human Form in Neolithic Malta*.

Other finds that should be there include the colossal statue from Tarxien, and the headless ‘Venus of Malta’ from Hagar Qim; look at her back, too. There is a headless Hagar Qim group and Red Skorba figurines. There is a case of Tarxien heads – note the hairstyles and features – and little Tarxien figures pointing to different parts of their anatomy. There are jewellery and ornaments – for example of shells and teeth – from various places, found mainly with burial remains. Since my last visit, the rooms upstairs contain Bronze Age and Phoenician/Carthaginian finds. The museum continually develops what it exhibits.