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**Report on Mission to  
MNAJDRA MEGALITHIC TEMPLE  
(MALTA)**

**10–12 May 2001**

**Dr Henry Cleere**

*World Heritage Coordinator, ICOMOS, Paris*

# **Report on Mission to Mnajdra Megalithic Temple (Malta), 10–12 May 2001**

## **1 Background**

On the night of 13 April 2001 an act of vandalism took place at the Mnajdra Megalithic Temple, one of the Megalithic Temples of Malta inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1992. This was widely reported by the world's media, and the World Heritage Centre of UNESCO and the ICOMOS World Heritage Secretariat were also informed. After consultation it was decided that ICOMOS should send an expert mission to Malta to study the situation and to prepare a report for consideration by the Bureau of the World Heritage Committee at the end of June 2001.

The mission, which took place on 10–12 May 2001, was carried out by Dr Henry Cleere (World Heritage Coordinator, ICOMOS, Paris).

## **2 Programme**

Thursday 10 May	am	Arrive in Malta from Larnaca (Cyprus).
	pm	Preliminary discussion with Minister of Education, Director of Museums, and other senior officials, plus representatives of the ICOMOS National Committee for Malta.
		Visit to Hagar Qim and Mnajdra Megalithic Temples.
Friday 11 May	am	Visit to Kordin, Skorba, and Ta' Hagra Megalithic Temples.
		Visit to Malta Centre for Restoration (with lunch).
of	pm	Meeting with Executive Committee of ICOMOS Malta and representatives of Malta NGOs.
Saturday 12 May	am	Final meeting with Minister of Education.
	pm	Return to Paris

## **3 Officials and others met during Mission**

The Hon Louis Galea	Minister of Education, Government of Malta
Dr Anthony Pace	Director of Museums
Dr Joseph Cannataci	Chairman, Malta Centre for Restoration
Dr Joseph Schiro	Director of Studies, Malta Centre for Restoration

Mr Michael Sant	Director, Finance and Administration, Malta Centre for Restoration
Mr Ray Bondin	Director, Valletta Rehabilitation Project, and President, ICOMOS Malta
Mr Joe Magro Conti	Planning Officer, The Planning Authority
Mr Norbert Borg	Research and Development Officer, The Planning Authority, and Secretary, ICOMOS Malta
Mr David Mallia	Heritage Advisory Committee, The Planning Authority
Professor Anthony Bonanno	University of Malta
Dr JoAnn Cassar	Institute for Masonry and Construction Research, University of Malta.

#### **4 Damage to the Monument**

The act of vandalism on the Mnajdra Temple took place on 13 April 2001 (Good Friday): it was discovered by an employee of the Museums Department. The authorities were immediately informed and the Minister of Education, the Director of Museums, and the curatorial staff of the Museums Department immediately visited the site, accompanied by police officers.

The enclosure fence around the site had been cut and the intruders dislodged and overturned over sixty of the massive stones (megaliths) from which the five-thousand-year-old monument was constructed. This was a systematic operation, judging by the way in which the surviving upper course of stones in the Middle Temple had been dislodged and toppled into the interior of the monument. Lesser damage was incurred in the Lower Temple and in some outer parts of the complex. Considerable effort was needed to displace the stones, necessitating the use of crowbars or some other form of leverage.

Most of the displaced stones had toppled into the interiors of the monuments. A number had been fractured (though some of these fractures were along the lines of earlier breaks that had been repaired). There was also a considerable amount of flaking and chipping, resulting from stones having crashed on to stone pavements below. These pavements, and one fine stone staircase, were also badly impacted. A number of crudely incised symbols (crosses and crescents) were found on some stones.

#### **5 Action taken by State Party**

##### *5.1 Immediate action*

Extensive police investigations began immediately after the discovery of the vandalism, and these are still in progress. However, at the time of the mission no positive information had been obtained regarding the identity of those responsible for the damage, nor of their motives.

Enhanced security measures were put in place at the same time on the Mnajdra Temple (and also on a number of other archaeological sites on Malta and Gozo. A 24-hour surveillance is now in place, carried out by the Museum Department's own security staff (which has been increased in size by the transfer for watchmen from other parts of the Education Department). The Works Division is advising on the installation of improved security measures, including the construction of stronger and higher fencing and the provision of better facilities for the watchmen. The Mnajdra

site is floodlit at night, power being supplied by a petrol-driven generator in anticipation of the installation of a sub-station to bring power from the national grid. Visitors are now excluded from the site itself, though they can still enter the neighbouring Hagar Qim Temple.

In the longer term, a consultant has been retained to prepare an overall security plan for all the monuments in the care of the Museums Department.

## 5.2 *Longer-term action*

A Project Plan for the period May–July 2001 was prepared by the Museums Department after discussions with the Minister of Education and other Cabinet members and is currently being implemented. This is based on a combination of restoration and the replacement of displaced stones. The conservation strategy is aimed at assessing in the first instance the structural damage, the conservation problems, and the archaeological problems. For this work the Museums Department has the support of a Scientific Committee, set up by the Minister of Education. It is comprised of leading specialists in the fields of archaeology, heritage management, stone conservation, and structural engineering. The Committee

The structural survey has been carried out by Dr Alex Torpiano (TBA Periti). In his opinion most of the damage is not beyond repair and the monument is structurally stable. As a result it was determined that it would be possible to restore the site as closely as possible to its state before the vandalism took place. To leave the site in its present condition was not deemed to be desirable, since this would result in serious further deterioration.

As a preliminary to restoration, a detailed survey is being carried out of the damaged parts of the monument. This was in progress during the mission: it is being carried out on a contract basis by a Maltese archaeological consultancy, the Archaeology Services Cooperative. In addition to detailed documentation of the damage it also includes some archaeological investigation in order to learn more about the original construction, and also of later interventions. There will at the same time be a rectified photogrammetric survey of the damage by a commercial company, Working Light Ltd. Dr JoAnn Cassar of the Institute for Masonry and Construction Research, University of Malta, is carrying out a full assessment of structural damage to the Temple so as to prepare recommendations relating to the restoration work.

The next phase of the project will be concerned with restoration and structural works on site, on the basis of the work carried out in the preceding phase (due to be completed by the end of May 2001). The programme provides for this phase to be completed during June 2001. It will involve stone conservation, re-erection of fallen stones, removal of recent filling, drainage, and other necessary actions.

The final phase, scheduled for July 2001, envisages the preparation of final reports by the stone conservation and structural engineering consultants and the archaeological contractors, along with the installation of monitoring measures on site. The programme provides for the reopening of the monument to the public on 9 July 2001.

## **6 The Cultural Heritage Strategic Plan**

Since 1995 the Government of Malta has been working on a thorough revision of the provisions for the protection, preservation, and presentation of its rich cultural heritage. A number of studies and reviews have been carried out since that time, including a draft Heritage Act in 1996 (since abandoned). In January 1999, conscious that little real progress had been made, the Minister of Education outlined a policy framework that involved some radical changes in institutional structures, legislation, and operational relationships. Special consideration would be given to the World Heritage sites and monuments of Malta. New legislation has been prepared to implement these recommendations. A Cultural Heritage Interim Board has been established to oversee the preparations for the new strategy and structure. The vandalism at Mnajdra has

intensified efforts to provide Malta with a structure for preservation, protection, and management best adapted to the needs of its cultural heritage.

## **7 Comments and recommendations**

- i. The State Party is to be commended for its prompt and effective response to the appalling attack on this great monument.
- ii. It is imperative that the police should be pressed to ascertain who was responsible for the vandalism. Whilst the prime suspect appears to be the trappers of migrating birds, who have erected illegal hides on the Government-owned land between and around Hagar Qim and Mnajdra and who nurse grievances against the authorities, the systematic nature of the vandalism and the appearance of crude engraved symbols seems to indicate that there may be other suspects, motivated not by local difficulties but with wider reasons for this form of demonstration. Painted graffiti on some of the stones at Mnajdra some years ago may support this hypothesis. If this is the case, similar attacks may be anticipated on other manifestations of the Maltese heritage, and so the completion and implementation of the overall security plan is a matter of great urgency.
- iii. The Mnajdra Temple is an isolated site and so security measures must be very effective. Fencing must be strong and difficult to scale or breach, and floodlighting at night is also important. A 24-hour surveillance system is essential. It is also important for the watchmen to be in radio or telephone communication with the local police station, so as to ensure prompt action in case of emergency.
- iv. It has been established elsewhere that providing guardians with distinctive uniforms has a deterrent effect so far as minor infractions (graffiti, climbing on stones, etc) are concerned.
- v. It is arguable whether it is desirable for visitors to be allowed access to the Mnajdra Temple. Access to nearby Hagar Qim is more easily controlled and so visitor access should not be a problem. It might therefore be reasonable to keep visitors outside the Mnajdra temple complex, at the same time providing viewing platforms, with adequate interpretation signage, on the higher ground overlooking it, from which an excellent view of the monument can be obtained. This also has the advantage of linking the monument more intimately with its physical context down to the sea.
- vi. Removal of the bird trappers and their structures is clearly a political matter fraught with problems. However, it is to be hoped that the State Party will give serious consideration to the progressive removal of these "squatters" in the coming years.
- vii. Given the role of the Planning Authority in matters of this kind, it is important that the proposed new law should ensure that mechanisms exist for the closer coordination of its work with that of the new institutions being proposed.
- viii. The Mnajdra Project Plan is well designed and will ensure a more secure future for this great monument. However, the timetable seems to be unnecessarily short. Visitor numbers during the summer months are lower than at other times of the year and so it is difficult to justify a completion date of 9 July 2001. It might be prudent to delay this until early September, so as to allow for unforeseen delays.
- ix. The extra time could be spent in carrying out a more detailed analysis of the stone conservation problems, so as to evaluate the internal stability of the fallen megaliths.
- x. Whilst the qualifications of the structural engineering consultant are impeccable, this is an unusual case. The expert meeting in 1999 highlighted the complex structural problems of this five-thousand year-old monument, and these must have been compounded by the recent vandalism. There also needs to be serious consideration

given to the stability of the soil build-up behind and between the stones, given that it will have been exposed to weathering as a result of the removal of stones. Consideration might be given by the State Party to an application to the World Heritage Fund for technical assistance in the form of an international structural engineering expert.

- xi. The State Party is also to be commended for the action now being taken to revise and update the legal, administrative, and scientific structure of its cultural heritage management programme, with its special emphasis on the requirements of the Maltese World Heritage sites and monuments.

## **8 Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to the Maltese authorities, and in particular to the Hon Louis Galea (Minister of Education), who made every effort to ensure that I was given free access to sites and documentation and were ready to discuss every aspect of the conservation both of the Mnajdra Temple and of the Maltese cultural heritage in general. I also wish to express my heartfelt thanks to the indefatigable President of ICOMOS Malta, Ray Bondin, for his help in arranging the logistics of this visit.

**Henry Cleere**

ICOMOS, Paris

21 May 2001

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