

HAL SAFLIENI HYPOGEUM

MANAGEMENT PLAN



CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

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Prehistoric Sites Department, Heritage Malta

HAL SAFLIENI HYPOGEUM

Description

The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, an underground cemetery used by Malta's prehistoric society, is an exceptional prehistoric monument testifying the artistic and architectural accomplishments of this prehistoric culture. It was used for burial throughout the Żebbuġ, Ġgantija and Tarxien Phases of Maltese Prehistory, spanning from around 4000BC to 2500BC. The Hypogeum is found in Paola close to the Tarxien Temples, the two sites being partly contemporary and possibly used by the same society.

The Hypogeum was discovered accidentally in 1902, at a time when the Paola area was the focus of extensive housing development. While workmen were digging a bell-shaped well for a house that was then being constructed above the site, they broke into one of the rock-cut chambers. This discovery was not reported immediately until the house was completed in 1903, when the owners informed the authorities.

Initial inspection of the site suggested that it belonged to the early Christian era, but further exploration of the site soon indicated otherwise. Extensive investigation of the Hypogeum commenced in 1904 under the direction of Fr Emmanuel Magri and by 1906 most of the site had been excavated. Unfortunately, Fr. Magri died in 1907 in Sfax, Tunisia, without having published his findings or any reports of his excavations and his notes have never found. The site was first opened to the public in 1908. However, even at this time it was apparent that further excavations which could shed light on its past were possible within the Hypogeum. These works were taken up by Sir Temi Zammit, then Curator of the Museum in Valletta, and excavations continued until February 1911.

The Hal Saflieni complex consists of a series of rock-cut oval chambers set on three different levels, one lying below the other. The earliest level to be created is the uppermost one, which originally consisted in a cavity scooped out of the brow of a hill overlooking the innermost part of the Grand Harbour. In the sides of the cavity, a number of openings and chambers were cut for the burial of the dead. Excavations carried out at the site in 1990-92 indicate that a monumental structure was originally present above the underground chambers marking the entrance to the underground cemetery, but the full extent of this structure is unknown. Light would have entered the complex through a small opening between the Upper and Middle Levels and it would have been necessary to use artificial lighting to navigate through some of the chambers.

Most of the rock-cut chambers are oval in plan whilst some chambers' walls and ceilings hold unique wall-paintings in red ochre depicting spiral and honey-comb designs; the only prehistoric wall paintings found on the Maltese Islands. One of the chambers decorated in red ochre holds a small niche which echoes particularly when someone speaks into it. This effect may not have been created intentionally by those who carved out the chamber and niche; however, it would have surely been exploited as part of the rituals that took place within the chambers.

The burial ritual that was used had more than one stage. It appears that bodies were probably left exposed until the flesh had decomposed and fallen off. The remaining bones were then gathered and buried within the chambers, together with what appear to be some of the personal belongings of the individual. Copious amounts of red ochre, a mineral pigment that was probably imported for Sicily, were deposited with the bones as part of the ritual, perhaps to infuse the bones with the colour of blood and life. Individuals were not buried separately, but piled onto each other in a vast ossuary.

Perhaps one of the most striking characteristics of this site is that some areas are hewn in imitation of the architecture of contemporary above-ground Temples. These carved imitations of megalithic interiors found in the Hypogeum are of tremendous importance, for a number of reasons. The first reason is that they shed light on the way that the megalithic 'temples' may have been roofed originally. When the ruins of the buildings were discovered, none of the roofs were found preserved. However the walls of the chambers were often noted to be corbelled inwards, suggesting that they had originally been roofed over. In the Hypogeum chambers that were carved to represent megalithic interiors, the roofs were carved to imitate a built roof of corbelled masonry, with one ring of stone overhanging the one below, in order to span the chamber.

Excavation of the Hypogeum yielded a wealth of archaeological material. The numerous human bones found within the site indicate that it was originally used as a cemetery and may also have served as the site for the funerary rituals that in all probability accompanied these burials. The large amount of human bones excavated from the site led Temi Zammit to estimate that over six thousand individuals had been buried at Ħal Saflieni throughout the span of time that it was in use. It appears that bodies were laid in a crouched position when buried and once the flesh had decayed away from the bones, these were pushed aside to make place for fresh burials.

Pottery vessels decorated in intricate designs were excavated from the chambers. These may have been used as part of burial rituals or may have also carried grave goods placed close by the deceased. A considerable number of shell buttons, stone and clay beads as well as amulets were also collected during the excavations; possibly worn by the deceased upon burial. Little stone carved animals and birds which may have originally been worn as pendants, were also discovered at the site.

The most striking finds from the Ħal Saflieni Hypogeum are the stone, and clay figurines. These depict human figures which are seated, standing or even lying down. The most impressive of these figures is that showing a woman sleeping on a bed or 'couch', popularly known as the 'Sleeping Lady' and now on exhibit at the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta. This figure is a work of art in itself portraying a keen eye for detail. The 'lady' is depicted with her right hand clasping a pillow on which her head rests, whilst her left hand is resting gently on her right elbow. The bed she is lying on is slightly concave as though it is bending under the weight of the figure it is supporting.

Statement of Significance

This statement outlines the principal values that give the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum its significance today.

1. World Heritage: Outstanding Universal Values

The value of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum has been recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention provides for the inscription of sites of outstanding significance in the World Heritage List. The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum was inscribed on this List in 1980. The inscription of the Hypogeum recognizes that it fulfils Criterion iii as laid out in the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, as a site that “bears unique testimony to a civilisation which has disappeared”.

The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum is a unique and remarkable burial structure, completely hewn out of the living rock on three levels, one below the other. One of its most remarkable distinguishing characteristics is that its interiors imitate the built interiors of the megalithic monuments of the same period.

The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum also fulfils two of the other Criteria laid out in the Operational Guidelines. It represents a masterpiece of human creative genius (Criterion i). It is also an outstanding example of a type of architectural ensemble which illustrates a significant stage in human history (Criterion iv).

Furthermore, all sites inscribed on the List must satisfy two other conditions. They must meet the test of authenticity, and they must have adequate protection to ensure their sustainable management.

At present (2011) there are 936 sites worldwide inscribed on the list, of which 3 are in Malta. In nominating these monuments for inclusion in the World Heritage List, the Government of Malta has committed itself to safeguard these sites for the enjoyment of present and future generations on behalf of the international community.

2. Cultural Heritage Values

2.1. Evidence of burial activity in prehistory

The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum is one of the two most important prehistoric burial sites in the Maltese islands. The deposits and finds from the site have yielded a wealth of evidence on burial ritual and belief systems during the period when it was created. The finds associated with the burials also shed light on other questions, such as Malta’s contact with the outside world.

2.2. Architectural

The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum is one of the best preserved and extensive environments that have come down to us from the Neolithic.

Unlike the fragmentary remains that usually survive from built structures of this period, the unusual preservation of the rock-cut chambers at Hal Saflieni allow us to study a system of interconnecting spaces very much as they were conceived and experienced by a Neolithic mind.

One of the most striking and fundamental characteristics of the site is the imitation of built, architectural interiors in the rock-cut chambers. The imitation of the interior of a

megalithic temple built above the ground not only provides evidence on the corbelling system that was used to roof the temples, but is also important in terms of the development of human processes of cognition and representation. The imitation of built architecture in the rock-hewn chambers at Hal Saflieni is perhaps the earliest example of such developments.

2.3. Artistic

The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum also yielded several important artefacts of great artistic significance. Foremost amongst these is the so-called 'sleeping lady', a miniature ceramic figurine that is widely held to be one of the great masterpieces of prehistoric anthropomorphic representation.

Unique paintings have also been found on the stone walls of some chambers. Similar paintings have not been found in any other site pertaining to this culture.

2.4. Discovery of prehistory

The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum played a central role in the history of Maltese archaeology. When the site was reported in 1902, archaeology in the country was entering an intense period of activity which was to transform our understanding of Maltese prehistory, as well as the understanding of archaeology in Malta and how it should be managed.

In 1903, the Museum was set up as a separate institution and the exploration of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum was the first work taken in hand by the new Committee of Management of the Museum. In addition, the vast depository of new material and information from the Hypogeum provided evidence that was to confirm the prehistoric origin of the Maltese Temple Culture, which until then most scholars had attributed to the Phoenicians.

3. Social Values

3.1. National identity

The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum has become a powerful symbol of Maltese national identity, and has often been represented on postage stamps and currency. The unique nature of the site, together with the new presentation of the site, has also made it a flagship of national pride.

3.2. Economic value

Tourism has become one of the pillars of the Maltese economy. Cultural tourism is a vital component in the promotion of the Maltese islands as a distinctive holiday destination. The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum makes an important contribution to this strategy, because of its unique character, and the high quality of the visitor experience that is offered.

4. Research and Educational Values

4.1. Educational resource

The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum is an educational resource of considerable potential. It may be utilised to illustrate the achievements of the Temple Culture, and the prehistoric origins of human exploitation of the stone materials offered by the Maltese environment.

4.2. Research potential

There is great scope for further research within and around the Hypogeum. Potential foci of research within the site itself include the study of the physical anthropological evidence left in secondary deposits after the early 20th century excavation, the evolution of the labyrinthine complex over time, the methods and techniques employed in its creation, its high-quality documentation, its conservation history and the development of appropriate conservation treatments.

Current Framework and Key Issues

Legal Framework

Ownership and Responsibilities – stakeholders

- The site itself is state owned, and is managed by Heritage Malta – Malta's National Agency for museums, conservation practice and cultural heritage. All houses overlying the site except one were acquired in 1989. These were dismantled and visitor facilities were built in their place.
- most of the buffer zone is privately owned.

Legislation

The principal legal instrument for the protection of cultural heritage resources in Malta is the Cultural Heritage Act (2002 and subsequent amendments), which provides for and regulates national bodies for the protection and management of cultural heritage resources. Building development and land-use is regulated by the Development Planning Act (1992), which provides for and regulates the Malta Environment and Planning Authority. There is no Maltese legislation enacted specifically to protect UNESCO World Heritage.

Planning issues – buffer zone, enforcement, development

- The site is in an urban area, and therefore careful regulation of building development is of fundamental concern.
- The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum is protected by a buffer zone recognized in the UNESCO inscription. The buffer zone is formally scheduled by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority as a Grade A archaeological site. The buffer zone of a Grade A archaeological site must include a minimum of a 100m radius from the baseline of the site itself, and is subject to wide-ranging restrictions of building development. In the case of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, most of the land included within the buffer zone is already developed, and falls within the limit of development. In such cases, current practice is to permit controlled redevelopment. Irreversible changes to the landscape, such as rock-cutting, are usually prohibited during such redevelopment.
- Road works are currently regulated by Transport Malta and not by the MEPA. This may result in impacts on the area in the immediate vicinity of the site.

Conservation

In 1979 the Maltese Government made a formal submission to UNESCO requesting the inscription of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum on the World Heritage List. As part of the UNESCO assistance to member states for the preservation of the cultural and natural heritage, Janusz Lehmann conducted an expert mission in the same year with the objective of assisting the Maltese government to establish a programme for the conservation of Hal Saflieni. Recommendations in Lehmann's report included:

- the introduction of walkways and limiting visitor numbers so as to mitigate visitor impact
- improvements to interpretation facilities
- the study of the microclimate of the site
- the control of light levels and duration so as to limit the growth of algae which were damaging the painted decorations.

In 1989 four of the houses built over the Hypogeum's Upper Level were demolished permitting the archaeological re-evaluation of this monument.

Following a number of research projects the site was closed to the public between 1991 and 2000. During this period an extensive conservation project was undertaken with the aim of providing an improved visitor experience while limiting fluctuations of the microclimate inside the site. As a result:

- Visitor numbers started being limited to 10 persons at any one time
- Light levels and intensity started being automatically regulated
- Visitor impact was mitigated by the introduction of a walkway which also served to make the visit safe
- The site's microclimate, which studies showed would be best kept at a constant temperature of 19°C and a relative humidity of 85%, was buffered from external conditions through the construction of a new entrance, foyer and interpretation area. Air conditioning systems within these areas were designed to condition air to optimal conditions before it enters the site.

"The re-opening of the site to the public (in 2000) is by no means the end of the Hypogeum Conservation Project. On the contrary, the true test of the project is only beginning. The success of the measures that have been introduced to safeguard the Ħal Saflieni Hypogeum for the future, while remaining accessible to visitors, may only be gauged by intensive scientific monitoring of the behaviour of the site over a number of years." (Grima R. 2000)

The 2000 project was successful in that the microclimate of the site has been relatively stable, and a significant reduction in dark biological growths can be observed. Since 2000, however, the equipment installed has witnessed a number of faults and is now obsolete. Two projects are in progress to start dealing with this problem:

- A project supported by a grant from Norway through the Norwegian financial mechanism has as a main focus the documentation of the site. Main actions included the full documentation of the site in 3D, acquisition of environmental monitoring equipment which has been placed in several areas of the site and through which data about the microclimate of the site is being captured and analysed.
- An engineer with experience in cultural heritage has also been contracted by Heritage Malta and is working on designing a new environmental control system, incorporating both passive and active measures.

An application for funds has also been submitted to conduct more studies, to assess the current condition of the site and to survey micro-biological activity within the site, and also to be able to implement the necessary works for a better environmental management of the site.

One recurring challenge is infiltration of water within some areas of the site. Research is being conducted to identify the source of this.

Access

Access and sustainability

- Physical access to the site is limited to 80 visitors per day. This results from i) conservation needs, ii) safety requirements, and iii) the size of spaces within the site, making it necessary to limit visitor numbers to ensure that visitors can enjoy the site adequately.
- The nature of the site makes it physically inaccessible to people with special needs.
- Parking spaces close to the site are not always available.
- The current set up of 10 visitors per hour discourages visits by large groups of people, including school visits.

- An educational programme for the site is currently not available.
- Current display is not engaging to visitors.
- Current facilities (bathrooms, staff room etc.) are not adequate.
- Entry fees for the site are often seen to be prohibitive. On the whole, however, visitors acknowledge that the price charged is fair following the visit. In spite of the price, most of the available slots are booked throughout the year.
- Identification of all potential risks for the site, staff and visitors and how to manage them is necessary.
- Events for and involving the community are currently few and very limited.
- Occasionally, Heritage Malta gets requests for special visits, photography, filming, interviews and/or press events. Requests for special visits are also sometimes made by researchers who may require to access areas which are currently not accessible to the general public. These are currently considered on a case by case basis, always ensuring that the '10 visitors at any point in time' threshold is respected. Filming and photography is generally not allowed. Standard Operating Procedures for such requests are not currently publicly available.

Research Opportunities