ANCIENT MOSAIC PAVEMENT DISCOVERED AT NOTABILE:
A HISTORICAL APPRECIATION
Anton Bugeja

Discovery and early works
The third of February 1881 would not end like another normal working day for Public Works employee Grazio Bugeja. At around 11.30 that morning, when digging holes to plant trees at Saqqaja esplanade had reached a depth of a little more than a metre, Bugeja encountered the remains of a splendid ancient mosaic pavement (Fig. 1). It appears that a number of persons came to know of the discovery and in no time a police constable was on site with orders to guard the remains. By the afternoon the Superintendent of Public Works was informed, the latter bringing the finds to the attention of the Chief Secretary to Government in the following morning. In a rare moment in the history of the islands when construction activity would positively and directly contribute to the preservation of heritage, Emanuele Luigi Galizia asked permission to search for further remains, charging the expenses on the vote for road maintenance. The go-ahead for exploration was given just a day after the discovery, starting a long series of events which would lead to the formation of one of leading symbols to the Roman occupation of the Maltese Islands.¹

finds. The mosaic pictures and important finds were stored in Galizia's office, bones removed to the police station and the other minor finds stored in rented rooms close to the excavations.

Clearing operations came to an end on May 17, 1881 (Figs. 2, 3). The members of the committee appointed to examine the excavations, however, had already seen to the protection of the site and proposed that a roof should be erected over the two mosaics and the edifice provided with a covered entrance (Fig. 4). The building was to house the relics found during the excavations and opened to visitors against an entrance fee. A call for tenders to erect the building was issued on May 25 and the building works were ready by the end of the year. Opening the building to the public proved more problematic than expected as remuneration for the services of a suitable person who would prevent relics being donated to visitors was considered as not sufficient. It is indeed significant that at a time when trained curatorial staffs were unheard of, a collector of antiquities like Mr. Mr. They was being proposed as a caretaker.

Indeed, a caretaker would only be appointed just a year after the discovery and the museum was opened to the public on February 20, 1882. By then an inventory of the items found during the excavations had been finalised (Appendix)

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2. The Malta Times and United Services Gazette 12 February 1881, 2.
3. From E. L. Galizia, Supt. of Public Works, 16 February 1881, in National Archives Malta (NAM), CSG01-8031/minute (12, 14.II.1881).
5. From E. L. Galizia, Supt. of Public Works to V. Houlton, Chief Secretary to Government, 22 March 1881, in NAM, CSG01-8317/works (22.III.1881).
6. See plan by E. L. Galizia dated 15 June 1881, photographed by Formosa in Caruana 1881.
7. From E. L. Galizia, Supt. of Public Works to V. Houlton, Chief Secretary to Government, 10 May 1881 in NAM, CSG01-8775/works (10.V.1881).
10. Debates of the Council of Government, 1882 Sitting No. 37 Column 685-686. Mr. They was a well-known collector of antiquities and part of his collection eventually became incorporated to that of the later Museum of Archaeology.
11. The first caretaker was Lorenzo Magro, who was appointed on February 15, 1882.
and the building and its contents entrusted to the syndic of Mdina. Rules were also in place to control admittance to the site. These stipulated the entrance fee and ensured that no relics were touched or removed from their place. As soldiers and sailors were expected to visit, no one with the slightest signs of alcoholic intoxication was allowed to enter the building.

A report describing what was found on site was available in print by late 1881. Although it was one of the first works by Caruana as librarian, it reveals an extensive knowledge of the literature concerning Maltese antiquities. Using this background knowledge, Caruana suggested that the mosaics discovered at Rabat belonged to a building that was in place by the first century BC and further proposed that the building underwent further changes during the 2nd to the 4th centuries AD. The presence of refined mosaics, statues (Fig. 5), ivory hair pins, and earthenware discovered in a building which enjoyed a superb vista over the underlying valley, made Caruana conclude that this was the official residence of an important personage. It is surprising that more than a century later this interpretation remains largely correct.

**Significance of the Discovery**

The discovery of the Roman Domus and subsequent early work on the site represent an important milestone in the history of heritage management on the Maltese Islands. In no other year would the threshold of progress in this field be surpassed with such frequency and success. In less than twelve months archaeological remains were excavated and later protected from damage, first by temporary measures and later by a permanent covering. The latter initiatives were probably the first of their kind on the islands, resulting in the earliest museum in Malta built to house an archaeological site. When one considers that megalithic sites like Ħaġar Qim, Ggantija and Mnajdra, which were excavated more than forty years earlier, were still used at the time (and for the years to come) as picnic gatherings or for quarrying, the case of the Roman Domus is indeed remarkable.

The challenges faced by those concerned were many, but these were confronted swiftly and successfully. The finances required were obtained at a time when no money was reserved for the preservation of antiquities. Unlike many other archaeological remains, the Roman Villa Museum (as it came to be called) had an officially appointed caretaker and the curatorship of the building and remains

12. NAM, CSG01-10588/boards (28, 29 xii.1881).
13. From A. Scoberras, Superintendent of Police, to V. Houlton, Chief Secretary to Government, 7 February 1882 in NAM, CSG01-10952/police (7.ii.1882).
15. ibid., 9-22.
17. Picnics were still held at Mnajdra in the early 1990s.
delegated to a local authority – a transfer of responsibility regarding antiquities that was certainly ahead of its time.

The achievements following the discovery of the Roman Domus were not restricted to the developments occurring at Rabat. When the discovery was brought to the attention of the Council of Government on February 16, 1881, a discussion on the local antiquities ensued amongst members of that entity. The comments made by the council members were surprisingly erudite. The Chief Secretary, Sir Victor Houlton, identified Hercules and Omphale on one of the discovered mosaics while Ferdinand V. Ingloitt was already proposing that the function of the Roman Villa at San Pawl Milqi was different from the one at Rabat, the latter correctly interpreted as the remains of a town residence. More significantly, at a time when even rival local politicians would subscribe to a common patriotic consensus, Mr Salvatore Cachia Zammit stood up in the Council and called for a permanent commission to study newly discovered remains and propose means for their preservation.

By April 1881, a Permanent Archaeological Commission (or Commissione Archeologica Permanente if your sentiments were pro-Italian) was meeting and calling for excavations near Ta’ Kaċċatura and Mnajdra. The Commission advised the government to acquire the utile dominiun of the former site from its tenant. Consequently, through the first known successful negotiations by government to acquire a site for its archaeological value, use of part of the lands at Ta’ Kaċċatura became under the full control of the Crown later that year. While in the following two years, no works were carried out at Mnajdra, excavations near Borg in-Nadur were followed by restoration of the megalithic wall and the building of a protective wall around the reservoir at Ta’ Kaċċatura. The Commission also called for a national museum for the islands’ archaeological history and palaeography, proposed covering the impluvium of the Roman Domus with transparent material and was also requested to discuss methods of preserving the remains of a ‘Greek building’ at Zurrieq. Surrounding Haġar Qim, Mnajdra and the Kordin megalithic remains with enclosures and providing them with sheltering sheds for custodians was also considered by some of the Commission’s members, but these plans only materialized – in part – decades later.

18. From E. L. Galizia, Supt. of Public Works to V. Houlton, Chief Secretary to Government, 22 March 1881 in NAM, CSG01-8317/works (22.iii.1881), Also Debates of the Council of Government, 1881 Sitting No. 18 Column 388-389.
22. These works were finished by November 18, 1882.
23. For details on the Permanent Archaeological Commission see files CSG01-8450/boards (2.4.iv.1881), CSG01-10649/boards (21.i.1881), CSG01-12767/boards (15.x.1884), CSG01-12799/boards (15.x.1884) and related documents at the National Archives, Malta. See also Debates of the Council of Government, 1883 Sitting No. 4 Column 125.
Two events had a more permanent effect on the development of research and preservation of antiquities in the late nineteenth century. After 1882, through the outcome of discussions on Caruana’s report, a sum of money was to be voted annually for the exploration and preservation of antiquities on the islands. Equally important was that through his contributions, Caruana came to be identified as the leading antiquarian on the islands. His work was not only positively appreciated by the Governor and called for by the other members of the Permanent Archaeological Commission, but the elaborate nature of his ‘Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiquities’ even surprised members of the Colonial Office. Through all this, Caruana emerged as the main person responsible for exploring and preserving new archaeological discoveries, a role that remained assigned to him irrespective of his future appointments and retirement from the civil service. The result of all this was that after a long period of sporadic explorations and efforts to preserve the island’s heritage, the developments following the discovery of the Roman Domus meant that future works would be characterized by a continuity that was not evident in previous efforts.

Like all the pages of history, however, individual persons are rarely solely responsible for change. The developments in archaeology in the late nineteenth century were not exclusively the result of Caruana’s work but also the consequence of the coming together of various persons through a series of events at the right time. This statement is particularly relevant to the immediate developments following the discovery of the Roman Domus. Caruana has often been considered responsible for excavations at the Roman Domus but his contribution was mainly linked to being a member of the supervising committee and to writing his excellent memoir about the site. The available documentation reveals that it was Galizia, in his capacity of Superintendent of Public Works, who was mainly responsible for the excavation and documentation of the site. This overlooked fact is surprisingly also attested by Caruana’s own writings. Furthermore, the decisions regarding the future of the mosaics were in the hands of the supervising committee and not the direct responsibility of Caruana. Were such decision solely in the hands of Caruana, the Rabat Museum would probably never have materialized in the late nineteenth century. The idea of a museum on site went directly against Caruana’s wish to have a central museum where all the antiquities would be preserved in one place, and when a proposal to place the discovered items in the ‘Roman Villa Museum’ was forwarded, Caruana refused such plans.

In a wider scenario, these events were building upon the legacy of the concerted effort previously provided by the members of the Society of Archaeology, History and Natural Sciences of Malta. This society sought and received support from the government, and some of its members were entrusted to produce various reports on the ancient Christian and ‘pagan’ monuments existing on the islands. Although pioneering initiatives were made towards the preservation and documentation of antiquities, the scope of the Society’s activities was mainly of an academic nature. Unfortunately such efforts were short-lived, probably as prominent members soon left the island or passed away. Various publications by the members of this society brought the endeavors to the attention of a wider international audience but an enduring change in the management of the island’s antiquities did not materialize in the immediate years following the Society’s existence.

Addressing the ensuing persistent neglect and damage to archaeological monuments became a major challenge in the late nineteenth century. The establishment of the short-lived Permanent Archaeological Commission ensured that such challenges were taken up by active members within the Council of Government. Through excavations, preservation and protection of ancient relics, the Commission provided crucial contributions to transform remains of antiquarian interest into Malta’s archaeological sites. Subsequently, through Caruana, the role of the Commission became the responsibility of a prominent member in the civil service and in the following years of progress, Caruana’s dreams and aspirations were shared by writers in local and foreign publications and more importantly his duties called upon by other entities such as the Works and Police departments. The consequence of all these changes was that by the 1880s, a working policy to safeguard the islands’ antiquities started to emerge.

In all these developments, a turning point is clearly perceived in the events occurring during 1881. The discovery of that mosaic pavement at Rabat was a key moment in such events that would not only provide a valid contribution to Maltese archaeology but also serve as one of the main catalysts for better heritage management on the Maltese Islands.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank the staff at the National Archives for their excellent services, Ms I. Vella Gregory and Dr M. Mizzi for reviewing an earlier version of this article and Mr J. Attard Tabone for his support in many ways.

26. In the early twentieth century, Caruana’s role was taken up by the Committee of Management of the Museum, of which Caruana was also member.
27. Caruana 1881, 4.
30. The best available synthesis remains the contribution by Sagona, op cit., 13-18. The emphasis of different details in this article is the result of research currently being undertaken by the author.
Appendix

Inventory of objects from the remains of the Roman edifice, discovered at Notabile in February 1881, and contained in the building erected thereon.

Press No. 1
Earthenware vessels – large size (2 striped red), 8
Earthenware vessels – medium size (1 striped red), 17
Earthenware vessels – small size, 23
Earthenware vessels – small (horse shaped), 1
Jar handle with inscription, 1

Press No. 2
Bronze bucket, 1
Bronze handle, 1
Adeye (?) with wooden handle, 1
Pieces of rusted metal
Bronze coins, 68
Fragments of glass
Fragments of bones
White coral, 11
Earthenware vessels – large size, 8
Earthenware vessels – medium size (3 striped red), 8
Earthenware vessels – small size, 23
Earthenware vessels – small size (bird-shaped), 1
Earthenware vessels – small size (horse-shaped), 1
Saucers, 8
Jug and vase covers, 23
Fragments of terra cotta vases with masks, 2
Terracotta head of horse, 1
Terracotta figure, 1
Bronze whistle (?), 1
Cone of lead, 1

Press No. 3
Earthenware vessels – large size, 2
Earthenware vessels – medium size (black), 1
Plates larger sizes (1 black, 1 red), 3
Plates medium sizes (red), 1
Fragments of plates larger size (black), 3
Fragments of plates medium size (red), 7
Fragments of plates medium size (grey vitrified), 1

Fragments of plates medium size (black), 1
Fragments of plates medium size (ring shaped), 1
Cups-small size (1 red, 7 black), 13
Vase (black), 1
Saucers, 5
Jug and vase covers, 4
Fragments of glass, 11
Fragments of burnt bones
Fragments of burnt wood
Earthenware lamps, 37
Soldering iron, 1
Wooden mortar Lid, 1
Bottle mouths-glass, 8
Fragments of earthenware (coloured), 3
Fragments of earthenware (with trinacria), 1
Fragments of earthenware, 3
Fragments of metal nails
Metal rings, 2
Metal handle, 1
Metal chain, 1
Fragments of bones (wind-instrument), 7
Metal tube, 1
Bone net-tool, 1
Wooden pin, 1
Fragment of lamp, 1
Wooden frame with 7 bronze coins, 1
Black and white mortar,
Small bronze buckle, 1

Press No. 4
Fragments of mosaic pavement (border with fruits, flowers, marks +c), 8
Fragments of wall plastering (divers colors and patterns), 97
Fragments of coloured marble slabs, 7
Fragments of marble statues, 15
Fragments of inscription on marble, 12
Ivory bodkins (1 with pine and 1 with jug shaped head), 15
Earthenware saucers (1 containing 3 heads, a metal ring, and a button), 2
Earthenware fragments bi-cylinder shaped, 3
Fragments of handle of terracotta vases, 6
Bronze Mask, 1
Bronze Plate, 1
Terracotta heads, 2
Fragment of bronze sheet with Roman letters, 1

Over Presses
Fragments of jar and a piece of wood embedded in stone, 1
Fragments of tomb-stones with cufic inscriptions, 4
Fragment of stone with metal tube and vine branch, 1
Fragment of Oxidised metal, 1 (cancelled)
Necks of earthenware jars, large size (one supported by a fragment of marble moulding with a lion mask), 2
Fragment of a jar containing fragments of metal, wood +c, 1

Under Presses
Fragments of Tomb-stones (ornamented), 2
Earthenware jar, large size, 1
Upper part of earthenware jar, large size, 1
Fragments of earthenware vessels, large size, ornamented (4 different patterns), 4

Fixed to the wall
Mosaic picture, representing Hercules and Omphale, 1
Mosaic picture, representing Autumn, 1
On the ground under pictures, stone frame for mosaic pictures, 1

In corner of room near stone bench
Sundry and divers fragments of marble, stone, vessels, +c.

On stone bench
Fragments of mosaic pavements, spiral-shaped, 7
Fragments of mosaic pavements, diamond shaped (white, yellow, green and black, broken), 1
Fragments of mosaic pavements, spear shaped (white and black), 5
Frame with fragments of red mortar pavement, spotted with white marble dices [?], 1
Frame with fragments of course [probably coarse] mosaic pavement, 1
Frames with specimen of terracotta tile-pavements:–
Lozenge shaped tiles (3 different sizes), 3
Hexagon shaped tiles (2 different sizes), 2
Fragments of mortar pavements, 5
Lava slabs (furrowed), 3
Bricks, 4
Skulls, 8

Under stone bench
Doric stone capitals, 5

Doric architrave, 1
Doric pieces of shafts of fluted columns, 8
Piece of column, not fluted, 1
Fragments of white mosaic pavement, 8
Fragments of Terracotta Slab—Large size, 2
Shell embedded in stone (fossils), 1
Fragments of stone mouldings and foliage in corner between stone bench and statue
Marble statue (from the waist downwards) on stone pedestal, 1
Lower portion of 3 marble statues, one broken in two, 3
Fragments of drapery, marble, 7

One stone bench supported by two fragments of fluted columns
Marble bust (female), 1
Marble head, 1
Marble fragment of head, 1
Marble fragment of foot, 1
Marble fragments of base (black), 2
Marble fragment of fruits, 1
Marble fragment of a leg, 1

Under stone bench
Miscellaneous fragments of stone and marble mouldings
Marble statue, (without head) on fragment of stone frieze, 1
Fragments of tomb-stones, 20
Fragments of earthenware vessels—large size, 25
Marble statue (without head) on fragment of stone frieze, 1
Fragments of earthenware vessels—medium and small size,

[24 written in margin by pencil]

Peristylium
Pieces of shaft column, capital + entablature (architrave new),
Nine boxes and a basket containing mosaic dices [?] fragments of marble, marble paving, lozenges and fragments of mosaic,

Marble fragments removed from Piazza Cattedrale, in January 1882, and placed outside, and on each side of the entrance of the building mentioned above
Fragments of inscriptions, two embodied in, 1
Fragments of cornices, 3
Fragments of Frieze, 1
Fragments of Capitals, 2
Fragments of Cornice with panned soffit, 1
Fragments of columns, 26
Fragments of unshaped blocks, 4

[A transcribed adaptation of F. Vassallo's copy, dated 9.2.1882, of an inventory made by E. L. Galizia, the former preserved in NAM, CSG01-10588/boards (28, 29.xii.1881). The number of items is represented after description. Notes by present author are enclosed by square bracket]