

Bones still at Valletta basement, government insists



Human remains found at the basement of Casa Cassar in Valletta were still on site and were being investigated, the government said yesterday.

The remains, found a few years ago, are believed to have belonged to Knights of the Order of St John and are being considered proof that the basement of Casa Cassar (also known as Casa Lanfreducci) was an extension of the crypt of the church of Our Lady of Victory, Valletta's first building.

NGO Fliimkien għal Ambjent Aħjar, while avoiding the issue whether the bones belonged to the knights, had attacked plans for the conversion of the basement into a backstage area for the Renzo Piano roofless theatre, saying this would desecrate the original burial place of Grand Master Jean Parisot de Valette and the burial ground for the knights who fought in the Great Siege of 1565.

The Office of the Prime Minister denied any work would be taking place in the crypt. Neither had there been any excavations at or alterations to the Casa Cassar basement.


"All the Grand Harbour Regeneration Corporation and its architects have done was take measurements and carry out the research required for the development application which is still being evaluated," the OPM said.

It was reacting to a Labour Party statement expressing concern on the project.

Contacted, a spokesman for the Maltese Association of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta said the association would voice its stand on the matter after the council met today.


Questions sent to the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage remained unanswered at the time of writing.

Comments

Astrid Vella(4 days, 1 hour ago) 


Ivan, now you're even contradicting yourself! You say that "the issue should have been referred to the competent authorities in 2009 so all the people in question had ample time to realize that no action had been taken." Well the reports WERE referred to the competent authorities in 2009!!! And still no action was taken!

By your words you've just proven why we finally have no choice but to take things to the media.

James A. Tyrrell(4 days, 8 hours ago) 

@Ivan Cassar. As I said earlier it is obvious that you have your own agenda in this matter and that agenda is to put down the very people who are trying their best to bring such irregularities to the attention of the general public. If you don't know how things work in Malta by now then you will never know. The way FAA handled the information was perfectly correct and if they had went down a different route the toilets would be flushing by the time anyone took notice.

I do agree with you that archaeological finds should not be miss-handled and tucked away at one's whim but you need to understand that this action was not carried out by FAA. The way these bones were handled was an absolute disgrace and if it hadn't been for FAA you amongst others would never have known they existed. It's interesting to note that the people you refer to, as incapable amateurs have proven more effective than the professionals in protecting what is left of Malta's heritage.


Ivan Cassar(4 days, 14 hours ago) 

2)

I hope you agree with me that this delivers the wrong message to the general public that archeological finds can be miss-handled and tucked away at one's whim. That such a message should come across from the paladin of our cultural heritage is sad indeed.

Astrid Vella(4 days, 5 hours ago)

Ivan Cassar, here we go again: Nobody was trying to tuck anything away, as Dr Abela Medici confirms: Dr Anthony Abela Medici(1 day, 8 hours ago) I was informed back in 2009 that MASMOM did report in writing to the Ministry of Resources and Rural Affairs early in 2009 and I am reliably informed that the findings were discussed with the PM before this date who approved the project for the preservation of these bones and restoration of the crypt and basement by the Order. What more than that do you need to be convinced that the HIGHEST AUTHORITIES were au courant, and that neither FAA nor Dr. Abela Medici NOR the Order of Malta was trying to conceal the bones or failing to report their existence.

Ivan Cassar(4 days, 14 hours ago) 

@James A. Tyrrell

1)

I am glad we are in agreement that 'This is no work for armatures'. I tend to agree with you definition of 'Armatures', maybe INCOMPETENT would have been a better fitting word.

That the lady has a right to speak is unquestionable. That she holds a B.A. qualification in Baroque architecture not particularly relevant.

What angers me is that in her urge to make a hit on the press she, and FAA, where willing to make public images of what could be important archeological finds that where first removed form their original place and then carelessly amassed in a box. Instead of reporting this to the authorities herself, as she is bound to do by law, she contents herself with relaying on other people (the forensic expert) who in turn tell her that other people (the tenants) had discussed the finds with the PM and a Minister who are in no way qualified to asses such finds. These should have also referred the issue to the competent authorities. This is supposed to have happened in 2009 so all the people in question had ample time to realize that no action had been take.

Victor Paul Borg(5 days ago) 

So, let's see the somersaults here.

First we have the government denying that this place could have ever been a burial place. Then, after pictures of bones were published, that the "human remains found at the basement of Casa Cassar in Valletta were still on site and were being investigated".

So, does this mean the government knew about these human remains or bones all along? And, if the government knew of these, then why did the government deny that the place was used as a burial last week the day after FAA came out on the media about this desecration of our heritage?

Is the government run by people who suffer from amnesia, I wonder?

Victor Paul Borg

www.victorborg.com


James A. Tyrrell(5 days, 2 hours ago) 

@Ivan Cassar. You state; 'This is no work for armatures how are not capable of substantiating their information! Our heritage deserves much better.' I must say I agree with you there. Definitely no place for armatures. I mean why would you want the rotating part of a dynamo getting in on the act to confuse things.

If we assume by some stretch of the imagination that you meant amateurs these are usually seen as people attached to a particular pursuit, study, or science, without pay and often without formal training. Now whilst people like Astrid Vella may not receive

pay I don't think you could describe the lady as an amateur given the fact that she has a B.A. qualification in Baroque architecture amongst other things.


These qualifications I think give the lady the right to speak out in support of the country's heritage. What qualifications may I ask do you have which you seem to think give you the right to badmouth her?

Raymond Sammut(5 days, 4 hours ago) 

According to early maps of Valletta, the church always features prominently as a free standing structure drawn in 3D and touching the cavalier at only one point of its rectangular base. Its name, Chiesa di Nostra Donna della Vittoria, and its importance to the architects, are clearly manifested in these historic maps. Adjacent (but not abutting) to the church are some structures proposed, and these could not have been anything else but the only burial grounds that were designated in Valletta at the early stages of construction.

My hypothesis would be that existence of bones dating back to 16th-century Valletta would extend to the police station. These bones have been good and truly desecrated over colonial/recent times, in my view, through the erection of very convenient but illegal and obscene structures; namely, the so-called Lanfreducci[sic] and that inglorious ridiculous looking police station.

As to Casa Cassar: it never existed. Ganado lists some 10-20 Casa's in his text (2003), but none is Cassar. If the Grand Harbour Regeneration Corporation are digging underground looking for additional space to house back-stage facilities, then they are surely looking in the wrong place. The Infrastructure Minister should come clean and show some honesty.


Ivan Cassar(5 days, 5 hours ago) 

@ James A. Tyrrell

I care so much for our heritage that I will never stand aside while persons for any quarter use it to advance an agenda without any thought of what the consequences might be. This is no work for armatures how are not capable of substantiating their information! Our heritage deserves much better.

Let me set the record straight. The space in question is an outstanding architectural item and deserves to be preserved, even if it were my grandma's kitchen. Putting toilets and showers in it is no way of safeguarding it! But neither is condoning the unprofessional handling of an archaeological site and keeping information from the heritage authorities.

And please do not assume you know my political field. Politics have nothing to do with this.

Ivan Cassar(5 days, 5 hours ago) 

@Astrid Vella

We are none the wiser I'm afraid. We will be when MASMOM will make public a document showing that they did indeed inform someone. As it is this is just talk and second hand information. Contrary to what you have done I will only accept hard

evidence not speculation. That is besides that fact that the finds should have been reported to the Superintendent of Cultural Heritage.

Yesterday you wrote “we knew that Dr. Abela Medici had immediately passed his report on to the authorities.” Yet today you quote him “I was informed back in 2009 that MASMOM did report in writing to the Ministry of Resources and Rural Affairs early in 2009”. Did he or did he not? Might I suggest it is you who needs to check your facts!

And we still don't know what other two cases in Gozo you are supposed to have reported. Why come out with imprecise info about these bones and yet not about these Gozo cases, are they not newsworthy yet?

Astrid Vella(5 days, 3 hours ago)

There is a big difference between this and the Gozitan cases. There, we are making slow progress and hope for a good outcome in favour of heritage and public access, which progress would be jeopardised if we go public now. Also, unlike Casa Lanfreducci, these sites are not threatened by impending new development. If they were we might have no choice, but until then, we will hope for a good result using more low-key methods as have often achieved in the past.


JOe VELLa(5 days, 2 hours ago)

@Astrid Vella

This issue is so dear to me, I believe it is also dear to all those who have the interest of our country at heart . When I read: 'Knights burial place to be linked to Piano theatre' TOM Jan6th. it is lumining as a plan.

Let me applaud your courage and I assure you as much as I am following this drama unfold so also is followed by the rest of Malta.

Unfortunately those who usually present themselves on camera as authority on the subject are no where to be found. SHAME!

Astrid Vella(5 days, 6 hours ago) 

@ Ivan Cassar: in addition to my other reply, please note:

Dr Anthony Abela Medici(8 hours, 47 minutes ago)

I was informed back in 2009 that MASMOM did report in writing to the Ministry of Resources and Rural Affairs early in 2009 and I am reliably informed that the findings were discussed with the PM before this date who approved the project for the preservation of these bones and restoration of the crypt and basement by the Order.

As you see, the authorities WERE informed, and the origin of the bones in the Lanfreducci basement/crypt was confirmed. Now, what more are you going to come up with ? Maybe the architectural features were only a photo-montage I created, or was the fabulous vaulted column built out of papier-mache for FAA to draw attention to itself? Give it a break Ivan!

D Camilleri(5 days, 5 hours ago)

So am I reading well,

Dr Anthony Abela Medici who examined the bones, is saying that the PM and the authorities new about the find and approved their preservation as well as of the whole site before 2009, and now the PM is saying that the bones which not buried there and therefore the site can be turned into changing rooms for that ridiculous theatre.

And didnt Piano plan dressing rooms in his masterplan for the theatre or did he just dream up the plastic sheeting

Astrid Vella(5 days, 2 hours ago)

In fact Piano planned all the stage storage facilities, dressing rooms and toilets under the Police Station which is to be demolished. Although it is reported that there is more than one floor of rooms under that building, the Ministry is now saying that works there could endanger the Auberge d'Italie and Sta Caterina church, so they decided that the Lanfreducci basement would be preferable.


This is what happens when major projects like these are planned in haste, without the necessary preparatory works which, in a site of this complexity could take years. An English heritage architect who was lecturing in Malta said that normally, just the public consultation element of such a project would take a couple of years. In our case it was easy - zero consultation!

But then, since when did our politicians hold heritage or public consultation in great esteem? The main thing is, of course, that this project is ready in time for the next election, even if heritage has to be swept away in the process.

James A. Tyrrell(5 days, 6 hours ago) 

@Ivan Cassar. You really are a strange person. You give the impression of someone who cares about the heritage of your country and yet you attack the very people who are doing their best on a voluntary basis to protect that heritage. Obviously you have some agenda of your own for attacking such NGO's but twisting the words that appear in the paper as you have done below does not do you any favours in that regard. The words "those who died at the time of the Great Siege" means simply that. The bones, which were found, have been forensically examined and this examination has determined that the bones date to the period of the Great Siege.

I also love your description, 'a lot of bones in a box which could have come from anywhere.' Given the fact that your own Government have verified that the bones were found on site and have now stated that they are back on site are you saying that the Government are planting bones Ivan? If you love Maltese heritage at all then stop attacking NGO's and start attacking the people who are destroying this heritage in the name of profit.

Ivan Cassar(5 days, 7 hours ago) 

@Marco Agius


We are the members of the public who are genuinely interested in this site and want

the Maltese Association of the Sovereign Military Order to shoulder whatever responsibility they might have in the disturbance of an important archeological site. We are those who when told something by a constituted body such as an NGO expect it to have checked it's facts first, gone to the relevant authorities with the information in hand, and then make public all information in a clear way and not play with words and give out photos in small doses as if this was some sort of melodrama. It is our heritage that is at stake here!

Astrid Vella(5 days, 6 hours ago)


Exactly, it is our heritage that is at stake. Once it was established that copies of the forensic expert's report had been passed on for the attention of the OPM and the relevant authorities some time ago, and still the site was earmarked for toilets and showers, what is the responsible thing to do but speak up? You are obviously one of those who relies on 'omerta' to cover up for the destruction of our heritage, but we can never subscribe to that.

We made the photos available as they came to us and as we had the opportunity to visit the site. This was no melodrama, it is you who is making it one, and the only reason for that that I can think of is to deflect attention away from Government's intentions on the site and to reflect well on those NGOs who have sadly not take a stand on this desecration of our Maltese and European heritage.

Ivan Cassar(5 days, 7 hours ago) 

@John Pace

Sir, you are not obliged to read my comments if you don't like them.

Ivan Cassar(5 days, 7 hours ago) 

@ Astrid Vella

I quote The Times of Wednesday, 12th January 2011 (Crypt being desecrated for a non-theatre – FAA) "...to date Casa Lanfreducci's basement still contained the remains of those who died at the time of the Great Siege as has been forensically established."

Well you said yourself that I was naive but to me "those who died at the time of the Great Siege" is equivalent to "those who fought in the Great Siege" I assume in 1565 fighting in the Great Siege was the main cause of death. Be it as it may the fact still is that what you saw was a lot of bones in a box which could have come from anywhere.

Be assured that I have to interest in rubbishing FAA. But I expect that an NGO such as yours should have heritage as its main concern not self-promotion and exposure. As I said your attitude is a disservice to the cause you uphold and damages your and other NGOs credibility.

Astrid Vella (5 days, 7 hours ago)


@ Ivan Cassar: this is becoming very tiresome.

No, while you are ready to assume that "Those who died at the time of the Great Siege" automatically equates with dying while fighting in the Great Siege, we are not prepared to state as much without it being backed up by any evidence. Unlike what

you make out we are very careful in our statements.

The origin of the bones has been documented by Dr. Anthony Abela Medici. Dr. Abela Medici is Malta's highly-respected forensic expert with decades of experience behind him however for some reason you seem to need to question his expertise. And you say you have no agenda?


Other NGOs are responsible for their own credibility – maybe you are annoyed at the appreciation that has been expressed here for FAA's work in these columns? Please stop going round in circles on this matter – if you have nothing better to do, I have.

Evarist Saliba(5 days, 10 hours ago) 

There must be something fundamentally wrong with the way "news" are handled. Official statements, press reports and alleged on site evidence contradict each other on what should be easily verified and basic issues. This is not helped by speculation.

I fenech(5 days, 10 hours ago) 

Iva, taht il-kadavru tat-Teatru Real u il-hela ta' Parliament ghal-55 ruh u parking komodu.

John Pace(5 days, 11 hours ago) 

@Ivan Cassar.


Why are you getting so hot under the collar regarding FAA?

OK we got it ...You don't love them...or even like them! Good for you !

But, 'doth protest too much, methinks'...way more then FAA are, from the looks of it!


The Authorities have been notified, so now that you know that they know, you must feel assurance that all will be ok... seeing you have so much more faith in them then FAA and others!

Keep cool!

JOe VELLa(5 days, 11 hours ago) 

Here we go again.

Who is not playing with words? Where the human remains there or not? Is this another cover up?

Ivan Cassar(5 days, 11 hours ago) 

We are much looking forward to see what the Maltese Association of the Sovereign Military Order have to say in all this.

What proof does FAA have to assert that this basement was the “original burial place of Grand Master Jean Parisot de Valette and the burial ground for the knights who fought in the Great Siege of 1565”? De Valette was buried at the Church of Our Lady of Victory and later removed to St John's. But de Valette died after the end of the Great Siege. It is safe to assume (we common folk, unlike FAA, can only assume not having secure historical data) that the knight who fought and died in the Great Siege were buried in Birgu before the Order moved to Valletta under Del Monte.

Had not the bones been tempered with when originally discovered we could have much more information on the same bones.

Astrid Vella(5 days, 10 hours ago)

Ivan Cassar, you have tripped up in your haste to rubbish us. We never said that the Lanfregucci basement was the “original burial place of Grand Master Jean Parisot de Valette and the burial ground for the knights who fought in the Great Siege of 1565” What we said was that the Lanfregucci basement was an extension of the crypt of Our Lady of Victory, the “original burial place of Grand Master Jean Parisot de Valette”

You really are making a full-time job out of this FAA-bashing campaign, aren't you? I do not expect thanks from you that we helped bring this issue to light, but if you were genuinely concerned about heritage as you claim, would you not prefer us to concentrate our time and energy on saving this place for posterity? Your investing so much time and energy, and your readiness to even twist facts in order to discredit us, makes me wonder what's behind all this.


Marco Agius(5 days, 10 hours ago)

@ Ivan Cassar

'We are much looking forward to see what the Maltese Association of the Sovereign Military Order have to say in all this.'

Who are 'We' in the above sentence?

Are you representing anyone ?

Miriam Cremona(5 days, 12 hours ago) 

Contrary to what the Government is reported to have said, the human remains found at the basement of Casa Cassar in Valletta were NOT on site on Thursday 13th January 2011.

Charles Sammut(5 days, 11 hours ago)

And there I was thinking that the government never lies.
