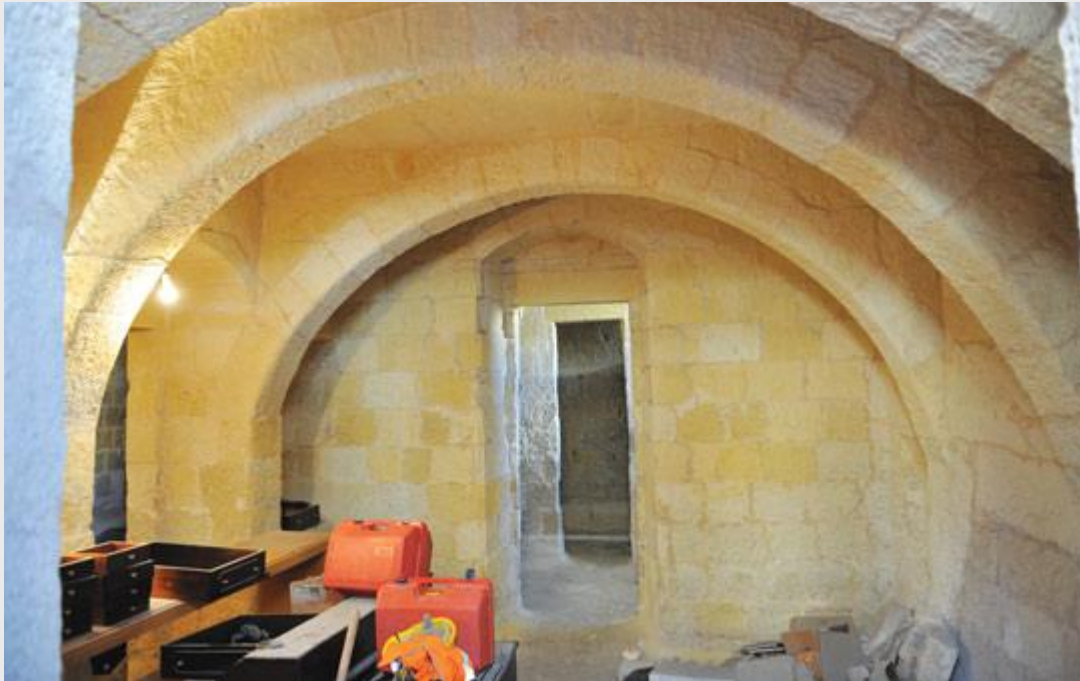


Human remains at Casa Lanfreducci

Knights had reported find in 2008

David Schembri



The entrance to the basement. Photo: Jason Borg

The government had been notified of the find of human remains in the basement of Casa Lanfreducci in 2008, according to the Knights of Malta.

The basement of the Valletta house, previously known as Casa Cassar, is slated to serve as backstage facility for the reinvented ruins of the Royal Opera House.

The government has come under heavy fire over the project from NGO Flimkien għal Ambjent Aħjar, which says the remains, found a few years ago, date back to the time of the Great Siege of 1565 and are proof the basement was an extension of the crypt of the adjacent church of Our Lady of Victory, Valletta's first building.

The Infrastructure Ministry had then charged that whoever found the remains had broken the law by not reporting them to the authorities, to the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage in particular.



The Malta Association of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta said it was “deeply troubled” by this statement (see the association’s letter to the editor on page 10).

Letters seen by The Times show that, as early as 2008, the Chief Government Medical Officer, the Archbishop’s Curia and, later, the Resources Ministry were notified of the find, when the Knights sought permission to transfer the bones to the crypt.

On August 8, 2008, healthcare director general Ray Busuttil wrote back granting permission, pending approval from the Curia and the police.

The Office of The Prime Minister was also informed of the find by the Curia, which is partly responsible for the church, and, on October 15, Bishop Annetto Depasquale wrote to the rder saying the Archbishop found no objection in transferring the remains.

The project of moving the bones once they are preserved – which has not happened yet – was, however, shelved and then it was time for a change in the Malta association’s leadership.

In 2009, the association also wrote to Chris Ciantar, permanent secretary at the Resources Ministry, who, on March 26, replied that the matter should have been referred to the superintendence. The latter, however, only came to know of the find last week, according to superintendent Anthony Pace.

In hindsight, the Knights admit they should have contacted the superintendence immediately but they resent being seen as “cowboys” with no respect for the law.

“Now we realise we should have contacted the superintendence and not these authorities but we were not trying to keep it hidden,” Daniel de Petri Testaferrata, chancellor of the association, said.



The ruins of Casa Cassar two decades ago, before the knights took it over and rebuilt it as Casa Lanfreducci.

Before falling in the hands of the Knights, the basement of Casa Cassar was previously used as a restaurant and a barber shop.

The president of the Malta Association of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, Philip Farrugia Randon recounts that when the knights went about their work on the basement after having finished the building of Casa Lanfreducci, which now houses the association’s headquarters, the place was in total disarray. Casa Lanfreducci was completed in the 1990s according to old plans and the place was in total ruins before the knights took over.

The order also categorically denied it carried out any rock cutting in the area of the basement’s floor, a point the ministry had used as criticism.

Asked who had put the remains in the pasticceria assortita (assorted pastries) boxes, Dr Farrugia Randon said he could not say exactly as this had happened before he became president but that the choice of container was regrettable.

The basement is closed off as the Superintendence for Cultural Heritage is carrying out investigations on site.

The knights' remains

The main reason NGOs are objecting to the basement being used as backstage facilities is that the basement might have once been used as a burial ground.

There is “no doubt” the basement and the crypt are connected, according to forensic expert Anthony Abela Medici, who was asked to examine the remains found in the crypt at the church of Our Lady of Victories.

Dr Abela Medici became involved in late 2008 when a displaced marble slab close to the confessional on the right hand side of the church revealed a forgotten staircase that led to a crypt. “It transpires the church was expanded in 1699, as the inscription on a plaque indicates, and it appears the entrance to the crypt was built over when it was expanded,” Dr Abela Medici said.

The crypt, according to the forensic expert, is still full of rubble but it contains some human remains and an elevated stone sarcophagus.

Even though he did not examine the bones forensically, as this required, among other things, permission from the health authorities, their fragility and the “well documented fact that the crypt was used to bury (Grand Master Jean Parisot de Valette) before he was moved to St John’s Co-Cathedral” led the expert to say it was “plausible” the remains in the crypt and those found in Casa Lanfredis’s basement dated to the time of the knights.


The two areas are connected by means of a doorway, around 60cm wide, which was barred the last time Dr Abela Medici saw it.

“It appears the area was closed in 1699 so it is plausible the bones predate that period. It is well documented that the remains of de Valette had been transferred to the church before St John’s was built. The fragility of the bones would be commensurate with the same period.”

Dr Abela Medici said when he had examined the basement of Casa Cassar, he found levels where the ground had been dug out. At that stage, he recommended the authorities be informed and, to date, he has not studied the bones in question.

“I am speaking out now because I want to draw attention to the fact that it is quite possible they came from that period and that their find should be investigated properly.”

Comments

Evarist Saliba(2 days, 9 hours ago) 

I think I was very careful in what I have written, and I resent it when it is used by others as a prop for what they have to say. The basic facts are that no one seems to

have known until a few years ago that a cemetery existed, if that is the case, next to the church of Our Lady of Victories. The building of the city of Valletta is very well documented yet no one has quoted a document or a map to show the existence of such a cemetery. The buildings next to the church are very old as the photographs of the basement clearly show. Such buildings had toilets, and within living memory, housed a barber and a pastizzeria. The fact that they did not form part of an annex to a theatre does not make them more acceptable.

I think that in many contributions I have made it clear that I am not happy with some aspects of the Piano plan, and what I write now is not a change of heart, but an appeal to a calm debate concentrated on finding a solution rather than scoring points.


Raymond Sammut(2 days, 5 hours ago)

"The building of the city of Valletta is very well documented yet no one has quoted a document or a map to show the existence of such a cemet[e]ry."(Saliba)

May I refer you to Ganado's text, 2003, on the Valletta's nascent planning era. I have found this text indispensable while preparing my responses to the numerous The Times reports on the Lanfredis scandal. Ganado's text is indispensable for the fact that the church in question is the first church built in Valletta and hence is the most significant art, architecture and religious freestanding workpiece in Valletta's history.

And BTW, Mr Saliba. What makes you think readers of The Times need any "props" from you before they decide to express their views on these comments board? What exactly do you resent? The onus is on the writer to be clear on what they write, and in my view you have been extremely clear except that you obviously lack in your referencing.

For example, you "very carefully" say: "Incidentally, I wonder if any examination can truly establish that the bones belonged to knights and not to less exalted persons..." Good referencing would have saved you the pains of "wondering".

Astrid Vella(3 days, 5 hours ago) 

While in theory it was up to the Knights to report this to the Superintendence, it's pathetic that any Government Ministry or civil servant should shrug off responsibility by saying that "you should have told the Superintendence". Civil servants routinely pass things on to the relevant department, why the exception in this case?

Couldn't the Chief Government Medical officer, the Curia, the Resources Ministry or the office of the Prime minister have informed or passed on the information to the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage and ensured that this matter was dealt with correctly in 2008/9? All it would have taken is the click of a computer, especially considering that the Resources Ministry is in charge of the Restoration Unit and therefore one imagines, in regular touch with the Superintendence.

Evarist Saliba says "I am sure that had this matter not become linked with the rehabilitation of the entrance to Valletta all this controversy would have been avoided" of course, because it was the proposal of installing the performance space toilets and showers that sparked off all this. A proposal that the Ministry of Infrastructure is trying to eclipse by throwing blame in every direction, when the main issue remains the future of the crypt.

Joe Grech(3 days ago)

@Ms. Astrid Vella - what you say is very true. It is indeed most unfortunate - and unacceptable - that occurrences happening in one Ministry (or being reported there) go unnoticed (or are not followed up) in another....Actually this is fast becoming one of the prevailing characteristics of this administration.

As you say, once the issue was reported (admittedly) to the wrong officials these should have passed on the report to those directly involved.

No man is an island; similarly no Ministry is an administration. Surely it is imperative that different Ministries communicate with one another.

Otherwise the sort of unpleasant outcome as the one that is presently being reported will result. And - as usual - nobody will be accountable.

Evarist Saliba(3 days, 10 hours ago) 

I have already remarked on how disheartening it is to have conflicting reports on this issue. People seem to be more concerned with scoring points rather than solving the question of how to proceed. This place has had more tenants than anyone can remember, and not all were versed in historical importance, but I am sure that none would have been happy to know that skeletons were buried underneath, irrespective of how old they were, or if they belonged to knights. Incidentally, I wonder if any examination can truly establish that the bones belonged to knights and not to less exalted persons, who equally demand respect. I am sure that had this matter not become linked with the rehabilitation of the entrance to Valletta all this controversy would have been avoided.

Raymond Sammut(3 days, 4 hours ago)

Not avoided, Mr Saliba, but "conveniently" avoided. The fact here is that truth finally came out following the rape after rape that has occurred against a burial place where people had, in the past, been interred with dignity and honour. It is glaringly obvious that this burial place was once the churchyard of the Victory Church --the very first church built as a preliminary to St John's soon after the siege.

And clearly, it should also be obvious to everyone that it is immaterial as to who these people were. The historical fact is that originally this was a privately funded church/churchyard. Although some, if not most, were later transferred to St John's, those who remained buried there had the right to remain undisturbed.

This is a gross violation of human dignity; a most disgusting obscenity; and ultimately a serious crime. And the reason why all this has happened is because someone, at some stage, had decided to erect a residence on top of the churchyard for their own convenience and without any respect or regard for the dead. This accursed hovel "Lanfreducci", that by now has housed so much vileness, should be demolished and the churchyard restored.

