

Underground passageways discovered in Valletta

Kurt Sansone



Archaeological studies in St George Square, Valletta have revealed an undocumented network of tunnels which possibly connect to the Palace.

Photo: Chris Sant Fournier

Preliminary archaeological studies in St George's Square, Valletta have uncovered an undocumented network of underground passageways, which could possibly connect to the Palace.

Studies are being undertaken in St George's Square in preparation for the building of a one-storey underground car park and the subsequent embellishment of the square.

The project, piloted by the Works Division and the Valletta Rehabilitation Project, still needs to be given the green light by the Malta Environment and Planning Authority.

The passageways were discovered on Tuesday when government employees from the Works Division under architect Claude Borg dug through a wall in a small room on Archbishop Street. After clearing debris and other material, they discovered that the passageway leads to under the Main Guard portico, parallel to the Palace.

The room had been previously used by the Water Services Corporation.

Further excavation works revealed that the central passageway had a number of corridors that led to other directions. One such corridor, at right angles with the central passageway and which seems to be blocked, runs in the direction of the Palace.

Mr Borg, executive co-ordinator of the Valletta Rehabilitation Project, said that archival research and previous studies of the site did not reveal the existence of the underground passageways.

"All archives and documents never indicated any shelters or significant structures underneath, though a number of historians and residents have recalled members of their family entering shelters from one of the corners of the square. Obviously, we had to verify the claims and, on Monday, I gave instructions for the wall blocking a small room underneath the square to be removed," Mr Borg said.

It seems that the passageways used to form part of a drainage system built by the Knights of the Order of St John.

"A number of interesting features and mason marks can be seen in this tunnel, which also has two openings branching out but whose access remains blocked. Works are still under way to open all the blocked passages and clean the tunnels as much as possible to plot out what might be a network system that was previously undocumented," Mr Borg explained.

Technical people from the Valletta Rehabilitation Project are surveying and documenting the passageways.

The Knights had built the Wignacourt fountain in the square to celebrate the arrival of fresh water to Valletta.

A spokesman for the Ministry of Resources and Rural Affairs, under whose wing the Works Division falls, said tests and studies were still underway and the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage was present at every stage of the clearing.

"Within the coming days, once all investigations have been concluded and all possible tunnels explored, the ministry will consult with the Superintendence on the findings and then assess its position and proposal on the embellishment project of the square," the spokesman said.

Meanwhile, the environmental organisation Flimkien għal Ambjent Aħjar yesterday proposed that part of the passages should be made accessible to the public as an added heritage attraction and an insight into the very old civil engineering works that lay beneath Valletta's streets.

The FAA had pointed out the existence of the passageway during a meeting with Rural Affairs and Resources Minister George Pullicino, who briefed the organisation on the square's embellishment plans.

The organisation said that, while it had "strong reservations" about the excavation of the square for the provision of underground parking, it was confident that the changes to the space would not only enhance the prestige of the square facing the Presidents' Palace but would also greatly improve the enjoyment of the square.

Comments

Dr Savior Tortell Pisani (1 hour, 14 minutes ago)

I sincerely hope that the debris that they are "cleaning" away is being carefully stored to be analysed by competent historians and scientists before being dismissed as rubbish. Many clues and interesting items of historical value could be hidden in such debris if these rooms and corridors were sealed off for hundreds of years.

The whole place appears to be in an excellent state of preservation. So I also hope that these tunnels are eventually made accessible to the public as part of the national historical heritage.

George Farrugia (1 hour, 39 minutes ago)

Reading about the tunnels under St. George's square, continues to enforce my view that this was a wrong decision to take. The car park in the centre of valletta would mean attracting more cars into the city - when we should be moving in the opposite direction. At least that was the idea with Park and Ride scheme.. Given the technology and tools now available in Malta, and the great expanse of open rock face underneath the bastions, why not dig a car park in the rocks themselves the entrance to which would be from the circular road outside valletta. There are many such sites that can be used for this purpose, and some of them perhaps can be dug as far into the city as the Palace itself. Access from such underground car park into the city can then be provided by escalators or lifts. In this way, these car parks can be dug as deep as required into the rocks. The technology is already in Malta as we have seen through the many tunnels dug recently to accommodate Mater Dei and the Power Station. I am sure private investment would be forthcoming for such a project.

J. Fiorentino (1 day, 13 hours ago)

Interesting find which calls for further exploration. Meanwhile make sure that the entrance to this system of underground passageways is blocked well. We do not want vandals or other undesirable characters to find a way into the Palace and other buildings..... during the night!!!

George Wilson (1 day, 14 hours ago)

Have you people lost your minds? As one who has visited and loved Valletta for the charm that comes from every corner and delighted in the history it represents; as well as one who, as a New York City resident, constantly laments the over-reliance on automobiles which has so scarred and degraded so much around me, I plead, beg, implore and pray that you will not go forward with this misbegotten parking lot under the square. Discourage, however you can, the cars, and please, leave precious, irreplaceable Valletta, the Square, and whatever yet may be discovered within its environs, as it is for many more generations to come and appreciate.

James A. Tyrrell (1 day, 23 hours ago)

@J Micallef. I would be the first to admit that there are other NGO's who have been around longer than FAA and I have the greatest respect for all of them. However I doubt if any of them managed to achieve the thing's that FAA have achieved in such a short time.

I think this whole FAA bashing thing is just getting stupid and is not doing you or anyone any favours. Astrid Vella is not paid for what she does. She and everyone else at FAA are unpaid volunteers who give up their own time in order to give something back to their country. What the hell do you people do other than put them down at every turn. If you are not interested in your own country, in it's history and it's environment then crawl back under your stone and leave the people who are interested to get on with the good job they are doing.

J.F. Vassallo Ebejer (2 days, 4 hours ago)

Why all this eagerness to dig up Valletta?? Are we going to allow the "need" for easy access to our cars to dictate the need to start messing around with such a wonderful and unique city? We have already done so much to demean the dignity of Valletta. Rather than searching for locations for underground car parks we should be looking at reducing the number of cars entering Valletta – for example, by making greater use of electrically-driven public transport vehicles which would be working on a continuous basis, taking people all around the city. Other possible arrangements could consist of making the Park and Drive system easier for people laden with shopping bags, and so on.

J Micallef (2 days, 4 hours ago)

Why does the Government not consult other credible NGOs rather than the politicized FAA? The other NGOs have been around for a number of years, and although they are not militant and noisy, they are experts in their field and have no hidden agendas.

John Carmel Navarro (2 days, 4 hours ago)

So this one is going to be another headache for the Government and Opposition this project is for an underground car park for these very same people. Having rightly voiced their opposition to St John's Co-Cathedral underground museum, maybe now this car park is shelved as well. Surely we just cannot have double standards. The walk will do our elected leaders good!.
