

MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

So far, I've made two trips to Malta, arriving a day late each time because of airline nonsense. Just can't make those connections in Paris, for some reason. Despite arriving a day late (and several dollars short—surviving in and around airports is expensive), I did my first trip correctly: the point of a first trip is to figure out what to do on the second trip. I had a great time both times, so here are postcards from both.

The harbor at Valletta is one of those incomparable views that everyone should be familiar with (along with, say, Table Mountain in South Africa, the Rock of Gibraltar, the Christ-the-Redeemer statue in Brazil, the Grand Canyon, Victoria Falls...)



During my second visit, I didn't just look at the harbor: I took a boat tour for a closer look at the harbor. Living on board is a common option there. On any island, water is a big part of the area that's available. In Malta, there are the huge multi-multi-multi-million dollar yachts, as well as more affordable options where people anchor at the marina and dry the laundry on tie lines.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Malta has been strategically important for millennia. The fortifications have been built and rebuilt and expanded and remodeled repeatedly.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Malta is not known for its wildlife. It could have been, but much of the interesting biodiversity was wiped out in millennia of human/humanoid use and residence and the wars that necessitated the massive fortifications. So the fauna that are left are typically small, and often invertebrates, like this snail. I wasn't expecting to find gastropods in a relatively warm, arid place, but here is at least one who figured out how to make this climate work.



There used to be bigger animals on Malta. On the second trip, I went to a cave where there were fossils of many kinds of animals, including a kind of small hippopotamus. When large animals, like elephants or hippopotami, live on islands, they tend to become smaller over time (insular dwarfism). Smaller animals, such as rats and snails, tend to become larger (insular gigantism). The effects taken together are known as the island rule.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

What looks like driveway gravel in this picture is actually a lot of megaliths, and this lizard, who would be small if living on a larger piece of ground, is as big as a tyrannosaurus.

Just kidding. The small lizard is still small. The phenomenon of island-adjusted proportioning doesn't always apply. Or maybe it does. That kind of lizard might have been tinier still before moving to Malta.



There are also the usual domesticated animals, including cats and dogs. The cats have kinked tails, as I've seen on other island cats, including on Borneo. The Maltese cats still have long tails, unlike the Bornean cats, most of whose tails are kinked into shortened tails. As far as I've been able to palpate, the cats have the usual number of vertebrae in their tails (19-21), but when the caudal vertebrae grow in a zigzag pattern or around in loops like a phone cord or are individually shrunken and warped, the tails can be much shorter. Of course, most cats don't want me doing that kind of palpation, so my investigation has been limited.



Following the enormous popularity of Game of Thrones, which was filmed on location all over Europe and extensively in Malta, the popularity of cold-weather dogs also took off, unfortunately for the dogs in places that are not cold. This husky poked a nose out to investigate, then retreated to the air-conditioned interior. According to this dog, staying cool is more important than doing the running that these animals were bred to do. I always wonder how that sort of decision affects the health and well-being of the animal.



I actually didn't know about Game of Thrones until I went to Malta the second time and visited Mdina, where that unfortunate husky lived. Mdina is a Maltese for 'old city'; if you're paying attention, you'll see the cognate with Arabic Madinah. Maltese is the only Afro-asiatic national language in Europe. The city is old, but not as old as the megaliths. It was the capital of the island of Malta from at least the time of the Romans to the medieval era.

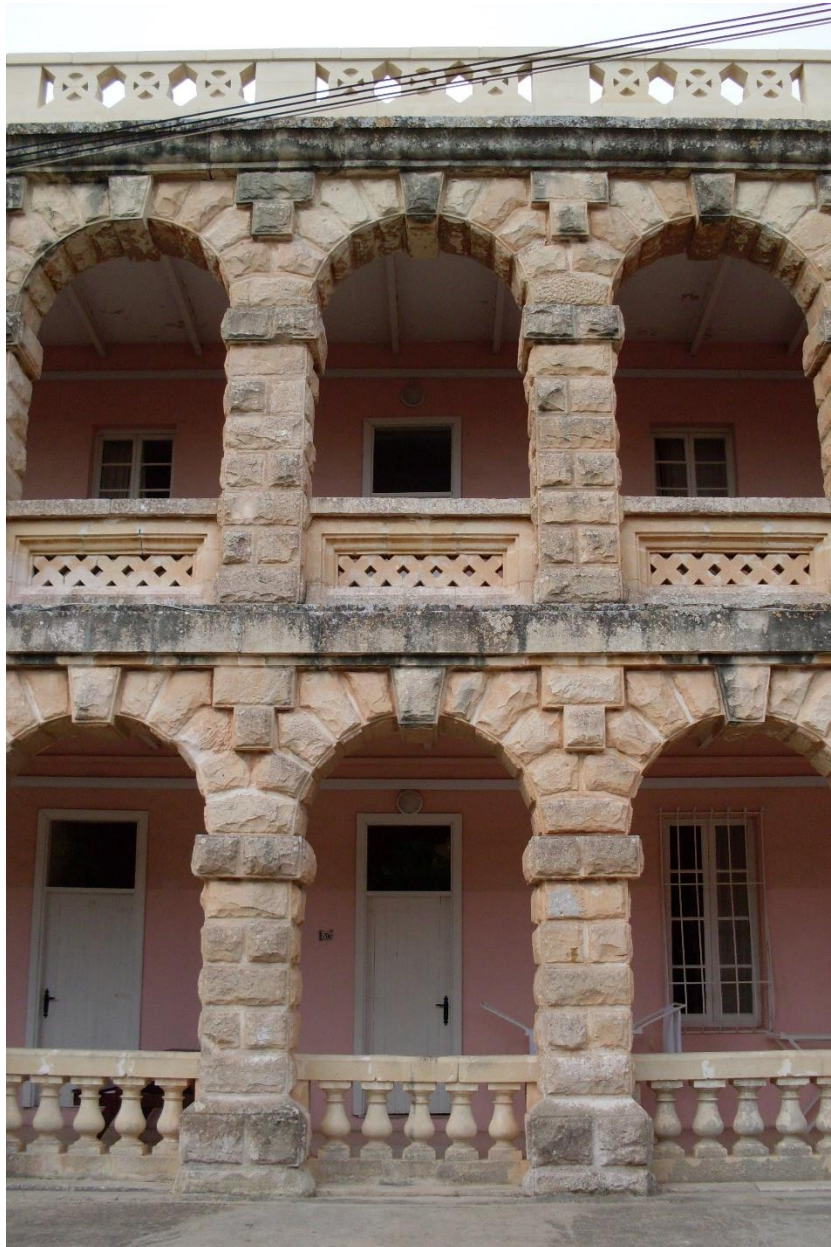


MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

As I was wandering around Mdina on foot (buses don't fit on those medieval alleys), I saw people in costumes and carrying swords. What on earth? The city is old, but most people wear T-shirts and ride bicycles and flush toilets at this point in history. After seeing an entire street of shop after shop of costumes and gear, I finally paid attention to the logo for Game of Thrones and looked it up. I'm now better informed about modern culture thanks to a visit to some very old culture.



Part of what I've appreciated about Malta is that staying there and traveling and doing things remain reasonably priced. It's a popular place for lower-upper-middle-class Brits to retire. Part of its reasonableness is that there is a lot of infrastructure that is not fully used, even now, or not quite what people would expect if they're used to the usual all-inclusive resort. This building was an old officers' quarters when the British were there, now remodeled into a hostel. It's big and clunky. The ceilings in the rooms are at least 14 feet high (4.3 m), and the bathrooms are later additions. This structure makes sense if one is making living quarters for people who need to sleep and work in a place that might take artillery fire, but it makes less sense for luxury vacation accommodations. It's too big and heavy for a quick-and-shoddy remodel. No problem. It was a great place to stay, one of my favorite hostels anywhere in the world. There was even a pool.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

But I used the pool only a couple of times, mostly as a matter of principle: if it's there, I ought to take advantage of it. The hostel was a 10-minute walk from a public beach, which I used every day when I was in Malta, on both trips. Not everyone is as thrilled as I am about swimming in the Mediterranean. As one person at the 2014 conference put it, she refused to swim in the Mediterranean because "people have been peeing in it for millennia." Doesn't smell like it, so I jumped right in.



I've also appreciated the public transportation, which is inexpensive, readily available, and comprehensive: it includes the ferries between and around the islands. What I have not appreciated is that the buses have to be hailed like taxis. Even if multiple people are standing at the bus stop, the bus doesn't stop unless at least one person waves arms vigorously and leaps out into the bus' lane. I hate to be that person, but I like to get where I'm going. I usually got where I wanted to go: priorities. I made it a point to go to Gozo, the second-sized island, on both excursions. This is the main harbor at Gozo, and where the ferry station is. The ferries do not have to be hailed.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

While waiting for a ferry from Gozo back to Malta, I went down to the water to see what I could see. The tide-pool life is spectacular in Malta.



Malta is loaded with megaliths. The best megaliths, and the oldest megaliths (neolithic), are on Gozo. This looked like one of the sources for stones. There are also underground megaliths in the hypogeum, a temple and grave site that is entirely underground (on Malta itself). It was discovered during construction for a housing development, and although the builders tried to keep it a secret, the truth would out, and the construction had to be stopped. It has a sound-amplifying chamber and lots of pictographs. One room was reportedly where the apostle Paul stayed when he was on Malta. There is now a museum above the hypogeum where many of the excavated artifacts are on display, including some of the elongated skulls that many people think are aliens. Picture-taking is streng verboten in the hypogeum, so I'm just putting the paragraph here by the mine.



Once out of the quarry, the enormous stones had to be moved to their target locations. How to do that? If one likes the idea of aliens, probably the aliens had transporter or levitation technology, or maybe were telekinetic with their elongated brains and could just will the stones into place. Another possibility is that these rounded rocks were used to roll megaliths to the sites. That seems reasonable: my multi-ton car has slid on loose gravel. How the boulders were put on the rolling rocks or set up once off the rolling rocks remain good questions.



According to Maltese oral history, there were giants who built the megalithic structures. If the people were bigger back then, they could use bigger pieces of building material. Sansuna was the matriarch of the giants and a vegetarian (vegan, even). She carried the stones from the quarries to the sites, all while schlepping her baby along. The fact that the woman has to do the construction while managing the familial and household chores hasn't changed over the millennia. Just the size of the woman. There are stone figures of enormous women in the museums in Malta.



The size of the megaliths (some as large as 40,000 pounds (18,143.695 kg)) is impressive all by itself. But the megaliths have a variety of modifications that are also impressive, including round holes that could have supported beams or provided hinge sites for swinging megalithic doors. Sansuna had to take the baby with her wherever she went because getting one's finger pinched in a door like that could be fatal.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Of course, I took a swim while at Gozo. Also snorkeling. The water is very clear, but the snorkeling is not brilliant. No great loss in spending some time in the water, in any case.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Malta is also known for its long tradition of silversmithing. This is Gaetano. He travels to a hotel a couple of nights per week to sell his art and to hold small make-it-yourself workshops.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Gaetano makes perfect things. I made this warped pendant. Gaetano was upset by how warped it was, but I assured him that for a first effort, this is brilliant. More importantly, it showed me how impressive Gaetano's perfection is.



More megaliths: I visited several of the more famous sites the first time around and repeated those the second time around while adding less frequently visited sites on the second excursion. The builders had no attachment to right angles, except for vertical support. Rooms are elliptical or circular, and although in this building the path through the structure was a straight line, there was usually no commitment to having paths between rooms along a line or at right angles.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

More holes, with smaller ones in this picture. The larger holes, like the one in the lower left, look structural. I'm not sure what to make of the many smaller holes.



Many of the sites appear to have been worked on multiple times over the millennia. The foundational stones were huge, precisely shaped, and without need for smaller stones for positioning or stability. The first people to work on these buildings knew what they were doing.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Later, there were people who could see that what had been done was terrific work, but they were not themselves able or trained to do that kind of work. Their work was not as precise.



Eventually, there were people who didn't build with stone but who tucked rocks in here and there to fill in gaps created by time or less precise work. I attribute the decline in quality to a decline in ability or information about building, but it might also have been a decline in prosperity. One could get the original-type work done, for a price, and after a while, no one seemed to have those resources. I've seen that downward trend in infrastructure in lots of places.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Sometimes, passageways were cut through single pieces of rock, rather than assembled from two posts and a lintel. If the giants made these structures, these smaller passageways could have been pet doors for the house hippopotamus.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

There is megalithic furniture like this table. Dropping the leaf from that table could be fatal.



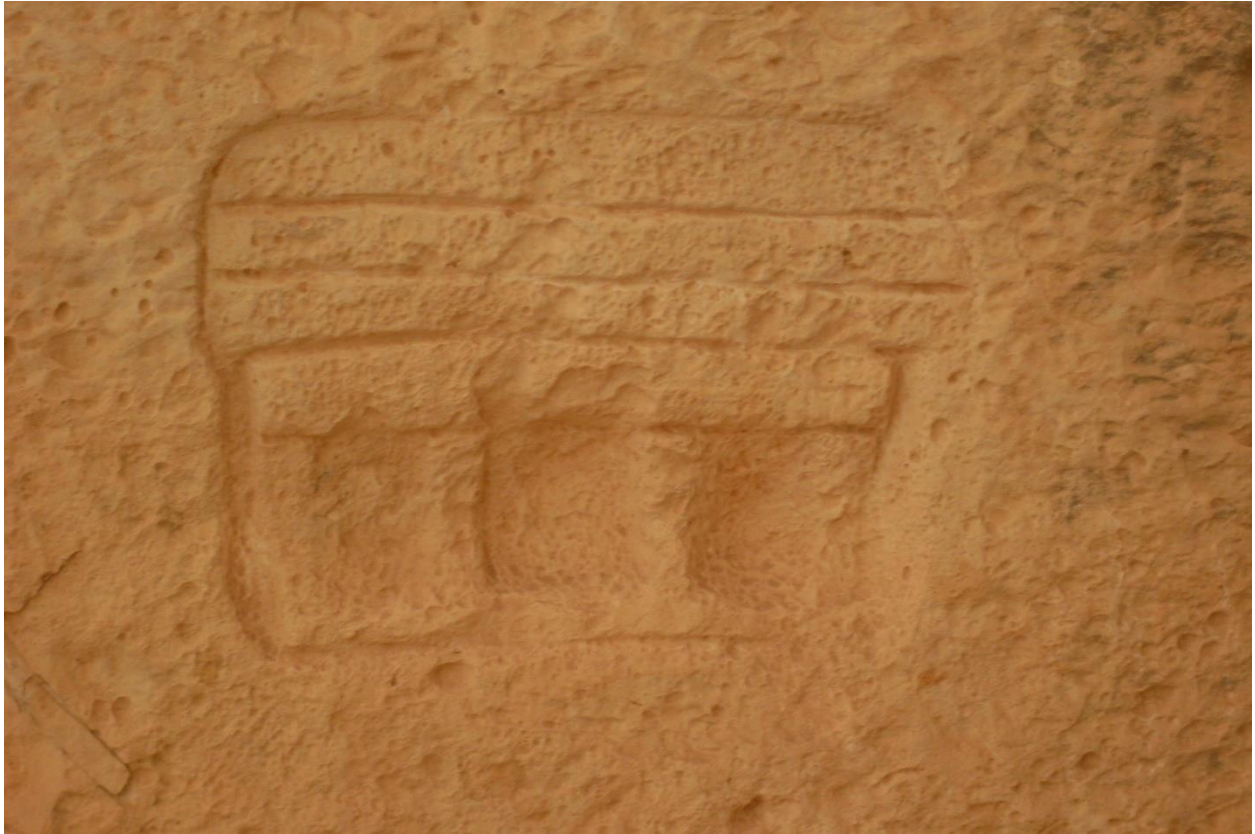
MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Interior design in the megalithic buildings included wall decorations. The lack of commitment to right angles is again in evidence, with spirals and dots. There are spiral-based designs elsewhere in the world, including from northern Borneo and the Māori of New Zealand and the neolithic builders of Ireland. I'm not going to argue that these people all knew each other, but I would suggest that lots of people were not obsessed with 'clean lines' as a design principle (take THAT, Architectural Digest). After spending time in a structure that is not about X-Y-Z-plane rectangularity, I experienced a sort of visual impoverishment and mild claustrophobia upon return to the world of rectangularity. I appreciated the 14-foot ceilings in the hostel again.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

I like to think that when Sansuna's child was large enough to chisel rock, this image of the family house was the output. At which point, the child was told not to chisel on the walls any more.



Malta has been inhabited for a long time. It's difficult to build because the old stuff is protected from destruction, even if the old stuff is not that great, like this jumble of megaliths that interrupted a parking lot. The megaliths here aren't so great, but neither is the parking lot. Maybe there will eventually be a better option than both of these.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

Malta also has amazing scenery, including cliffs, olive orchards, and miles and miles of beaches.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

It is possible that some of the scenery is less amazing than it used to be. The arch of the Azure Window collapsed in 2017, after my 2014 trip and before my 2018 trip.



A thistle



On the first trip, I didn't do much with the Roman era of Malta. I did walk down to the beach where Paul washed up (he's not there anymore). So the Roman component was more of a priority on the second trip. The Romans did like rectilinear design and made mosaics, some of which are still in good condition after a couple of thousand years.



The Romans also built catacombs on Malta. Had to have some place to put the people who didn't survive the shipwrecks. The Roman catacombs are not as well done or as stylish as the hypogeum. Lighting is minimal in the catacombs, and there are panic buttons here and there so that if people have trouble with the close quarters of the idea of catacombs, they can mash one of those buttons and make bright lights turn on so that they can find their way out as quickly as possible.



MegaMalta, 2014/2018: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

In the gift shop, there was a sign announcing the possibility of birthday parties in the catacombs. I asked the clerk how often they did parties. He said not often, but several times per year. A. I want to meet that kid. B. I want to be that kid. It's too late for the kid part, but I am planning to hold the party for my 50th birthday in Malta in the fall of 2024. I haven't made reservations with the catacomb people yet, but consider yourself invited. They have panic buttons. Should be fun.

