

Scratching the Surface: Maltese Graffiti Research and Maritime Iconography

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Across the Mediterranean, past cultures and civilisations have left indelible traces of their existence. Sitting at a crossroads of this historic and important sea, the Maltese islands have been settled for millenia and played host to many diverse groups of people. These include the enigmatic Megalithic Temple Builders, Romans, Hospitallers, and British, to name but a few. Curiously, many have left their traces in an often-overlooked body of material; that of historic graffiti. Carvings and inscriptions depict ships, hands, religious iconography, architectural elements, and dates. The graffiti represent a cross-section of past societies and provide a voice to many individuals. Indeed, graffiti appears to have been a prolific activity in the past, as evidenced by thousands of examples across over a hundred sites. Graffiti extends as far back as prehistory, with examples considered to be the earliest representations of seafaring vessels in the Mediterranean. Historic graffiti face many threats from renovations, urban change, and the alteration of the landscape. August 2018 saw the launch of the Malta Ship Graffiti Project (MGSP), an initiative underpinned by a Citizen Science approach. The public submit “newly” identified sites, also engaging these communities in this rich and charismatic cultural heritage resource. As we continue to uncover these graffiti sites, it becomes clear that the research is only just scratching the surface of Maltese culture and history.