

Team discovers 2,000-year-old Roman house during excavation in Malta

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The Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy in Malta, Angela Cervetti, visited the archaeological excavation site to meet USF students and USF IDEX staff members to learn more about the dig and their role in the international research project. Credit: Davide Tanasi

A team of researchers and six students from the University of South Florida have discovered a centuries-old house in exceptional condition during an excavation in Malta, a country located in the Mediterranean Sea.

Led by Davide Tanasi, professor and director of USF's Institute for Digital Exploration (IDEx), USF students collaborated with a team of scientists from around the world on the Melite Civitas Romana Project, uncovering what life was like 2,000 years ago when Romans ruled Malta and the island was used for military staging and maritime trade.

"Not only do we have the chance to uncover amazing Roman structures, but Malta is critically understudied despite being a wealth of fantastic archaeology and history from antiquity," said Angela Costello, a USF doctoral student studying public history and [digital humanities](#). "So, by revisiting these old excavations and furthering the work with new digital methods, we are learning more and more about Roman Malta every day."

Nestled in the heart of the ancient city of Melite, the once lavishly decorated mansion, traditionally known as Roman Domus, had been covered by centuries of soil. "In use between the 1st century BCE and 2nd century CE, the Domus was elegantly decorated with mosaic floors, wall frescoes and marble decorations," Tanasi said. "During the Roman Empire, it was certainly used as a residence by a representative of the emperor or some very wealthy individual very close to the imperial court."

After a summer of digging, processing and cleaning artifacts of the Roman Domus, the team discovered a portion of a previously unknown house adjacent to the domus with nearly 10-foot-tall walls, a height Tanasi says is unheard of for the Roman residential units usually found in the Mediterranean area.

This discovery, according to Tanasi, provides a better understanding of the urban fabric of ancient Melite and the area's spatial configuration, a process that explains the human experience and behavior based on the surrounding structural environment.

On a hunt to learn more about the owner of the house and what it was like living a block away from the domus, the team is searching for clues among the findings they have so far: an exquisite interior likely decorated with terracotta floor tiles, frescoed plasters and an ancient waste disposal system full of fragmented pottery, glass vessels, animal bones and charcoal.

"It was literally the garbage disposed by whomever lived in the house," Tanasi said. "By studying this deposit, we will learn a lot about the life of who lived in the house. It is surprising how much you can learn about people from their garbage."

For Sarah Hassam, a USF ancient history graduate student, another person's trash has indeed proven to be a treasure. "The most exciting moment for me was during our third week, while cleaning pottery, a small fragment I had been scrubbing revealed the engraved letters D-A-O-I, a possible hint for somebody's name. Everyone was pumped and shared theories on the engraving. It was a very cool find," she said.

In addition to the excavation, IDEX's role in the project is to preserve cultural heritage through digital approaches. Findings from previous excavations are now displayed in the museum of the Roman Domus.

"We perform digital photogrammetry where we capture data using a series of photographs that are then composited to create a 3D model and terrestrial laser scanning to provide more in-depth information on the site that we can process and re-visit during the year when we aren't present in the trenches," Costello said.

Tanasi signed an agreement for IDEx and Heritage Malta to pursue funding to advance the 3D digitization of the Maltese archaeological and cultural heritage.

The permit to continue the excavations in the Roman Domus district was extended to 2025 and IDEx will continue the exploration of the newly discovered house next summer to learn more about the identity of its owner.

Provided by University of South Florida

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