

Malta's prehistoric sacred landscapes: towards a framework for sustainable enjoyment

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The Megalithic Temples of Malta are at once one of the country's most iconic tourism assets, and one of the least understood. The monumental architecture of these extraordinary buildings, which are inscribed as a series on the UNESCO World Heritage List, has received considerable attention. On the other hand, their setting in the wider landscape is often overlooked. Only recently is attention beginning to focus on questions such as 'why are these buildings positioned where they are?', 'how did they transform the experience of inhabiting the surrounding landscape?', or 'can we speak meaningfully about a sacred landscape in prehistoric Malta?' If so, how may this resource be managed, presented and enjoyed sustainably as a niche tourism asset?

These questions will be considered in turn. Some of the vulnerabilities of this resource, and the current challenges of managing it sustainably, will be identified and discussed. It will be argued that Malta's cultural landscape generally has suffered extensive and cumulative damage as a result of a long history of inadequate protection and management. The pressures of poorly designed and conceived construction activities have continued to mount relentlessly, bringing the country to a point where the sustainable enjoyment of Malta's sacred landscapes, and the cultural landscape more generally, is severely threatened.

A number of practical principles for good practice will be identified and proposed to help address this challenge, which is now at a critical stage. These include:

- (i) The relationship between the 'secular' and the 'sacred' in prehistoric landscapes
- (ii) The relationship between evidence from different periods in the cultural landscape
- (iii) The relationship between sacred landscapes as a niche tourism asset, and their contribution to the quality of life of local communities
- (iv) The need for coherent, holistic and integrated approaches when managing cultural landscapes and their values