

The Maltese Archipelago at the Dawn of History

Reassessment of the 1909 and 1959
excavations at Qlejgħa tal-Baħrija
and other essays

Edited by

Davide Tanasi and David Cardona



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Introduction

Davide Tanasi, David Cardona

The period between the mid-2nd millennium BC and the arrival of the Phoenician colonists in the Maltese Archipelago, around the late 8th c. BC, is one of the most fascinating of the Maltese prehistory. Distant in time from the majesty of the Megalithic Temples and the aura of the Punic Temples of Melqart and Astarte, this timeframe has been, for a long time, the lesser known and investigated. This, together with the poor preservation of its monuments, has contributed to its fame as one of the most enigmatic phases of Maltese archaeology.

Over the last 110 years, several major scholars of Maltese archaeology challenged themselves with excavations and studies to shed light on possible corresponding Mediterranean chronologies to Malta's Middle/Late Bronze and Iron Age. T. E. Peet, M. A. Murray, J. D. Evans and D. H. Trump worked at and wrote about the sites of Borġ in-Nadur (in Marsaxlokk Bay) and Qlejgħa tal-Baħrija (on the outskirts of Rabat and Ħad Dingli), the key sites for this period, mostly using the ceramic data to sketch up a chrono-typological sequence in order to give an order to the multifaceted evolution of this part of Maltese prehistory. Without the support of the amazing tools that archaeometry now offers and at times even without the comfort of stratigraphic excavation methods, those scholars laid down the foundations of many recent studies, producing a pioneering scientific literature.

What is most striking in that literature, though, is the use of terms as 'culture', 'phase', 'period', 'facies', 'pottery phase' and 'pottery style' often coupled with the adjective 'cultural' in the meaning of what appears as a culture to us. A plurality of terms that may at times hide uncertainty and lack of clarity and which now makes it difficult for authors of recent studies to reconcile modern hypotheses with those of their illustrious predecessors.

The advances of research methodologies have pointed out a certain awareness of the discrepancy between archaeological evidence and the essence of a fully operating ancient culture. Due to the destructive action of several different factors over centuries, any attempts of defining a culture or a facies always produces a partial picture of a historical reality which is impossible to properly reconstruct (Cocchi Genick 2005, pp. 5-6). In other words, the subordination of our analysis to the

randomness of the archaeological sources, conditioned by many natural and historical factors taking place between past and present, often cause erroneous interpretation of certain 'cultures'. In this perspective, some Italian scholars suggest the term 'archaeological facies' as more appropriate than 'culture' for the definition of these phenomena (Cocchi Genick 2005, p. 6). According to R. Peroni, an archaeological facies is 'a layout resulting from the casual combination of data related to some aspects of the material culture, as they appear from the archaeological evidence and it is the outcome of a certain transmission and circulation process of the information and it is definable through the study of geographic distribution of the artefacts' (Peroni 1998, p. 10). Endorsing this vision and trying to apply it to this last stage of Maltese prehistory, the terms 'culture' and 'cultural' should, in our opinion, be used just in reference to Borġ in-Nadur, as the main product of the Maltese indigenous communities throughout the Middle/Late Bronze and Iron Age, while the term 'period' will be used to indicate those internal chronological stages characterized by specific pottery productions, identifiable on the basis of typological and stylistic indicators, as for example the Baħrija period.

The Borġ in-Nadur culture and the Baħrija period are actually the subject of *The Maltese Archipelago at the Dawn of History*, the last volume of a trilogy, that represents the logical continuation of a long term research project aimed at the reassessment of the material culture of the Maltese Middle/Late Bronze and Iron Age through the analysis of legacy data left by the excavations carried out in the first half of the 20th century in the key sites of Borġ in-Nadur and Qlejgħa tal-Baħrija. The first two books (*D. Tanasi, N.C. Vella (eds), Site, artefacts, landscape: prehistoric Borġ in-Nadur, Malta, Oxford: Archaeopress Open Access 2011; D. Tanasi, N.C. Vella (eds), The late prehistory of Malta: essays on Borġ in-Nadur and other sites, Oxford: Archaeopress 2015*) revolved around the site of Borġ in-Nadur and the period characterized by the production and circulation of Borġ in-Nadur pottery. The interdisciplinary and collaborative approach behind the research for those two volumes bore groundbreaking results and shed light on one of the most enigmatic moments of Maltese prehistory. But while that research focused primarily on the cultures between the mid-15th and mid-13th c. BC, not much about the dynamics in place from the mid-13th to the beginning of the Phoenician occupation

toward the end of the 8th c. BC was discussed, as in fact the evidence summarizing that period was better represented by the site of Qlejgħa tal-Baħrija rather than Borġ in-Nadur.

In this perspective, the reappraisal of the excavations carried out at Qlejgħa tal-Baħrija by T. E. Peet in 1909 (Peet 1910) and D. H. Trump in 1959 (Trump 1961) – both of which only preliminary published – and the critical study of the Baħrija period using the methodology devised and put in place for Borġ in-Nadur, became imperative and, at the same time, the logical conclusion of almost a decade of research on Maltese prehistory. Like the other two companions, this book is published thanks to a generous grant from the Shelby White – Leon Levy Foundation of Harvard University (Program for Archaeological Publications), received by one of us (DT) in 2017.

The volume is organized in parts. Part I comprises 6 chapters: chapter 1 deals with the history of the archaeological research at Qlejgħa tal-Baħrija (Cardona); chapter 2 details the most recent fieldwork at the site of Qlejgħa tal-Baħrija (Zammit); chapter 3 focuses on the critical reassessment of all the ceramic materials from the 1909 and 1959 excavations (Tanasi); chapter 4 takes into consideration textile tools and coroplastic from the 1909 and 1959 excavations (Veca); chapter 5 deals with stone, metal and bone artefacts from Qlejgħa tal-Baħrija (Veca, Trapani and Tanasi); chapter 6 delves into the study of the post-prehistoric materials from the 1909 and 1959 excavations (Hassam). Part II includes three chapters representing the archaeometric dimension of the research project: chapter 7 focuses on the non-destructive chemical characterization of an array of Bronze/Iron Age pottery from various Maltese sites (Tanasi, Tykot, Pirone and Vella); chapter 8 is a thorough petrographic and chemical study of the Baħrija pottery (Tanasi, Brunelli, Cannavò, Levi); chapter 9 presents the first innovative radiocarbon dates for the Maltese Middle/Late Bronze and Iron Age (Tanasi and Tykot). All cultural materials discussed in Part I and II are kept at the National Museum of Archaeology at Valletta (Malta). Part III comprises three chapters of other aspects strictly connected with the Maltese Middle/Late Bronze and Iron Age: chapter 10 discusses the Baħrija-type pottery found at the Thapsos settlement in Sicily (Tanasi); chapter 11 presents new critical evidence about the major site of Tas-Silġ sanctuary during the Baħrija period (Cazzella and Recchia); chapter 12 deals with an extensive zooarchaeological study of the Middle/Late Bronze Age cave site of Għar Mirdum (Miccichè).

The Maltese Archipelago at the Dawn of History has proved once again the enormous value of the legacy excavation data, especially in a context with limited new or ongoing excavation projects targeting the Middle/Late Bronze

and Iron Age. The collaborative and interdisciplinary approach, true *leitmotiv* of all the three books, supported by innovative archaeometric methods, has brought a cache of new data for other scholars to use for attempting historical reconstructions of such crucial ages and prepared the ground for a long waited and much needed plan of new excavations at Borġ in-Nadur and Qlejgħa tal-Baħrija. The storage rooms of the Auberge de Provence, where the National Museum of Archaeology is located in Valletta have, in our opinion, given everything they had to offer. The time is ripe to return to the small fort in the North – the meaning of Qlejgħa tal-Baħrija as given by Wettinger – (Wettinger 2000, pp. 14, 442) to pick up where the founding figures of Maltese prehistory stopped many decades ago. That is the main recommendation for future works we have, at this stage, to offer.

We are, indeed, very grateful to Sharon Sultana (Senior Curator of the National Museum of Archaeology) who permitted the study and facilitated the access to the various researchers involved in the project between 2017 and 2018, and to Anthony Pace, then Superintendent of Cultural Heritage, for the authorization to undertake archaeometric analysis on ceramics artefacts and bone specimens. The technical drawings of the materials were carried out by Stephan Hassam and David Cardona and digitally improved by Gianpiero Caso and Paolo Trapani. A sincere thanks also needs to be given to Mariella Musumeci (Director of the Regional Archaeological Museum ‘Paolo Orsi’ of Siracusa) for authorizing the study of the Maltese-type pottery from the Thapsos settlement and to Anita Crispino (Executive) for having facilitated the study. The drawings of the Maltese-type ceramics from Thapsos are credited to Rita Musumeci.

Last but not the least, we dedicate this volume to our life partners, Denise and Mireille, who selflessly supported us in the years of this project.

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