Review articles and reviews

The Maltese Archipelago at the Dawn of History
Reassessment of the 1909 and 1959 excavations at Qlejgħa tal-Baħrija and other essays
edited by
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For too long, the Maltese Bronze Age was the less popular cousin of the Neolithic. This started to change in 2011, when Tanasi and Nicholas Vella published *Site, artefacts, landscape: prehistoric Borg in-Nadur, Malta*, followed by *The late prehistory of Malta: essays on Borg in-Nadur and other sites* in 2015 and this volume in 2020. All are published by Archaeopress and supported in part by the Shelby White-Leon Levy Foundation of Harvard University. Together, these volumes achieve many firsts, including a re-assessment of the Bronze Age, fundamental archaeometric analysis, absolute dates and the bringing together of various strands of research to produce a fundamental Bronze Age trilogy. Cumulatively, these books embody good practice for collaboration between various researchers and institutions, resulting in a much-needed fresh perspective that stems from different scholarly traditions.

Throughout, rigorous scholarship has been applied to data sets that lay neglected from academic discourse. The research shows the importance of engaging with existing data sets and, more importantly, shows just how time consuming the process is. It requires focus and rigour, all of which abound in all three volumes. The latest instalment tackles the very difficult period of the mid-13th century BCE and onwards, focusing on the key site of Qlejgħa tal-Baħrija. Both the site and the period have been subject to speculation and neglect, with a number of arguments based on broad suppositions and dubious later chronologies. All the authors tackled these questions by careful analysis of

materials, unshackled by the burden of previous debates.

Starting with a history of interventions at Qlejgħa, the volume re-assesses the key work by David Trump. An intensive survey by MariaElena Zammit assessed the entire site, rather than the excavated parts. Combined with a careful study of pottery and careful mapping of 42 rock-cut pits, this shows the site is much more extensive than what has been excavated. In particular, the mapping of the pits provides much needed context, shows how they are related to other features and gives an indication of quarrying activity before the digging of pits. Equally, the paper by Stephan Hassam shows that the site's biography extended well beyond the Bronze Age (a period that remains in need of more analyses).

The book considers all known aspects of the site, including a much-needed catalogue of stone and other artefacts (Veca, Trapani, Tanasi), showing both outside contacts and local stone working and a very thought-provoking paper by Carlo Veca on textiles. Bronze Age textiles are at the centre of many debates in wider Mediterranean and European studies. While traces of textile production have been acknowledged in Malta, there remains a lacuna in discussing textile making. Rather than relying on moot arguments centred on 'silos', Veca offers a thorough, methodical re-assessment, anchoring the debate in current studies. He identifies textile production across different parts of the site, which in turn offers scope for further research. Based on his results, if excavations are resumed they should have a detailed environmental sampling strategy which will provide much needed archaeobotanical data.

A number of papers are focused on pottery, a project that Tanasi has been working on for a long time. Tanasi's paper on pottery from the 1909 and 1959 excavations is particularly interesting and finally provides a working catalogue for Bronze Age sherds. It would be most welcome to have higher resolution photographs of select sherds, particularly the ones described as incised. A visual examination shows a number of different tools used for incision and some comb stamping. The arguments regarding wheel made pottery are convincing. The use of a slow wheel is extremely likely and it is good to see engagement beyond the 'conventional wisdom' that the wheel is a Phoenician invention.

One of the highlights is Tanasi demonstrating that Bahrija ware is of local production. Tanasi, Tykot, Pirone and Vella also conducted non-destructive pXRF analysis on a number of sherds, showing a predominance of Maltese clays. This is backed up by the excellent archaeometric work in the subsequent chapter. In both cases, the data are presented in tables. It would be wonderful if the time period/phase for each sample were noted, particularly since this work will inform research methodologies for years to come.

Section 3 of this volume contextualizes Bahrija. Tanasi has been refreshingly open about how research develops and his willingness to re-assess and re-evaluate data in light of new discoveries is particularly welcome. The trilogy makes it possible for researchers to follow the train of thought. Tanasi re-assesses the difficult question of Maltese pottery in Thapsos. His thought process is clearly laid out, showing the importance of making these processes available to the wider research community. Cazzella and Recchia identify Bahrija deposits at Tas-Silġ. Their work shows that the Late Bronze Age break is anything but, at least at the site of Tas-Silġ. There too they are engaged in a long-term programme of re-assessment anchored in detailed excavations. If the Tas-Silġ data appear at odds with that from Borġ in-Nadur and Bahrija, it is worth remembering that many of the Bronze Age sherds come from disturbed

contexts. This is not surprising, given the long life history of Tas-Silġ. More importantly, it is refreshing to see contrasting points of view in a publication. The Bronze Age (and the Neolithic, for that matter) cannot be seen in terms of being exactly the same across the islands. Tas-Silġ offers a particular type of context, one which is almost unknown in the Maltese Bronze Age.

Equally, the analysis of faunal remains from Ghar Mirdum offers an insight into different strategies across the islands. Here, Miccichè draws parallels with Borġ in-Nadur. This assemblage provides much needed data on animal consumption and butchery and offers fruitful avenues for a study of mortuary practices. Perhaps most intriguing is the presence of (unusually large) chicken bones. This is particularly interesting because it is broadly agreed that chickens only appear in the western Mediterranean in the 9th century BCE. There remains a lot of work to be done when it comes to chickens. Of course it is entirely possible that the Ghar Mirdum examples come from a later layer, especially considering the size. The only way to answer this question, both in Malta and elsewhere, is via radiometric dating.

Finally, this volume has four important results. First, there is mounting evidence that the Bahrija "phase" is subsequent to Borġ in-Nadur rather than running in parallel – at least at the site of Qlejġha. Tas-Silġ might yet yield more surprises. Second, the Bahrija phenomenon is an indigenous one. Previously, it was related to the Fossa Grave culture in Calabria and the Ausonian III in Sicily. An uncritical acceptance of the Sicilian paradigm has long blighted studies of the Neolithic and Bronze Age. It is good to see carefully collated evidence that challenges deep-seated assumptions. Third, it is clear that at least some "Mycenaean" pots are made locally. Whether these are the result of extensive external contact remains to be seen, but this highlights why it is essential to carry out thorough scientific analyses rather than relying on visual "style".

Fourth and finally, Tanasi and Tykot offer much needed radiometric dates. The late David Trump had a deep interest in the Bronze Age. It

is good to see that his thoughts are borne out by radiometric dates, especially since he was keen to obtain such dates. More importantly, the radiometric dates anchor the arrival of the Phoenicians (and thus the conventional end of prehistory) to not earlier than 750 BC. And as a bonus, the isotopes in the sample show that cattle are eating C3 plants.

Like every good piece of research, this volume answers questions and raises new ones. It also offers a space to revisit conclusions and voice dissent where needed. The collaborative nature of the work is particularly welcome and it is hoped that this standard will be adopted across all archaeological research on the islands. This is the beginning of a new era for Bronze Age studies on the Maltese Islands.

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