

## 14. Taking stock

Davide Tanasi – Arcadia University,  
The College of Global Studies, MCAS, Italy  
TanasiD@arcadia.edu

Nicholas C. Vella – Department of Classics and Archaeology,  
University of Malta, Malta  
nicholas.vella@um.edu.mt

The principal aim of this collection of essays has been to throw light on the history of Malta and the south-central Mediterranean in the second millennium BC. The research exercise was triggered by a collective interest in Borġ in-Nadur as a rich antiquarian and archaeological landscape and in the cultural material uncovered during a number of excavations in the major prehistoric sites found there. It is not up to us to say whether collectively or as single or joint contributors we managed to accomplish our aim as fully as we had hoped. The reader will find that several queries that came our way when the work was in progress either remain unanswered, often for reasons beyond our control, or were attended to only briefly; others, we believe, were tackled more fully with interesting results. Nonetheless, we hope that the unanswered queries will stimulate the sort of constructive debate that allows research to progress. What we want to do by way of conclusion is to take stock and point out where we feel research should be directed in the short and medium terms. We do not presume that ours is the *only* valid research agenda that can structure Bronze Age studies in the Maltese islands. Other researchers will have their own queries which, no doubt, will enrich the tapestry of meanings which we endeavour to give material culture from the distant past.

## The site and its landscape

The centennial interest in the area of Borġ in-Nadur has produced some of the most fascinating accounts of Malta's antiquarian literature. Indeed, the way in which people have sought to understand the sites, in particular the megalithic ruins and the underground water cistern at Ta' Kaċċatura, may be taken as representative of the process of transformation which antiquarianism underwent to become archaeology at the beginning of last century. Revisiting those accounts and the fieldnotes kept by one of the archaeologists has also allowed us to throw light on queries that have been posed about the late prehistoric culture of the Maltese archipelago. Our wish is to locate Margaret Murray's own papers as even they might contain precious information not considered worth publishing at the time.

Beyond the site of Borġ in-Nadur, much work remains to be done. We are still lacking a comprehensive survey of dolmens, traditionally associated with the Early Bronze Age (Tarxien Cemetery phase); it is clear that their distribution along the margins of major topographic features, including deep-sided wadis, plateaus and plains, begs explanation. Hilltop sites long associated with the Borġ in-Nadur cultural *facies* – including, for instance, In-Nuffara, Wardija ta' San Ġorġ, Wardija ta' San Martin, Il-Qolla – still lack comprehensive surveys which would document the known rock-cut 'silo pits', identify rock-cut features (including post holes and hut foundations), catalogue portable stone equipment (including rollers and querns), and collect systematically the few pottery sherds that have luckily escaped the attention of the avid amateur and collector. Understanding of the landscape context of such sites at the micro scale – in terms of catchment (water, soils, stone), access to the sea, and visibility, for instance – will allow us to write site biographies of the sort accomplished by two of the contributors to this volume.

## The artefacts

The inauguration of the Bronze Age display at the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta will go a long way to ensure that awareness is raised about Malta's late prehistory. This will also

serve to whet the appetite of those who want to learn more, including research students, and those visitors who will feel that tours of the archaeological sites will be a natural extension of their visit to the museum. A management and conservation plan for the sites and the surrounding landscape is needed, probably more than ever before, even if the accomplishment of this task will require Herculean strength and determination!

The reserve collection at the National Museum of Archaeology includes material from Borg in-Nadur that limitations of time forced us to omit from this volume. This includes the following: the shell and bone material collected by Murray and her team from the megalithic temple; pottery collected in 1969 during the removal of one of the spoil mounds produced as a result of Caruana's work in 1881; and the study of unpublished materials from Trump's excavations in the village area. In addition, a detailed inventory ought to be drawn up of the several worked stone objects that can be seen scattered within the confines of the temple site. We believe that there may also be pottery in reference collections abroad, England in particular. It would be worth expending time to see whether this is the case and to study what may be available.

It is clear to us that the significance of the material from Borg in-Nadur can only be understood when seen in conjunction with material (admittedly mostly pottery) from other contemporary sites in the Maltese archipelago and elsewhere, Sicily in particular. Comprehensive catalogues of the pottery, for instance, should allow researchers to identify the degree of convergence or divergence in the choice of pottery equipment and hence of material indicators of "how things were done" in different contexts (domestic and funerary to start with), and identify the productive roles that some sites might have had in prehistory. This should also allow researchers to query the role material cultural elements might have had in the construction of local, regional and supra-regional social and cultural identities.

### **Cultural processes in Late Mediterranean prehistory**

Understanding cultural processes in prehistory implies a good grasp of the element of time. In practical terms this translates into the

existence of a reliable yardstick, a good relative chronology and an even better absolute one. The work at the site of Tas-Silġ, carried out by an international team (in the southern sector of the site) led by the University of Malta between 1996 and 2005 and by an all-Italian team (in the northern one) led by the University of Rome since 2003, will allow revisions to be made. Since 2007, the Italian prehistorians have repeatedly made summary reference to a new periodisation scheme for the Maltese Bronze Age on the basis of the spectacular discoveries made in the re-used megalithic temples. The full publication of the results should allow us to understand the rationale behind the revision and provide the stratigraphic and dating evidence to sustain the claims being made.

If social identities were encouraged if not wholly built on the possibilities of seaborne mobility, in contexts where pluri-ethnicities existed, as has been suggested in this volume, it is clear that we will need to know what elements of material culture were travelling *to* where and *from* where. For pottery, in particular, it is imperative that imports are distinguished from local productions. Since it was not possible to carry out archaeometric tests on samples of pottery studied in this volume, care was taken to refer to pottery typical of the Borg in-Nadur cultural *facies* found in Sicily as belonging to a type; it is possible that the vessels are actual imports rather than imitations, produced by locals or resident foreign craftsmen.

It is clear that quality research can only be accomplished in the right environment, where initiative is not stifled but encouraged and commended, where new research tools and novel research questions are not frowned upon but welcomed, where proper provisions are taken to ensure that knowledge and skill transfer is built into any international research enterprise. Above all, no high quality research can be carried out without sufficient financial backing. We acknowledge here the fact that the award received from the Shelby White-Leon Levy Foundation of the United States made it possible to accomplish much of what is presented here; more importantly perhaps, the financial aid has ensured that the results are available for free download to as wide an audience as access to the World Wide Web permits. We also acknowledge the fact that the research

institutions to which the majority of the contributors to this volume belong – namely, Arcadia University, Heritage Malta, University of Catania, University of Malta – support the initiatives of the sort embarked upon here. It is, however, disheartening to note that in Malta cultural heritage studies have not yet made it to the priority lists drawn up by government research grant-awarding bodies. This is a real pity, and a missed opportunity, which can generate spin-offs that go from knowledge creation to enhanced public awareness of a cultural heritage with a clear Mediterranean dimension.

Our parting wish may sound paradoxical but we hope that the research presented here becomes outdated, in part or in whole, for in that case the likelihood is that somebody or a group decided to ask questions, follow an insight, seek financial backing, and produce results.