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HARRIS DUNSCOMBE COLT IN MALTA

NICHOLAS C. VELLA AND RUPERT L. CHAPMAN III

In December of 1992 Mrs Armida Colt donated to the library of the Palestine Exploration Fund in London an archive of photographs, papers, offprints and pamphlets relating to the work of her late American husband, Harris Dunscombe Colt Jr. (1901–73). Part of this material concerns Malta (Fig. 1), in particular the archaeological activity that took place there between 1925–34 when the island's megalithic antiquities were coming to the fore as a result of unstinting work by Dr (later Sir) Themistocles Zammit, rector of the University of Malta (1920–26), curator (1903–22) and subsequently director (1922–35) of the Valletta museum of archaeology. On being informed of the Colt archive by Mr Andrew D. Appleyard, one of us (NCV) had occasion to examine the photographic archive in the course of research conducted at the British School at Rome about the effects of colonialism on the development of prehistoric research in Malta. On the initiative of the other one of us (RLC) this material has been presented to the University of Malta Library following an official request made by Dr Anthony J. Frendo, then Head of the Department of Classics and Archaeology at the same university, to the Executive Committee of the P.E.F. As this note was being drafted to mark this important event and to throw some light on Colt's Malta connection, contact with Colt's son Harris Strickland Colt and wife Margaretta was established by one of us (NCV). This led to the discovery of more material including a photograph album which has been kindly donated to the same library.

To readers of the *Quarterly*, H. Dunscombe Colt Jr. will be known for his work in the Levant and for having been a valued member of many committees, not least of the Council of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem from 1962–72 (Bennett 1975, iv). He is also better known for his significant contribution to Petrie's excavations at Tell el-'Ajjul and at his own excavations at Nessana in Palestine. At the first site, then misidentified with Beth Pelet, Colt arrived with his first wife Teresa in December of 1930 to join what Crystal Bennett called 'the exclusive group of people who worked with that archaeological giant, Sir Flinders Petrie' (1975, iii), including James Starkey, Olga Tufnell and G. Lankaster Harding. Colt had already worked in Egypt in 1925, but only from Tell el-Far'ah (South), where he had worked under Petrie in November 1928, could he write to his parents that he 'felt as if he were learning' (personal communication from Mr and Mrs H. Strickland Colt). With Harding and Starkey respectively, he was responsible for the painstaking restoration in London of engraved ivory plaques of the Hyksos period and for holding an exhibition showing the results of clearing the Egyptian cemetery of the Ramesside age at Tell el-Far'ah (Petrie 1931, 264, 267). More important, however, is the fact that through Colt's negotiation the excavations at Tell el-'Ajjul for the season 1930–31 were aided by New York University, thus renewing, according to Petrie, 'an arrangement in years long past with [the] United States' and heralding 'a great prospect of future work' (Petrie 1931, 269). Colt authored the report for that season (Colt 1932). In 1935 he embarked on his own excavations at the ancient Nabatean site of Nessana located near Auja al-Hafir in the western Negev desert under the auspices of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem and funded by New York University and the American Museum of Natural History. It was at this site that Colt's team uncovered thirty-five complete rolls of papyri written in Greek, the first discovery of its kind in the history of Palestinian archaeology. The excavation was published after the war by the Colt Archaeological Institute (Colt 1962), a private

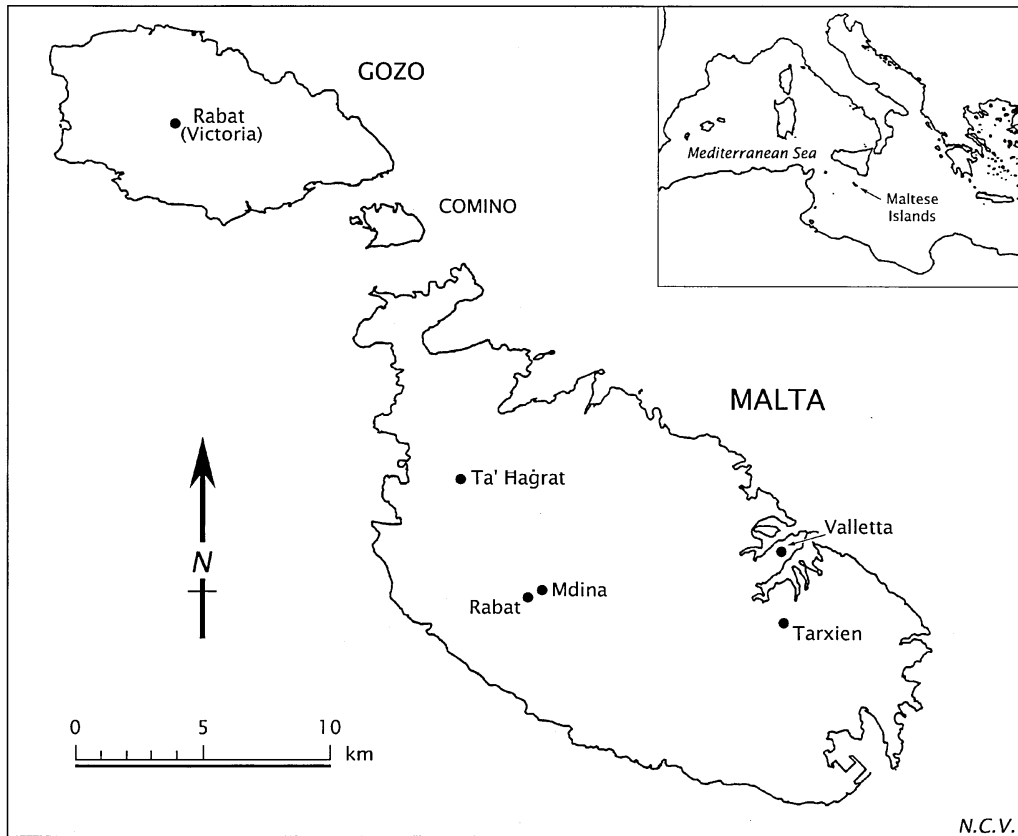


Fig 1. Map of Malta.

foundation set up by the man himself in New York in the 1950s. These were only three monographs from a whole series of seminal works on Palestinian archaeology that this Institute published until Colt's death in 1973; according to Crystal Bennett, who knew Colt personally and who wrote his obituary, in those days 'to be published by Colt was a sought after honour among archaeologists' (1975, iv).

H. Dunscombe Colt was born in New York in 1901 in a large long-established New York and Connecticut family distantly related to Samuel Colt of revolver fame. He was educated at St Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire. He seems to have harboured an interest in archaeology from a very young age, and often wrote to his parents about 'digging up Indian things' in Arizona where he had moved to a new school. His first participation on an excavation appears to have taken place in 1922 at the Roman site of Richborough in Kent. Colt travelled a lot with his father and visited Malta for the first time in 1921, spending most of the winter there. It is not known what lured him to the island, but he certainly returned again in 1922, 1923, and in 1925 while he was living in Oxford; at Oxford he appears to have been in touch with some university archaeologists, perhaps even attending classes at the university, but never took a degree (personal communication from Mr and Mrs H. Strickland Colt). It is not

impossible that Colt was in Oxford when on 1 June 1920 the honorary degree of DLitt was conferred on Themistocles Zammit by the university, and that Colt heard Zammit lecture on Malta's antiquities in London. On 26 November 1927, Colt married a Maltese girl, Teresa Strickland. It is in circumstances related to the archaeology of the island that Harris and Teresa seem to have met, for Margaret Murray mentions them as her helpers in the Valletta museum during her archaeological activity on Malta, noting that only 'later' was Teresa to become Mrs Harris Colt (1963, 129). Indeed, it is very likely that Murray introduced Colt to Petrie, her colleague at University College in London, after meeting him in Malta. It is also a possibility that Colt came to Malta with Murray's expedition. The friendship with Teresa, and his breadth of vision, must have allowed the young Harris to move within archaeological circles with ease and to nurture further his childhood interests. By the end of his second visit to the island, at the age of twenty-one, he had already delivered a lecture on the archaeology of Malta at the King Edward VII social club on 28 February 1922, advertised in the columns of the *Daily Malta Chronicle*. The contents of the lecture can be surmised from a letter Colt wrote to the *New York Tribune* from Malta a day later in which he informs Americans, in a most succinct way, of the most interesting remains of this 'dot in the Mediterranean' (Colt 1922). His knowledge of the archipelago's antiquities was sound and in tune with the latest discoveries being made by Themistocles Zammit. The date of 300 B.C. for the island's Stone Age remains is surely a misprint as if the newspaper editor was obliged to knock a zero off the unrealistic 3000 years which was Zammit's estimated age for the Maltese prehistoric temples, proven correct by radiocarbon dating more than thirty years later.

Through Teresa, a long-standing friendship with Themistocles Zammit was also established. Teresa's father, Charles, had been a good friend of Zammit and with him he shared a passion for Malta's ancient past that was instilled in Charles at a very tender age through his parents, both active in the promotion and study of Malta's ancient remains (de Trafford 1998, 39). Charles' death in 1918, and of his wife a few years later, meant that Teresa had to be given away in marriage by her uncle the Prime Minister of Malta Sir Gerald Strickland, the sixth Count della Catena, later elected to peerage (Hornoyold 1928, 201). This ensured for Colt a swift entry into the highest echelons of Maltese society and an entry in the island's *Who's Who* ([1930], 131). The newspapers of the time describe the lavish wedding reception attended by 1500 guests, including Zammit himself, held within the walls of Villa Bologna, Gerald Strickland's aristocratic home (*Daily Malta Chronicle*, 30 November 1927) (Fig. 2).

It is difficult to define in detail Colt's archaeological activity in Malta. No papers or fieldnotes seem to have survived: none formed part of the Colt bequest to the P.E.F. and none could be traced with his son in the United States. The annual reports of the workings of the Museum Department compiled by Zammit mention Colt at least five times, as having superintended the excavations on at least three sites and provided technical advice, material and financial assistance for another two (Zammit 1925, 7; 1926: I, III, IV; 1927, III-IV) about which he wrote with zeal to his parents at home. The most fruitful experience seems to have been the excavation at the Neolithic temple site of Ta'Hagratt in the northern part of the island between 18 June-5 July in 1925 (Zammit 1929, 6), which he then visited with his father in the autumn of the same year. Most of the work was conducted together with the Englishman Lewis Upton Way F.S.A., F.R.G.S., who visited Malta regularly to oversee Zammit's excavations, and with whom Colt travelled back to England from Malta in 1925; Way had also followed Colt in Palestine as a volunteer on the expedition to the ancient Nessana. Zammit's gratitude for this 'hearty cooperation' is recorded in the report detailing the excavations undertaken at an important Roman site outside Mdina, the old capital of Malta in 1922 (id. 1925, 7), and elsewhere (id. 1926, 1). This friendship seems to have persisted for a long time and several



Fig 2. Harris Dunscombe Colt Jr. and Teresa Strickland during their wedding reception at Villa Bologna, Malta, 26 November 1927. They are flanked by Lord Gerald Strickland and Harris D. Colt respectively.

donations were made to the Valletta museum by Colt and his wife while he was engaged on his expeditions in Palestine. Zammit appears to have acknowledged these kind gestures and Colt's participation in the excavations by way of offprints of excavation reports and other articles he had published in various journals: one of these, a seminal paper on the water supply of the Maltese islands (Zammit 1924), is autographed and inscribed 'To Colt, with the author's compliments 1/5/27'.

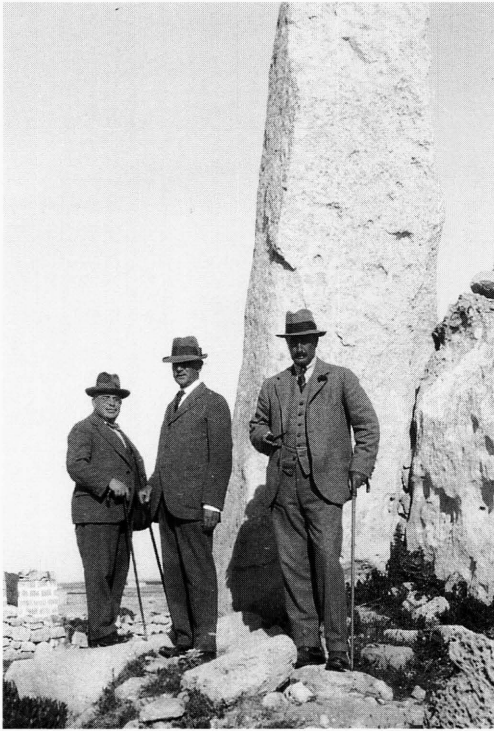


Fig 3. Themistocles Zammit (left) with H. Dunscombe Colt's father (Harris D. Colt) and Lewis Upton Way at Hagar Qim, Malta, probably in 1925.



Fig 4. Excavations at a Saracenic graveyard outside the museum of Roman antiquities at Rabat, Malta, 1925.

More information can be gleaned from the photographic collection. These consist of 93 prints and 123 negatives in eleven loose packets and the album containing 48 photographs. The negatives vary in size but the majority are approximately quarter-plate in size, measuring $4\frac{1}{4}'' \times 3\frac{1}{4}''$. They record the excavations Colt participated in, others that were in Way's charge which he visited, his colleagues and local workers, his friends, and his travels. Two photos from the scores of prints and negatives are reproduced here (Figs. 3, 4). None of the photographs include Harris Dunscombe Colt Jr. himself, since most of them, if not all, were taken by him. Some photos show the working methods of the day, already recalled by Margaret Murray (1963, 129–30), where digging was undertaken by local men who carried away the spoil in baskets under the supervision of figures like Colt and Way. Zammit himself was not always present on site due to commitments elsewhere and arrived only later in the day, sometimes by motorcar or horse-drawn cab, to inspect progress, study the changes in stratification mainly on the basis of the pottery typology, and take notes. The photographic archive is of immense value to anyone interested in the archaeological activity in Malta during the inter-war years, primarily because it complements Zammit's fieldnotes and publications with a visual record. The photographs also provide the sort of evidence that is so precious to conservators and archaeologists who wish to study sites long covered over or destroyed.

To historians of Near Eastern archaeology, this short note will bring in focus the hitherto unknown contribution that Harris Dunscombe Colt Jr. gave to Maltese archaeology earlier last century, before he was lured to the arid desert areas of the Orient.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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