

Research Essays by Students of Archaeology

Anthony Bonanno

The beneficial value of personal research in the formation and learning process of students at tertiary level was realised right from the very conception of the undergraduate course of Archaeology in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Malta (see Bonanno 1995). It was put into effect not only by encouraging continuous assessment on essays connected with the topics of individual study units, but also by including in the course structure the preparation of a longer piece of prose based on relatively extensive research on an agreed topic. Two such 'long essays' were produced by the first two graduates in Archaeology (Pace 1990; Said 1990).

Since 1992, the year in which the teaching of Archaeology at the University of Malta was upgraded to provide also for the B.A. (Hons) degree, the Department of Classics and Archaeology has monitored a series of researched essays as part of the Honours programme in this subject. The first crop of Honours long essays - often referred to as 'dissertations' - was harvested in June 1994, but since then there has been a regular production of between three and five essays every year. The topics of these essays range from *catalogues raisonnés* of particular classes of archaeological material in Maltese collections (Azzopardi 1994), to scholarly discussions of topical questions concerning the archaeology of the Near East (Micallef 1994; Vella 1994; Farrugia 1995) and others concerning prehistory in general (Zammit 1995) and Maltese archaeology in particular (Mifsud 1995; Vella 1995).

The Archaeological Society of Malta has decided to bring this otherwise unacknowledged research work to the public by publishing every year in its *Review* a critical appreciation of the essays presented in the respective year. For this issue of the *Review* I have been requested to write the first of such reports.

Egypt's Supreme God

Carmen Michelle Buhagiar has chosen to study the much debated question of monotheism in the religion of ancient Egypt, covering that whole period of Egyptian civilisation spanning from predynastic times to the end of the New Kingdom (Buhagiar 1996). In her treatise, she makes extensive use of both the literary and the iconographic evidence. As a result of her investigation she concludes that the most appropriate qualifying term for the religion of ancient Egypt is neither "polytheistic" nor "monotheistic", but "henotheistic". That means that, while it worshipped an extensive pantheon, it venerated also a supreme god above all others.

Ms. Buhagiar sets out to trace this supreme god from among the hundreds of gods that existed in ancient Egypt, making a thorough assessment of the evidence using a very well defined methodology. She starts by eliminating all those gods whose role was clearly and essentially limited, both spatially and in their stature. Logical considerations then make her eliminate other gods of a significantly higher rank, which leaves her with four main candidates for the title of supreme god: the Nile, the king, the god of the dead, and the sun god. Of these the last one comes out as the supreme god. His various aspects and attributes are discussed, focussing on the Eighteenth Dynasty when the sun worship reached its climax, first by the worship of Amun-Ra, and then by the exclusive worship of Aten during the reign of Akhenaten. This was a short but significant period, after which came the restoration of the older religion, including the re-establishment of Amun-Ra as the supreme god, who was to experience his highest exaltation during the Nineteenth Dynasty.

We are told that this was the culminating point in the history of Egyptian religion, which was thereafter to take the path of decline. This gradual decline in religion coincided with a similar decline in the political and cultural spheres of Egyptian life, until the whole civilisation collapsed and succumbed to the all-pervasive one of Hellenism. Ironically, however, and contrary to what is implied by Buhagiar (1996: 137) on the authority of Kemp (1989: 2), it is at this point, after two debilitating invasions, the Persian and the Macedonian ones, that a number of Egyptian cults, namely those of Isis and Serapis, leave the confined world of the Nile valley to spread and take root throughout the Greco-Roman world. It is later on, with the arrival of Christianity, as correctly remarked by Buhagiar, that Egyptian religion is completely supplanted.

Egyptian Mummification

One would have thought that the subject of mummification in ancient Egypt was such a commonly treated subject that it would allow extremely little to say which could be in some way original. Nevertheless, by choosing to compare the technique and ritual of mummification in the Old Kingdom with those of the New Kingdom Aloisia de Trafford has created for herself an area where she could roam with some freedom for new insights into an old subject (de Trafford 1996).

The work aims at tracing the development of artificial, as opposed to natural, mummification from its origins in the Early Dynastic Period and the Old Kingdom, to

the standards it reached in the New Kingdom. As the title implies the Middle Kingdom does not manifest any noteworthy changes but constitutes merely a transitional phase. In the exercise de Trafford has discovered the ancient Egyptians' great talent for balancing continuity and change.

She takes into account the ancient texts, including the *Pyramid Texts*, which are connected with or describe the mummification ritual. The full texts from three Greek writers (Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch) and two papyri are reproduced in full in appendices. All of these date considerably later than the two compared periods. She also examines archaeological evidence, such as the funerary architecture, inscriptions, artefacts and the mummies themselves (these being derived necessarily from second hand sources), as well as the iconography in the various artistic representations of this mortuary ritual. In this way, the religious and technical aspects of the ritual have been combined in order to provide 'a balanced picture'.

Mummification ensues from the Egyptians' perception of life and death which is discussed in Chapter 2. The mummification ritual and technique of the two kingdoms are discussed in two separate chapters. The comparison becomes more specific in the concluding Chapter 6 where, besides minor developments, like the lack of concern for the fertility organs and the greater importance given to amulets, two main changes are observed. One is the introduction of the dessication of the corpse in natron and the removal of the brain. However, the most important change the author identifies in the New Kingdom is in the perception of mummification which comes to the fore mostly in the 'Opening of the Mouth' ritual. While in the Old Kingdom 'it was a transformation from the god on earth (the king) to god in the afterlife', in the New Kingdom 'it was the transformation from the human (those who could afford to be mummified) to the divine' (de Trafford 1996: 82).

Roman Baths in Malta

It should not come as a surprise to anyone that the Romans were very fond of bathing. The imperial public baths encountered in practically all the major cities of the empire are a concrete testimonial to the institutionalisation of this healthy habit. Public baths were sometimes financed by wealthy individuals and most of the houses and villas of the better-off stratum of society had smaller versions of these public baths. Roman bathing involved a whole ritual involving passages from hot and steamy rooms to cooler ones, ending up in a dip in a cold bath or swimming pool. Although the Maltese islands were probably never regaled with imperial baths, Joe Magro Conti has compiled evidence for a surprising number of actual

and presumed bathing establishments of other types of baths, especially domestic ones (Magro Conti 1996).

A good number of these are briefly mentioned in pre-20th century literature, in printed and in manuscript form. Unfortunately, very little can be derived from these because the information is always very scanty. Five such complexes have been excavated during the present century, with varying standards of excavation method and record taking. Of these, only three survive. The one attached to the Roman villa at Ramla Bay in Gozo was reburied in 1910.

The author starts by discussing the practice of bathing in the ancient world, using both written and archaeological sources, including a more detailed treatment of Roman baths and technical features related to them. This is followed by a brief account of the historical and socio-economic background to Roman Malta. A brief account of the available literature on Roman baths in Malta is followed by a thorough discussion of each of the recorded sites, with very useful tentative reconstructions. The best preserved bathing complex, that of Ghajn Tuffieha, is discussed in all its details in the last chapter.

Magro Conti has successfully achieved the task he had set himself, namely that of compiling a 'comprehensive corpus of Roman baths in the Maltese Islands' in an attempt to provide a further insight into the life-style in Roman Malta. He also discussed in some detail, the construction techniques used in these buildings and tried to identify influences from other parts of the Roman Empire. The work is generously illustrated with line-drawings and colour photographs. Some of the latter show features of Maltese archaeological sites that have so far remained unpublished.

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Note: The long essays by Buhagiar, de Trafford and Saliba were supervised by Dr Anthony Frendo, that by Magro Conti was supervised by the present writer.