

The economic history of Roman and Byzantine Malta

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BRUNELLA BRUNO, *L'ARCIPELAGO MALTESE IN ETÀ ROMANA E BIZANTINA: ATTIVITÀ ECONOMICHE E SCAMBI AL CENTRO DEL MEDITERRANEO* (Bibliotheca Archaeologica 14; Edipuglia, Bari 2004). Pp. 198, figs. 48. ISBN 88-7228-376-0. EUR. 42.

With one major and a couple of minor episodes, the exceptional archaeological heritage of the Maltese islands has been the exclusive domain of British archaeologists since the archipelago came under British rule in 1802: Themistokles Zammit, a distinguished Maltese doctor, dominated the archaeological scene during the first three decades of the 20th c., and then a German scholar (Albert Mayr) and an Italian archaeologist (Luigi Maria Ugolini) made some inroads but were never allowed to conduct excavations. Throughout the long colonial period (1802-1964), the British government never made an effort to set up the necessary local mechanism for training curators of the island's archaeological heritage. It was only in 1939 that J. B. Ward Perkins was appointed professor of archaeology at the then Royal University of Malta, presumably with the intention of starting such a process of transfer of expertise. But that was not to be, since Ward Perkins' appointment had to be abandoned because of the War. In this scenario, and against the pre-independence political background of the early 1960s, the concession by the Maltese government to an Italian archaeological *missione* from the university of Rome and the Università Cattolica di Milano to conduct monumental excavations on three major sites was an ideological (religious and cultural, as well as political) statement by the ruling Nationalist Party. The mission conducted 8 annual archaeological campaigns employing tens of local workmen, again, however, without the training of local archaeologists as part of their remit. The final campaign took place in 1970, on the eve of the return to government of the Labour Party, which had a quite different ideological agenda.¹

The Italian mission managed to publish a lavish 'preliminary report' after each annual campaign, but the promised definitive report never materialized. Since 1996, the same universities, together with that of Lecce, have returned periodically to study the excavated material and conduct minor operations on two of the same sites, with the aim of producing definitive reports and to prepare the sites for presentation to the public. The publication under review appears to be the collateral result of the study of one class of excavated material, the pottery. The imminent publication of that material has been announced in the present volume (7-9) as well as in other venues.² Bruno's volume under review uses the results (including quantitative statistics) from her examination of the amphorae from the excavated sites, but extends her scope to the pottery of the Roman period from the whole island in order to construct an evolutionary picture of economic activity from the beginning of the Roman period to the end of Byzantine rule. She also sets this evolving picture against the background of the central Mediterranean.

She begins (chapt. 1) with a brief outline of the historical backdrop from the Roman conquest in 218 B.C. to the Arab invasion in A.D. 870, as derived from literary and epigraphic sources. Her intention to revise the islands' economic history can be read between the lines already in her introductory paragraph dedicated to the historiographic literature from the 16th c. onwards. Here one notes a slight inconsistency between her attributing to Malta a privileged status immediately after the Roman conquest as a reward for taking Rome's side in the war (this is based on Cicero and Silius Italicus) and her assumption that 'the Maltese prisoners [were] sold as slaves' (17-18). In his account of the capitulation of the island to the Roman consul of 218 B.C., Livy does not specify who the prisoners were. It is more likely that they were the 2000 or so troops that formed the Punic garrison. Another inconsistent position is taken in

1 N. Vella and O. Gilkes, "The lure of the antique: nationalism, politics and archaeology in British Malta (1880-1964)," *PBSR* 59 (2001) 353-84.

2 A. Ciasca and M. P. Rossignani, "Scavi e ricerche della missione archeologica italiana a Malta," *Malta Archaeological Review* 4 (2000) 51-67.

connection with Cicero's considering the possibility of going into voluntary exile on Malta in 58 B.C. (*Ad Att.* 3.4). Malta fulfilled the statutory condition of being more than 400 miles away from Rome (not Italy). The real reason for his not being able to take up that option was that he was already declared an outlaw from the date of the bill of exile. In fact, he was reconsidering the same option in April of 49, but in May received word from Antony that he was not allowed to leave Italy (*Ad Att.* 10.7-9, 10.18). Another possible correction concerns the award of the *ius Latii* to Malta. It should be kept in mind that this concession was given by Antony in 44 to the Sicilian *civitates*, presumably including Malta, but that it was as readily removed by Octavian, if not already by 36, then certainly by 21 B.C. This is reflected in the fact that the *municipium* is not documented, for either Malta or (separately) Gozo, before the 2nd c. A.D. The different political status of the Sicilian *civitates* after 21 B.C. is defined by Pliny (*NH* 3.8.92).

A first appraisal of the merits and demerits of the excavations of the Italian mission in the 1960s is given in a short overview of archaeological work in the 20th c., followed by a look at prospective future research (chapt. 2); in her appraisal Bruno deems that "il metodo seguito nello scavo e nella documentazione, così come alcuni approcci interpretativi siano oggi superati e discutibili" (25). Of interest is the rise of interest in the Phoenician-Punic legacy of the island, which up to the end of the 19th c. had been confused with the prehistoric Megalithic heritage. Already at this stage Bruno shows an admirable familiarity with the extensive literature on the subject, including even some undergraduate dissertations at the University of Malta. For anyone unfamiliar with the geography of the Maltese islands, her account (chapt. 3) of their environmental context, including the geological formations and the climate, is a boon, rendering the whole book even more self-contained. It is kept up-to-date by inclusion of the recent revelations produced by pollen analyses of Phoenician-Punic deposits from Tas-Silg.³

The important chapter 4 is dedicated to settlement and demography. Here she discusses the documentation of not only the inhabited centres and villas, but also the sanctuaries. She endorses the internal and central location of the two main urban centres, Melite for Malta and Gaulos for Gozo. For the former she embraces the by-now well-rooted notion of the contraction of the town already by Byzantine times and states (without supporting evidence) that 'some domestic quarters in Rabat are given to burial' while admitting that sporadic excavations have revealed continuity of residences in the 6th-9th c., even if by then located on the periphery of the town. Of interest is the topographical location of Roman villas, most of which had sectors dedicated to the pressing of olive oil. She observes that some are in the immediate vicinity of the main town, some in the hinterland adjacent to harbours, some near water springs, but some on Globigerina limestone territory (which must have been less arid than it is today); many occupy high places (hills or terraces), some overlooking bays and small anchorages for defensive purposes. She correctly observes that there are no traces of systematic divisions of agricultural land (*centuriatio*), not even in the more fertile plains, although those are admittedly very small and scarce. The list of 'villa' sites on 48-50, whether real or presumed, is inflated as some sites are counted twice (e.g., nos. 9 and 12, 34 and 35). In discussing the location of the sanctuary of Juno (previously assigned to the Castle of St Angelo on the Birgu peninsula), Bruno suggests that the ruins described by the 16th-c. Jean Quintin as standing halfway between the *oppidum* and the Castle are the same as those rediscovered in 1768 at the foot of a hill called Cortin. Whereas she might be right in identifying Mdina-Rabat as Quintin's *oppidum* (rather than the Late Mediaeval town of Birgu), Quintin's description fits better the Megalithic temple ruins (as many as three separate groups survived up to the 19th c.) on another hill bearing the same place-name of Qortin (today's Kordin/Corradino). As for the demographic estimates, a figure on either side of 10,000 proposed by C. Renfrew for the Prehistoric temple period seems to be valid as the upper limit, even for the Early Roman phase (2nd c. B.C. to 1st c. A.D.), to judge by funerary evidence, rather than the higher figure of 17,000 proposed by G. Said Zammit.⁴

3 C. O. Hunt, "Palynology," in A. Bonanno and A. J. Frendo, "Excavations at Tas-Silg, Malta. A preliminary report on the 1996-1998 campaigns," *MedArch* 13 (2000) 111-14.

4 G. A. Said-Zammit, *Population, land use and settlement on Punic Malta. A contextual analysis of burial evi-*

Chapter 5 considers professional activities and economic interests; it also highlights the patronage and civic rôle of individuals commemorated in inscriptions. The textile and building industries are documented by literary sources. Only two professions are attested by funerary inscriptions, a 2nd-c. A.D. comic actor and lyre player and a 6th-c. medical doctor. Commercial activity seems to be implied by a proxeny inscription dated to the Late Republican period. As to the anonymous *primus* of the *municipium* commemorated by an inscription of the 2nd c. A.D., it is not certain whether he 'restored' (as Bruno suggests) or constructed *ex novo* a marble temple of Apollo in the town of Melite. For the sake of precision, it should be stated that members of the Jewish community (referred to on p. 58) are only recorded in funerary inscriptions of the 4th c. or later.

Chapter 6, which treats of the exploitation of the local resources, is peppered with new insights on economic activity in the islands. Here she admits that, owing to inadequate sources for the period in question, a good part of the reflections are based also on information derived from sources relating to different periods. She begins by observing that the dismal image given by 16th-c. writers of the islands' agricultural potential is not completely correct, even if the terrain must have always been difficult to exploit. Recent studies are confirming her surmise that water resources must have been more abundant in antiquity than from the 16th c. onwards with the exponential increase of extraction from the water tables. Cultivation of the olive in Roman times, amply suggested by the remains of a considerable number of olive-processing villas and the relatively few imported oil amphorae, probably continued into Byzantine and Arab times, as suggested by surviving place-names; it may eventually have been reduced as a result of increasing demand for cotton. The conspicuous presence of foreign wine amphorae suggests that in Roman and Byzantine times wine production did not have much economic relevance, wine being mostly imported. Whereas I agree with her conclusion that the raw material for the famous Maltese textiles was probably linen, her elevation of Maltese rose production (64) is based on an erroneous reading of a passage in the *Verrines* relating to cushions (of Maltese fabric) stuffed with roses. That the countryside was reasonably rich in pasture, and that the consumption of meat, especially of ovicaprids, was relatively high, is suggested by more recent findings from the excavations at Tas-Silg.⁵

As to economic activity connected with the sea, trade is suggested by the literary sources, in particular Diodorus Siculus, while fishing is well-attested by the fish and sea-food remains from Tas-Silg. Totally missing are any traces of the typical installations for the salting of fish. The ubiquitous salt-pans do not present satisfactory dating elements. In 1768 important harbour structures emerged at the foot of a hill at Marsa, near the head of the Grand Harbour. Their description suggests structures of Late Hellenistic and Roman times, but a study of the pottery indicates the presence of Late Roman and Byzantine amphorae; 260 amphorae of a globular form can be attributed to an Aegean production of the Byzantine period, and excavations conducted in an area close by produced commercial pottery of the 7th-9th c. These finds, along with frequent references in the sources to distances between Malta and other ports, show that Malta was at that time well situated on the established sea-routes. Again, unfortunately, Bruno confuses Corradino Hill where Jean Quintin had seen stones 'of stupendous size' (which he attributed to the temple of Juno) with the promontory of Qortin (later known as Jesuits Hill) where G. F. Abela (1647) later saw traces of a quay and where in 1768 the above-mentioned harbour structures were found.

In chapt. 7, Bruno makes her most daring and novel claims as she attributes two new amphora types to a local production during the last two centuries of the Republic and the first two of the Empire. The main reasons for her claim (85) are that (1) the types do not occur outside Malta, and (2) they are characterized by technical and formal elements typical of other

dence (BAR S682, Oxford 1997).

5 A. Corrado, A. Bonanno and N. Vella, "Bones and bowls: a preliminary interpretation of the faunal remains from the Punic levels in area B, at the temple of Tas-Silg, Malta," in S. Jones O'Day, W. Van Neer and A. Ervynck (edd.), *Behaviour behind bones: the zoo-archaeology of ritual, religion, status, and identity* (Oxford 2004) 47-53.

ceramics known to be of local production. Malta Type 1 is a Late Republican amphora. Its ovoid body has close similarities with that of the Punic local amphorae, so it could be derived directly from those. Yet it is also similar to various types with ovoid body which are not yet properly classified but are close to oil amphorae from Brindisi and others from N Africa (e.g., Dressel 26 and Tripolitanian I). Apart from having the same type of fabric as the Punic-Maltese neckless amphora, this type accounted for only 5.4% of the Late Republican amphorae at the sanctuary of Tas-Silg, but reached 49.4% of the same at the villa of San Pawl Milqi. Malta Type 2 is an Early Imperial amphora. It is rather squat with a slight narrowing of the body at the centre. Bruno has also identified a third type, so far represented by one example that has the same characteristics but a more cylindrical body. The only snag about both types is that their fabric, in 90% of the cases, contains volcanic inclusions and quartz, which are not typical of Maltese geology. The fact that in some cases the fabric is the same as that of Type 1 is taken to indicate that at least a part of its production could be Maltese. Since these alien elements are present in Maltese cooking ware already in the 4th-3rd c. and become more common in Maltese pottery in the 3rd-1st c. B.C. (e.g., in votive plates at Tas-Silg), Bruno suggests the import of foreign sands, possibly as ballast in boats, for mixing with local clay. The contents of both amphora types are likely to have been oil and/or fish sauces for export (in exchange for other commodities, or as ballast for outgoing boats) or for internal circulation (as suggested by examples from the Xlendi shipwrecks⁶). The presence at Carthage, Segesta, Eryx and Enna of coins struck on Malta seems to confirm such trading activity.

Chapter 8 analyses in great detail the two most important sites excavated by the Italian mission in the 1960s: the multi-period sanctuary of Tas-Silg, and the Roman villa of San Pawl Milqi. After recounting the historical development of each as revealed by the excavations, Bruno discusses at some length their economy and activities, as well as the amphora frequency and the light that it sheds on the function of each site in each period from Punic-Hellenistic to Arab-Norman times. The account of the historical development does not contain much that is new,⁷ although she mentions for the first time (101) a field survey of the area around the site conducted by the Italian team in 1999. The survey appears to have discovered new 'sites' that are likely to be connected with the sanctuary. Some additional information results from recent exploratory interventions. There is apt criticism of the excavation methods of the 1960s and the negation of some inadequately supported hypotheses (e.g., the existence of an Arabic mosque and a Norman chapel at Tas-Silg) that were based only on some pottery and flimsy stone remains. Those who have found it difficult to explain the function of heavy ashlar structures on both the N and S peripheries of the sanctuary will find some consolation in the fact that the excavators find the same difficulty (107-8). Of renewed interest, on the other hand, is the confirmation by the recent excavations of the function of the baptismal basin right in the middle of the prehistoric temple ruin (i.e., quite a few metres behind the apse of the Early Christian church) and the discovery of 275 coins (ranging from the 4th to mid-6th c.) and a gold tremis of 671-74, beneath the bottom stone slab of its baptismal basin.

On the model of the island sanctuary of Delos, Bruno suggests that the Tas-Silg sanctuary might have received revenues from the rural estates represented by the neighbouring 'sites' mentioned above, as well as the nearby villa at Zejtun, which produced a fragment inscribed with a dedication to Ashtart (110). Apart from the sale of cult-related objects and the provision of hospitality services, the sanctuary must have drawn revenues from maritime activity, including piracy. Ritual food consumption within the sanctuary appears to have been the order of the day, as established by the studies conducted by the team from the University of Malta.⁸

6 Being located at the very mouth of the Xlendi inlet in Gozo, the shipwreck finds may be of local, Maltese origin. Navigation into this inlet is notoriously tricky.

7 One notes a slight confusion in interpreting Ptolemy's location of the temple of Hera. Ptolemy's coordinates place it to the east of the island, not to the south as Bruno suggests (99). The top of the hill on which the sanctuary was installed is only 40 m above sea level, far below the 200 m assigned to it here.

8 P. J. Schembri, "The molluscan remains," in Bonanno and Frendo (supra n.3) 102-9; A. Corrado, "Animal bones," *ibid.* 109-10; Corrado, Bonanno and Vella (supra n.5).

The ceramic repertoire of Tas-Silg is quantitatively impressive but monotonous, consisting for the most part in locally-produced domestic pottery. Amphorae for transport constituted the bulk of imported pottery (5748 diagnostic fragments, corresponding to a minimum number of 2722 vessels). Apart from these, a few fragments of Campanian A and C black gloss and of thin-walled items belong to the Late Republican phase, while a score of Italian terra sigillata fragments, together with one or two lamps, represent the Early Empire. Imports from mid-Imperial to Byzantine times consist almost exclusively of African Red Slip ware and lamps of Hayes IIA/IIB. Some Sicilian lamps datable to the 6th-8th c. are also present. Bruno then discusses at length the origins of the amphorae and derives several observations on consumption of food-stuffs and the mechanisms of exchange. She finds extraordinary parallels of ritual wine consumption at the contemporary Sicilian sanctuary (of Phoenician origin), the *Aphrodision* of Eryx, and in the amphora heap connected with a sanctuary at Cagliari probably dedicated to Venus (114). She even suggests the possibility of the Tas-Silg sanctuary serving as a distribution centre of market goods, given its key position in the SE harbour. Like Delos, it might have served in the exchange of goods (including wine) for slaves (115). It is interesting to note how the quantitative pattern of imported amphorae changes from the last two centuries B.C. to the first two A.D. The prevalence of Italian wine amphorae of the first phase gives way to a predominance of N African oil amphorae. From the mid-3rd c., the sanctuary appears in progressive decline — the causes are unknown, though the author suggests a couple of possibilities — even if it was never abandoned completely before the construction of the Christian church during or after the 5th c.

The Roman villa of San Pawl Milqi (*S. Paolo Milqi* in Italian) lies on the incline of a hill in NE Malta, just above the 100 ft. (not metre) contour above sea-level, and dominating the Salina inlet which in antiquity penetrated farther inland. It was hastily excavated between 1963 and 1968. In view of the presence of extensive equipment for olive-oil extraction, the villa must have been connected with a *fundus* containing olive trees. A modest Punic farmhouse, datable to the 4th c. B.C., seems to have preceded the construction in the late 2nd c. B.C. of the villa, which also had defensive features. It comprised the residential quarters, decorated with mosaic floors and painted walls, and the *pars rustica*, equipped with several olive-crushers and presses. The villa appears to have survived at least up to the 3rd or 4th c. A.D., when a fire destroyed parts of it. Thereafter, a part of the building (according to one view, connected with a cult of Saint Paul) survived up to the Arab invasion in 870. Bruno discusses at length the light shed by an analysis of the ceramic finds on the economic activities and vicissitudes of the villa over the centuries. In addition to oil pressing, she identifies the processing and storage of cereals (130-31). Even here, the imported tableware dating from the Late Republic to the 3rd c. (ranging from black-gloss and thin-walled ware to Italian and, later, N African terra sigillata) is scarce. Again, for dating purposes she relies principally on the amphora material (1014 diagnostic fragments, equivalent to a minimum of 491 vessels). In the Punic phase, the villa appears to have relied on local, if not indeed its own, produce, with the import of oil and *garum* from N Africa. This situation persisted even in the Late Republic when, however, much more wine was imported from S Italy, at the expense of N African imports. A major vitality is attested in the first two centuries of the Empire both by the new structural works and by the proportion of imported amphora (more than 50% of the total). It is at this stage that the large central space is equipped with olive-pressing apparatus. Amphora finds suggest an economic contraction in the 3rd and 4th c., and only a sporadic presence in the 5th. They also confirm some form of occupation in the Byzantine age, and Bruno does not exclude that it could have had a religious purpose.

Chapter 9 gives a synthesis of the results of Bruno's study of the amphora material, especially the imported goods. Here we are given much greater detail on the identified origins of the imported amphorae, not only at Tas-Silg and San Pawl Milqi, but also for Malta in general. What is surprising is that any trade with Sicily taking place in the Late Republic (end of the 3rd to the end of the 1st c. B.C.) is not reflected in the pottery, which appears to be imported from Latium and Campania. This is not (as is usually the case) accompanied by a comparable quantity of imported black-gloss (Campanian A) tableware. Imports from the Greek East are very sporadic (only a few Rhodian amphorae). In Early Imperial times, she identifies a

frequent presence of amphorae which she believes to be of E Sicilian origin. Trading links with Pantelleria are testified by the import of typical Pantellerian cooking ware. Malta seems to be the farthest importer of the so-called 'Spello' amphorae, produced in the Tiber and Arno valleys. Eastern Aegean wine amphorae are on the increase, like those from N Africa. The latter take the upper hand in the Late Empire, with diversified areas of production (Tripolitania, Tunisia, Mauretania). Iberian fish-sauce amphorae, which made an appearance in the previous phase (other than in a shipwreck in Marsascala), continue to trickle in during this phase, and the Aegean area is also represented by limited specimens. Those intensify in the Byzantine period (6th-9th c.), suggesting political and military as well as commercial ties with the Byzantine Empire. On the other hand, even N African imports (including the small spatheia) are on the increase.

Chapter 10 offers a synthesis of the observations made in previous chapters, based mostly on the transport amphorae, against a historical backdrop provided by other sources. The hypothesis of an intimate connection between the pirates mentioned by Cicero and the sanctuary of Hera, though just possible, is taken to extremes. More probable is her suggestion that the sponsoring patrons who financed the monumentalization of the sanctuary of Tas-Silg were the *negotiatores*, the Maltese or foreign traders who embarked on the patronage of an important place of worship dedicated to Hera or Juno, queen of heaven, whose favour was crucial for navigation.

The only earlier attempt I know of that included some of the amphorae found in Maltese collections was by J. A. Riley in his study of the coarse ware from Berenice (Benghazi).⁹ Now Bruno has placed Malta firmly on the maps of amphora distribution patterns. She has also shown that a picture of Malta as a backwater that may be implied by the literary sources (or by their absence) does not reflect reality, especially in Imperial and Byzantine times.¹⁰ We need more works of this kind, based on the 'nitty gritty' of the archaeological evidence. By contrast, the little sculpture that has survived, even if occasionally of the highest quality, cannot tell us much about the economic and social vicissitudes of the archipelago in Roman times. By weaving together diverse sources, ancient and modern, to form a coherent picture, Bruno has created her own mine of information which cannot be ignored by any future researcher if used in the right context.

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9 J. A. Riley, "The coarse pottery from Berenice," in J. A. Lloyd (ed.), *Excavations at Sidi Khrebish Benghazi (Berenice)* (Libya Antiqua Suppl. V.2; Tripoli 1983) 91-467.

10 Placing in an appendix the ancient literary texts alluding to Malta, in their original language (Greek or Latin), has made life much easier for the reader. It would have been equally useful had the epigraphic sources been appended too.