DISTRIBUTION OF VILLAS AND SOME OF THE MALTESE ECONOMY IN THE ROMAN PERIOD

by ANTHONY BONANNO

CERTAINLY one of the most striking aspects of the Maltese archaeology of the Roman period is the comparatively large number of villas, or rural houses, distributed in different areas of the two major islands of the Maltese archipelago. Already twenty-two sites have been recorded, their state of preservation ranging from just a few foundation walls to full-scale building complexes.

By far the largest and most impressive remains of such buildings are those excavated in recent years by the Italian Mission from the University of Rome at San Pawl Milqi.[1] Another villa, not much smaller in scale, was excavated in 1915 by Ashby at Ta' Kaċċatura, near Birżebbuġa, on the other side of the valley opposite the well-known prehistoric site of Għar Dalam.[2] Yet another is currently being excavated by the Museum Department at Żejtun.[3] The thermal complex of Għajn Tuffieħa, decorated with pleasant and varied geometrical mosaics, must have formed part of a sumptuous villa.[4] Traces of similar baths have been recorded at Marsaxlokk,[5] and another villa with richly patterned mosaics was brought to light at Ramla Bay in Gozo.[6] Other sites which have produced remains of villas are: Tas-Sittin (near Fawwara), Ras ir-Raheb (near Baħrija), Fiddien (near Mtaħleb), Wardija, Bidnija, Hal Far and St. Thomas Bay.[7] Until its name is corrected it may not be superfluous to repeat that the so-called 'Roman Villa' of Rabat is not a villa at all, but a Roman town house.

Only a few of the sites just mentioned are examples, on a more modest scale, of the type of villa used exclusively as a holiday resort like that described at length by Pliny the Younger in his letters.[8] The majority seem to have been the permanent residences of well-off country gentlemen and incorporate installations for the

extraction of olive oil and, probably, for wine pressing. At the villa at San Pawl Milqi, for example, one finds several olive-pippers and huge rectangular blocks of stone on which the wooden structures of the *prela*, or olive-presses, used to be mounted, as well as a whole system of rock-cut channels. Besides, a large number of containers carved in stone must have served as settling vats. At the villa in Zejtun only one such rectangular block and a couple of stone vats survive. A similar stone press-bed and two rock-cut settling tanks are visible at Ta' Kaċċatura. Evidence of the same agricultural industry, in the shape of instruments used for such processing, comes from various other sites. The reconstructed olive-pipper at the Museum of Rabat comes from Marsaxlokk;[9] the basin of another stands in the forecourt of St. John's church at Hal Millieri.[10] My attention has recently been drawn to two similar instruments, one at Għajn Tuffieħa, in the field further uphill above the baths, and one in a field on the Mġarr-Ġnejna road.[11]

Considering the small size of the islands, the number of these olive oil processing plants is certainly significant and it seems logical to assume that other such installations have either been completely destroyed or still await discovery. The size of some of of these agricultural plants and the large quantity of this industrial equipment so far recorded suggest two tentative comments by way of interpretation: the first of a broad ecological nature, the second purely economic. The frequency of these complexes implies that the cultivation of the olive-tree was well diffused on the islands, certainly much more than it is today, and it should not be too difficult to envisage large silvery-green patches of olive groves marking the Maltese landscape in Roman times.[12] It also implies that a considerable portion of the Maltese economy in the same period was supported by the cultivation of the olive and by its by-products.

From the economic point of view the question arises whether production was intended to cater exclusively for local needs or whether there was enough surplus to promote oil or olive export. Ancient literature is completely silent in this regard, whereas it is fairly informative about another Maltese product, linen. Our only sources remain, therefore, archaeological and it is once more archaeology that provides us with further information. There is a very characteristic type of amphora, egg-shaped and neckless, which is widely diffused in Malta and is commonly held to be a local Maltese variation of a Phoenician type.[13] Its shape survives also in the Roman period. Such amphorae appear sporadically in

other sites bordering on the Mediterranean.[14] Besides, amphorae of Italian pedigree were at one stage imitated in Malta.[15] These containers could very well have carried Malta-produced olives or olive oil exported to other centres. Moreover, we know that it was a regular practice to re-use amphorae, originally produced in some foreign land, to export locally produced commodities. The Maltese of Roman times might have, therefore, exported their merchandise in containers originally produced in Rhodes, Spain, Italy and elsewhere. Further evidence for such a trade comes from the Grand Harbour area, precisely from Marsa, at the foot of Corradino Hill, where in 1766 some store-houses were discovered, one of which containing 260 entire amphorae, ready, one would presume, to be shipped off to some unidentified destination.[16]

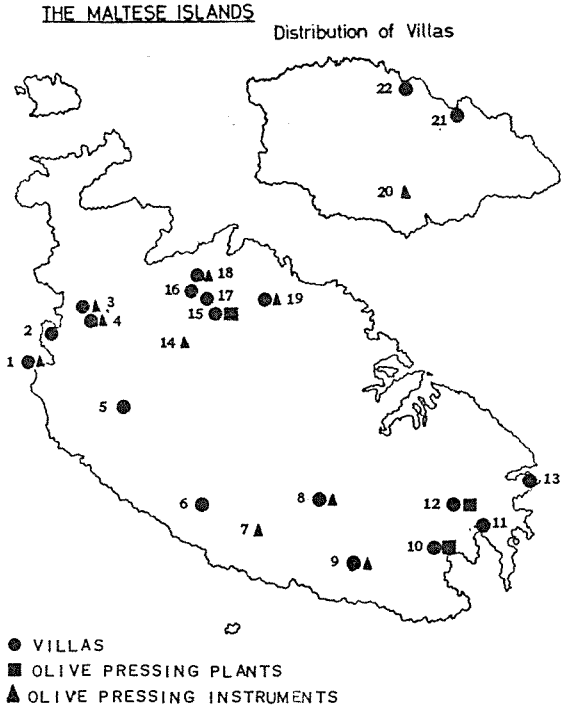
Some of the questions that one may ask regarding these large rural villas are: Who were their owners? Were they rich natives or Roman magistrates on temporary residence for their tenure of office in the islands, or rich landowners from some other area of the Roman Empire: Sicilian, North African or Italian? What sort of labour did they employ, slavery or some other system whereby local farmers were recruited? Were there other farmers of more modest means earning their living independently, or was Maltese agriculture monopolized by the rich owners of these villas? The answers to such questions are not available at this stage of the study of the Roman period in Malta. Perhaps archaeology may in the future solve, at least in part, some of these problems.

The attached map shows very approximately the distribution of country villas on the two islands. The survey of the Roman antiquities of the Maltese islands is still in its initial stages, and the map does not have any pretensions of accuracy or completeness.[17] From the present map one observes that most of the recorded villas lie within 2 or 3 kilometres from the sea, but we find a few further inland, as much inland, in fact, as a maximum breadth of 13 kilometres permits. The siting is almost always on a high place either on top of flat hills or promonotories (Ras ir-Raħeb, Għargħur) or, more often, on the sloping sides of ridges over valleys or facing the sea (Bidnija, San Pawl Milqi, Burmarrad).

The olive is the only agricultural product for which we have ample archaeological evidence but certainly other products were grown locally to satisfy, even partly, local needs. The ear of corn appearing, in conjunction with the head of a female divinity, on locally-struck coins of the early Roman period[18] may seem to indicate that corn was also grown in some abundance on the islands. Vegetables were presumably also grown, but one must keep in

List of Villa Sites

The number on the left corresponds to that on the attached map. The six-figure number refers to the grid on the 1:25,000 maps of Malta published in 1962 by the Directorate of the Overseas Surveys.



1. Ras ir-Raheb (395739)
2. Qala Pellegrin (402752)
3. Ghajn Tuffieha (421762)
4. Misrah Miel (423755)
5. Fiddien (436711)
6. Tas-Sittin (477666)
7. Hal Millieri (523665)
8. Tad-Dawl (near Mqabba) (529677)
9. Hal Far (554645)
10. Ta' Kaccatura (574657)
11. Marsaxlokk (589667)
12. Zejtun (582678)
13. St. Thomas Bay (61786)
14. Bidnija (462757)
15. San Pawl Milqi (470768)
16. Wardija Hill (463776)
17. Wardija Hill (464773)
18. Wardija Hill (465778)
19. Gharghur (506758)
20. Xewkija (333878)
21. Ramla Bay (355911)
22. Marsalforn (335925)

mind that the change to the present intensive cultivation of such vegetables is a much more recent phenomenon.[19]

We do not know for certain whether flax, the linen plant, was systematically cultivated or not. That it was seems to be indirectly implied by the frequent mention in ancient Greek and Latin writers of a Maltese textile, the raw material of which has been firmly established to be linen rather than cotton.[20] But the cultivation of flax requires deep soil and a great quantity of water.[21] Deep soil occurs extremely rarely in the Maltese islands and it can be found only in the alluvial deposits at the very lowest edges of the larger valleys. As far as irrigation is concerned, we are all too familiar with the low rainfall of this part of the Mediterranean where an annual 0.75m. of rain is the rare exception. And the climatic conditions in Roman times could not have been very different from the present ones. Similar considerations have made Busuttil and others conclude that flax was probably imported in its raw state, and processed and woven locally.[22] The discovery of burnt fabrics

made from 'flax or a fibre of that type' in the Bronze Age layer at Tarxien[23] may suggest, but does not prove, that flax was grown in Malta in prehistoric times, whereas the spindle whorls found in the same context[24] clearly suggest a certain amount of weaving activity. On the other hand, enough documentation survives to show that flax was cultivated in Malta in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries A.D.[25]

According to ancient writers, an important Maltese industry, the products of which enjoyed a wide and long lasting repute for their quality and fineness, was the textile industry.[26]

It is unlikely that the Romans introduced this industry in the archipelago which to them was mostly, if not only, of strategic importance. It seems in fact very probable that it was a survival of Punic times when Malta was a well established trading post – perhaps even a colony – of those people of Phoenician origin who in the Western Mediterranean are better known as Carthaginians. Both the Phoenicians and, later, the Carthaginians were renowned for their intensive trade in sought-after textiles and it is very probable that they established a weaving industry also in these islands. The Maltese products were in fact so well known that Cicero, the famous Latin orator, calls them simply 'Maltese' (*Melitenses*)[27] and the Sicilian historian, Diodorus Siculus, says that the most important Maltese craftsmanship was devoted to the production of draperies (ὀθόνια), which were distinguished for their sheerness and softness.[28] Besides these, other writers, such as Varro, Silius Italicus and Novius refer to Maltese textile products.[29]

Cicero, in his prosecution speeches against Verres, the former propraetor of Sicily and Malta, among other things, accuses him of having seized for himself great quantities of Maltese clothing and that for his sake the city of Melita itself had for three whole years served as a weaving factory.[30] This suggests that most of the drapery was woven in the city itself by specialized workshops and, probably, within the household, perhaps by the female members of the family. That there were specialized craftsmen in the profession (ὀθονοποιοι) is witnessed by Diodorus, but the weaving implements discovered in the 'Roman villa' of Rabat indicate that it was also a home-based craftsmanship.

That the Maltese draperies were luxury products and fetched good prices is inferred by the ancient writers' statements and it is natural to conclude that this industry must have been one of the most important sectors of the Maltese economy in the Roman period.

The economy of the archipelago, however, was certainly not limited to agriculture and textiles. The geographical position of the islands invited and compelled their inhabitants of all times to resort to fishing. In a paper delivered in a congress on Sicily and Malta,[31] I postulated the existence of fishing communities in the vicinity of the harbours and of the smaller sheltered bays of the islands: the Roman predecessors, admittedly on a much smaller scale, of the fishing villages of Marsaxlokk, St. Paul's Bay, Xlendi and Mgarr (Gozo). Once more, positive concrete evidence for this hypothesis is lacking, but fishing implements have been discovered in the Rabat 'villa'.

Some years ago, a Maltese scholar, basing his arguments on two integrated and somewhat controversial lines from a Latin poem on hunting,[32] tried to establish the existence in Malta of a coral industry in the last century B.C., which employed a number of people (κωραλλεῖς) in fishing coral off the Maltese shores.[33]

From the second century B.C., when Rome had become the leading naval power of the Mediterranean, one of its most pernicious enemies were the pirates. Several campaigns against them failed or achieved limited results until in 67 B.C. Pompey, the Roman general, managed 'to restore the control of the sea to the Roman people'. In his speeches against Verres, Cicero tells us that pirates were accustomed to use Malta as a shelter during the winter.[34] The pirates were called Cilicians because originally they came from Cilicia Trachea in Asia Minor but they certainly included adventurers of other nationalities, perhaps even Maltese recruits. There was probably some agreement of non-aggression, even tacit, between the pirates and the Maltese since we are told that the former, one of whose main activities was the looting of temples, left the riches of the Maltese temple of Juno untouched. Besides shelter, the pirates needed provisions, especially food and fresh water, which was not easily available in the islands. In exchange the local inhabitants of the rural and coastal hamlets and the rich owners of the large villas had their lives and property guaranteed and they could also have received from them other commodities and luxuries looted from elsewhere. Such agreements are, in fact, recorded in other places.[35] Harbour activity involved in the maintenance of ships, piratical and other, and in the loading and unloading of cargo must have also employed a number of Maltese workmen.[36] Such harbour activity is attested by the number of discoveries of Roman lead anchors in the larger as well as in the smaller harbours, such as Salina bay, which must have once served as a small port.[37]

Besides providing an outlet for artistic expression, the building industry has always played an important role in keeping a section of the Maltese population gainfully occupied. Naturally, in the Roman period its proportions were by no means comparable to those it reached with the population explosion from the time of the Knights up to the present day, but it was certainly not negligible. Diodorus Siculus praises the dwellings of the islanders 'being ambitiously constructed with cornices and finished in stucco with unusual workmanship'.[38] The huge well-dressed rectangular blocks we see employed in constructions of Roman date – the standard size was approximately 1.20 × .50 × .50m. – require the experience of specialized masons and man power (probably in addition to the use of draught animals) for quarrying, transporting, dressing and laying. Specialized masons must have been employed for the more refined decorative work of which the Greek Sicilian historian speaks. Most of this architectural decoration was made in local stone but we have in our museums an interesting collection of ornamental architectural fragments, such as capitals, cornices, cavettos, in marble. Marble does not occur naturally in Malta and so it had to be imported. It is a totally different material from local stone and though the Maltese masons could have learnt the carving technique it required, it is more probable that experienced craftsmen were brought over from abroad to sculpt it *in situ*. This is exactly what was done in the case of that grandiose architectural programme of the Forum of Septimius Severus in the North African city of Lepcis Magna, for which a whole team of sculptors and carvers were imported from Asia Minor together with the marble with which they were familiar.

Throughout their history the Maltese have always been shrewd and able merchants and in Roman times a section of the Maltese population could well have practised trade, a profession they may have inherited from the Phoenicians, the tradesmen *par excellence* of antiquity. We have only one allusion, in ancient literature, to sea-merchants in connection with Malta, but it is not specified whether they were Maltese or Phoenician.[39]

Thus it is clear that agriculture and the weaving industry were the two main sectors of the economy of the Maltese islands in the Roman period. Fishing and port industry also played an important part and building a minor one. Other minor industries or crafts must have existed. For example, one that is amply testified by archaeological finds is pottery-making.

Though it may be presumptuous to say that Malta was particularly wealthy in Roman times, we have the testimony of the first century B.C. Sicilian historian who, in the same passage, tells us

that the Maltese enjoyed a good standard of living, an achievement which he attributes to Malta's geographical position, its excellent harbours and to 'the sea-merchants'. That there were a number of rich, well-off families is proved by the large rural villas and city houses excavated so far. Some of these could even afford thermal complexes of considerable size. Public buildings, decorated with rich marbles, are testified by inscriptions and by actual material remains. But we still have to investigate whether this well-being was shared by the rest of the population which lived in the two main cities of the islands and in the rural and coastal villages.

NOTES:

[1] M. Cagiano de Azevedo and others, *Missione Archeologica a Malta. 1963/8* (Rome, 1964/9) sections dedicated to 'S. Paolo Milqi'.
[2] T. Ashby, 'Roman Malta', *Journal of Roman Studies* V (1915) 52-66.
[3] *Museum Report 1961*, p. 5; *1972/3*, p. 72; *1973/4*, p. 51.
[4] *Museum Report 1929/30*, pp. VIII-XII; *1930/1*, pp. III-IV; *Bulletin of the Museum* I, 2 (1930) 56-64.
[5] *Museum Report 1931/2*, p. V.
[6] Ashby, *Roman Malta* 70-4.
[7] See *Museum Reports 1902 ff.*
[8] Pliny *Epistulae* II, 7 and V, 6.
[9] D. Trump, *Malta: an Archaeological Guide* (London, 1972) 109. The one in the courtyard of the Cathedral Museum at Mdina was moved there from San Pawl Milqi prior to the excavations by the Italian Mission. See *Missione Archeologica, 1963* pp. 127, 135, pl. 41,2.
[10] See A. Luttrell, ed. *Hal Millieri: A Maltese Casale, its Churches and Paintings* (Malta, 1976) 26, pl. 8A. In the surroundings one can also observe some walls which, from the size of the blocks, may be dated to the Classical period.
[11] I am indebted to R. Vella Bonavita for the information. For the one in Għajn Tuffieħa see *Missione Archeologica, 1963* p. 20.
[12] There are several Maltese place-names connected with olive oil, such as Zebbug (olive), Zejtun (edible olive), Birzebbuga (olive well) and Ghajn Zejtuna (olive spring). See J. Aquilina, *Papers in Maltese Linguistics* (Malta, 1961) 205, 220, 234-5.
[13] Trump, *Malta* 110, pl. 21.
[14] A study of the distribution of these amphorae is not an easy one and would entail a careful examination of various collections and museums in North Africa and in Western Mediterranean countries. It is, nevertheless, a major *desideratum*.
[15] According to A. Ciasca, 'Ricerche puniche a Malta', *Ricerche puniche*

nel Mediterraneo centrale (Roma, 1970) 102.

[16] Ashby, *Roman Malta* 28-9. For earlier bibliography see *ibid.* 28, n. 2.

[17] A systematic topographical survey of the Maltese antiquities has recently been launched jointly by Dr A. Luttrell of the History Department of this University and the present writer. For a preliminary report on this survey, see A. Luttrell, 'L'abitato medioevale a Malta: un approccio archeologica', *Colloquio Internazionale di Archeologia Medievale: Palermo, 1974* (Palermo, 1976).

[18] *Missione Archeologica. 1964* p. 121, pl. 50; E. Coleiro, 'Maltese Coins of the Roman Period', *The Numismatic Chronicle*, XI (1971) 76, pl. 15, 4.

[19] M. le Lannou, 'Sicile et Malte. Problèmes Géographiques et Economiques', a paper delivered in the *IV Congresso di Studi sulla Sicilia Antica* (1976) due to be published in *KOKALOS* for 1976.

[20] J. Busuttil, 'The Maltese Textile Industry in Antiquity', *Melita Historica* IV (1966) 215-9.

[21] McGraw-Hill, *Encyclopedia of Science and Technology* V (1960) 297-8; G. Usher, *A Dictionary of Plants used by Man* (London, 1974) 357-8. See also J. Borg, *Descriptive Flora of the Maltese Islands* (Malta, 1927) 274-5.

[22] Busuttil, *Maltese Textile Industry* 217, following H. Thédenat, s.v. 'Linum' in *Dict. des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines* III (1904) 1261, and Yates, *Textrinum antiquorum* I (London, 1843) 252.

[23] T. Zammit, *Prehistoric Malta: The Tarxien Temples* (Oxford, 1930) 55-6; J.D. Evans, *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands: a Survey* (London, 1971) 150, n. 2.

[24] Zammit, *Prehistoric Malta* 72-3.

[25] I owe this information to Dr. G. Wettinger of the University of Malta.

[26] Hesychius 1027; Diodorus Siculus 5, 12; Varro, *Sat. Men* 433; Cicero, Verr 2, 2, 176; 2, 2, 183; 2, 4, 103-4; 2, 5, 27; Silius Italicus, *Punic.* XIV, 274; Novius (*apud* Non.) 540, 11. See above note 20.

[27] Cic. *Verr* 2, 2, 183.

[28] Diod. Sic. 5, 12.

[29] See above note 26.

[30] Cic. *Verr* 2, 4, 103.

[31] *IV Congresso Internazionale di Studi sulla Sicilia Antica* (1976) due for publication in *KOKALOS* 1976.

[32] Grattius Faliscus, *Cynegeticon libri* 11. 405-6.

[33] J. Busuttil, 'The Coral Industry', *Journal of the Faculty of Arts* (R.U.M.) IV (1971) 332-3.

[34] Cic. *Verr.* 2, 4, 103. See J. Busuttil, 'Pirates in Malta', *Melita Historica* V (1971) 308-10.

[35] Dio Cassius XXXVI, 20; Cic. *Verr.* 2, 4, 21.

[36] Malta was regularly visited by cargo vessels on established trade routes. See J. Busuttil, 'Maltese Harbours in Antiquity', *Melita Historica* V (1971) 305.

[37] See the distribution map of underwater discoveries in *Missione Archeologica. 1964* fig. 1.

[38] Diod. Sic. 5, 12.

[39] Diod. Sic. 5, 12.