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Insularity and Isolation: Malta and Sicily in Prehistory

Geographic characteristics of the two islands

While Malta and Sicily have a certain degree of insularity in common, there are several differences of a geographical nature between them that have generated very diverse cultural developments in their respective prehistoric biographies.

While Sicily is a large island (it is in fact, the largest island of the Mediterranean) and the distance that separates it from the European continent is negligible and an easily surmountable obstacle, the Maltese archipelago consists of five small islands, with a total surface area of only 316 km², and lies much further away from the two continents,¹ even if the 90 km stretch of sea that separates it from Sicily is surmountable, mostly because of the intervisibility of the two islands, albeit not without difficulties.

While the geology of Sicily is reasonably varied, composed of both volcanic and sedimentary limestones and clays (the latter characterizing the formation of the Ragusano and the Siracusano, the closest Sicilian provinces to the Maltese islands), the geology of the Maltese archipelago consists only of sedimentary layers of hard and soft limestone, as well as one layer of clay. Consequently, whereas Sicily had in prehistory a ready supply of minerals like basalt, flint and ochre, all these were absent in Malta. Not to mention obsidian, which for the Sicilian inhabitants was within easy reach from the islands of Lipari and Pantelleria, while it was probably available for the Maltese ones only through the Sicilian intermediaries.

The geomorphology and the resulting weather regime are even more diversified in Sicily than in Malta. In particular, Sicily has ranges of mountains, rivers and extensive fertile plains, apart from vastly long stretches of accessible coastline. All these features must have made it largely self-sufficient in mineral resources and in those resources required for a viable agricultural or pastoral economy: caves, building stone, flint, clay for pottery manufacture, as well as a sufficient supply of water. This meant that this large island has remained inhabited uninterruptedly (and

¹ It should be kept in mind that that the distance that separates Sicily from the African continent is substantially smaller than that separating Malta from that same continent.

I emphasize the word ‘uninterruptedly’) since the Upper Palaeolithic, if not before.

We cannot say the same for Malta. Malta’s geomorphology is much less diversified. It is mostly hilly (maximum altitude of 260m) with shallow valleys in-between flowing into a few, albeit exceptionally sheltered, harbours and a number of inlets. The climate is semi-arid, with only seasonal variations. This results in greatly reduced biological resources that in pre-industrial times would have rendered vulnerable any type of agricultural, pastoral, or mixed economy, particularly in case of consecutive years of drought.² The rough sea in the Sicilian Canal would have also meant seasonal isolation, especially in winter.³ These conditions would have made the Maltese inhabitants dependent on neighbouring lands, particularly on Sicily, for any lacking resources. Indeed, Sicily turned out to be a primary and intermediary source of many commodities down to late-Medieval times. Such geographical conditions rendered the Maltese islands much more subject to periods of depopulation and interrupted occupation. Such interruptions have been suggested by a diversity of evidence for the transition from the Temple Period to the Bronze Age (Bonanno 1986: 40-41), for the transition from the Bronze Age to the Phoenician colonization (Brusasco 1993; Vidal Gonzalez 1996: 100-101), and for the period following the Arab invasion in AD 870 (Brincat 1995: 19).

The following are three episodes from Maltese prehistory in which the above geographical features brought about both similar and different developments in the two islands (fig. 1.1).

Episode I: the first human settlement (c. 5000 BC)

The earliest suitably documented human settlement on Malta dates to the end of the sixth millennium BC. As yet, the Upper Palaeolithic of the Grotta dell’Addaura and the Mesolithic of the Grotta dell’Uzzo are missing from Maltese prehistory, even though the possibility of such an early human presence exists since the Sicilian land mass extended southwards to incorporate Malta in various phases of the Pleistocene (Fedele 1988: 59-78) and since it has now been ascertained that by

² Such sequences of dry years are well documented from Medieval times onwards. In particular in the 1460s when, after successive dry years, crops were reported to have failed, all animals in Gozo were claimed to have died and many people drowned in their attempt to cross to Sicily in small boats (personal communication by Prof. Godfrey Wettinger). See also Wettinger 1982: 31; 1985: 45, 84, 280, 299.

³ *Insula est Melita iudices satis lato a Sicilia mari periculosoque disiuncta* (‘Malta is an island separated by a wide stretch of perilous sea’). These are the very words used by the Latin orator Cicero (*Verr.* II, 4, 103) in the 1st century BC.

the Mesolithic the Mediterranean sea did not remain a physical barrier for human movement.⁴

The impressed ware characterizing the first colonizers of Malta is closely related to that of the *Stentinello* culture in Sicily, suggesting that the *Ghar Dalam* farming community originated from southeastern Sicily (Evans 1971: 208-209; Trump 1966: 21-24; 2000: 46-47).⁵ The pottery of the following two phases of the Neolithic, then, show a progressive evolution which reveals continued cultural stimulus from the north, via Sicily. The *Grey Skorba* ware, in fact, shows affinity to that of the *Serra d'Alto* culture which had penetrated into Sicily from the Italian mainland, while the *Red Skorba* ware has close similarities with the *Diana* pottery of Lipari (Evans 1971: 211; Trump 1966: 45-46; 2002: 30, 39, 47-48).

The earliest inhabitants were farmers but, as the domesticated animals required for such an economic regime were not present on the Maltese archipelago before then, the first specimens of the cattle, ovicaprids and pigs, whose bones were found in the *Ghar Dalam* cave (Ashby *et al.* 1916: 6-10) and in the *Ghar Dalam* and other Neolithic levels at Skorba (Trump 1966: 50), had to be shipped over from Sicily for breeding new flocks and livestock. For priming up stocks with new blood to prevent detrimental intensive inbreeding, fresh supplies from the same source are likely to have been periodically resorted to.

The early Neolithic levels at Skorba produced specimens of barley, wheat and lentils (Trump 1966: 24, 53). It is equally likely that the cereals cultivated for the first time in Malta had to be brought over from the same source.

Having embarked on a new lease of life on the two major Maltese islands, the Neolithic inhabitants appear to have kept their trading and cultural connections with their Sicilian neighbours alive (fig. 1.2).. The geology of both Malta and Gozo lacks sufficiently hard stone, such as flint, to make really efficient cutting instruments. Certain areas in the islands produce an inferior type of flint, commonly known as 'chert' in archaeological circles, which served a limited range of purposes. So flint and obsidian (which were already in current use among Sicilian early Neolithic farmers) also had to be imported. What was exchanged for these products remains unknown. Sicily had sources of good quality flint in the Iblean mountains, right next door to Malta, and Iblean flint, together with obsidian from Lipari and Pantelleria provided the Maltese Neolithic farming community

⁴ It is in the Mesolithic that obsidian from the island of Melos was being deposited in the Franchthi cave on the Argolid.

⁵ Although some closer similarities have been noted with the Monte Kronio pottery further west on the south coast of Sicily (Maggi 1976-77).

with excellent raw materials for efficient lithic instruments, obsidian no doubt reaching Malta via Sicily (Tykot 1996; Tykot and Ammerman 1997). Two cores of this prehistoric ‘black gold’ found in a *Grey Skorba* layer in the Skorba village (one from Lipari, the other from Pantelleria) confirm that it was imported in this raw state and that it was knapped into usable instruments in situ (Trump 1966: 28; 2002: 66-67).

The Neolithic village of Skorba produced also very early anthropomorphic figurines that find no parallels in neighbouring Sicily, showing a certain vague similarity with Cycladic Neolithic figurines. Given the non-secular context in which they were found, in two elliptical huts joined together by a cobbled courtyard, the figurines may represent an entity connected with cult or simply objects connected with rites of passage.

Episode II: the Temple Period

Some sort of a fresh start seems to have taken place around 4000BC with the *Zebbug* phase, with its new range of pottery fabrics, shapes, and decoration style which has a lot in common with the pottery style of the *San Cono-Piano Notaro* culture in Sicily, suggesting an origin again in southeast Sicily for the new culture, if not a new wave of settlers (Evans 1971: 212-214).⁶ The two cultures share also funerary architecture, consisting of rock-cut tombs with vertical shaft leading to a chamber, or more chambers (Leighton 1999: 93-99). Soon after, however, the two islands go their separate ways in cultural development. Within Sicily itself the eastern part opens itself to stimuli from the north and from the east while the west part is affected by stimuli from the northwest. Malta, on the other hand, takes up a trajectory of a unique cultural development, completely different from those of Sicily and the rest of the Mediterranean world. There is no doubt that a major contributing factor for this phenomenon was the geographical factor. Whilst Sicily, owing to its sheer size and its proximity to other lands, was more susceptible to cultural movements on all fronts, the Maltese group of small islands was sufficiently distant from the rest of the world to generate a distinct culture and island identity. What is surprising is that Sicily did not allow itself to be influenced in any way by what was happening on the group of tiny islands to its south.

After the first four centuries which, in terms of surviving architectural evidence, are only represented by rock-cut underground collective tombs (such as the ones of Ta’ Trapna near Zebbug, the one inside the Xaghra Circle in Gozo, and the group

⁶ On the importance that should be assigned to pottery, as opposed to other manifestations of culture and economy, as a gauge of a new immigration see Trump 1976-77: 24.

at Xemxija) and one or two domestic huts at Skorba, Malta and Gozo experienced a cultural efflorescence that produced great feats of architecture and plastic art. The *Ggantija* phase (3600-3000 BC) saw the construction of the first modest ‘temples’ with a trefoil internal plan; by the end of the same phase the gargantuan south temple of *Ggantija* had been built. It seems, however, that all the sculpture found in *Ggantija* itself and in the rest of the ‘temples’ was only created in the last phase of this period, that is, the *Tarxien* phase (3000-3000BC). It is during this phase that the temple culture reached its apogee (fig. 1.3).

Meanwhile, funerary architecture did not remain static. By the end of the *Tarxien* phase the concept of small chamber tombs of the *Zebbug* and *Ggantija* phases had evolved into one of large, communal underground cemeteries, of which we have at least two: the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum and the one inside the Xaghra Stone Circle. Both must have hosted hundreds of human burials but, while the Xaghra Circle one made use of a pre-existing subterranean cave system, with very little architectural manipulation, the Hal Saflieni hypogeum was hand-hewn in the living rock, a masterpiece of negative architecture in its own right (fig. 1.4).

But to what extent was this temple culture isolated as opposed to insular? That the Maltese archipelago was not completely isolated from the rest of the world in the period in question has been a well known fact since the reversal of the diffusionist view that saw it only as a by-product of the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations of the Aegean. The overall homogeneity of culture and cult practices of the two major islands of the archipelago confirms the intensive internal seaborne connectivity between Malta and Gozo. The lithic imports (obsidian from Lipari and Pantelleria, as well as the green stone axes and axe-shaped pendants from Calabria) were there for everybody to see as proof of sustained import traffic with Sicily, if not beyond (Renfrew 1973: 155). To these one has now to add a jadeite axe pendant from yielded by the *Zebbug* chambered tomb at the Xaghra Circle probably originating as far as the western Alps (Malone et al. 1995:325-329). The view of a temple culture developing in ‘splendid isolation’, therefore, might appear to have been excessive. In the absence of identifiable external sources of inspiration, on the other hand, there was undoubtedly a high degree of introversion, a sort of hothouse effect in the rise, as well as the fall of this culture (Renfrew 1973: 164). As observed above, even Sicily remained indifferent to what was happening here, at least up to the time of the collapse of that culture. For these reasons, I harbour great reservations for the view that holds that the Maltese temple culture was virtually a statement of cultural identity in front of the rest of the world outside it (Robb 2001). I find that it projects too far into the past very modern notions and values of national identity.

Around 2500 BC (more probably a few centuries later) the temple culture came

to an end and was superseded by a completely different one. The collapse of the temple culture remains one of the 'mysteries' of Maltese prehistoric archaeology. So far the causes that brought about the apparently sudden end of such a rich culture have not been identified in the archaeological record, but not for want of trying. There are also no hints of gradual decline in its architectural and artistic performance (fig. 1.5), although it has been suggested that even in its climax the society that produced it was performing under stress (Stoddart *et al.* 1993: 8-9). Indeed, the most plausible scenario suggested by the cultural efflorescence itself seems to be that of overexploitation and exhaustion of biological resources, compounded by climatic disasters (such as successive years of drought), which left no option to the inhabitants but to abandon the islands and seek greener pastures elsewhere. The same would not have happened in Sicily because of the more diversified environment there.

Episode III: the Bronze Age

I have on several occasions declared my views in favour of a radical change of culture, the end of one culture and its replacement by a new one towards the middle of the third millennium. The change in cultural manifestations, religious ritual, building techniques, and the artistic rendering of the human form, along with the introduction of metal technology, leave no doubt in my mind that there is no thread of continuity between the temple culture and that of the Bronze Age population, with one exception, the so-called 'Thermi Ware' (see below). From this juncture onwards foreign contacts are on the increase. Pottery of both the Early and the Middle Bronze Age is found outside Malta, particularly in Sicily. Foreign connections, therefore, are both outgoing and incoming.

One of the most important objects that are clearly imported is a fragmentary bone plaque with bossed projections on the upper surface which belongs to a well known and well documented class of Bronze Age funerary objects known as 'bone bossed plaques' (*ossi a globuli*). At Tarxien the Maltese plaque was found in an "ashy layer at the entrance to [room] 30, 1918" (Zammit 1930: pl.xxv, 2; Evans 1971: 148). For this reason I cannot see why it has been consistently associated with the *Tarxien* phase of this site, rather than with the *Tarxien Cemetery* one (fig. 1.6). Even Sebastiano Tusa feels uncomfortable in proposing the Maltese bossed plaque as a proof of Maltese inspiration for the formation of a still dubious Sicilian megalithism, admitting that the second millennium (the date of the plaques) is posterior to that of the flowering of the Maltese temples (Tusa 1991: 272-3).

There now seems to be little doubt that the bossed bone plaques were manufactured in Sicily, but their ultimate origin is likely to be in the Aegean area

(Sluga Messina 1983: 156-60). As many as twenty specimens of different typology are of Sicilian provenance (Spigo 1984-85: 874-5; Procelli 1991: 254, n. 7, with previous bibliography). Outside Sicily, besides the Maltese specimen, others have been found in Altamura (Puglia), Lerna and as many as four examples in Troy (bibliography in Procelli 1991: n.8). It is to be kept in mind that while western Sicily was, in the Bronze Age, more projected culturally towards western Europe and the western Mediterranean through close contacts with Sardinia (for example, the Bell Beaker culture), eastern Sicily remained attached to a wider culture which had its epicentre in the Aegean and western Anatolia (Tusa 1991).

Connections have also been suggested between the Sicilian monumental tombs with pilasters (or pseudo-pilasters), or with stone constructed facades, of the *Castelluccio* culture and the earlier megalithic and collective burial traditions of Malta. The flow of ideas in this case is taken to be from the 'contemporary cultures of Malta', both the last phases of the Temple Period and the *Tarxien Cemetery* one, to that of Castelluccio in Sicily (Procelli 1991: 260).

Furthermore, a clay statuette found in the *Tarxien Cemetery* layer at Tarxien has the same burnished red surface, and the same type of triangular projections indicating arms, as in a number of similar statuettes of the *Castelluccio* culture from Monte San Giuliano (Caltanissetta) in Sicily which have been compared to similar figurines from the central and eastern Mediterranean (Orlandini 1968: 58). Besides, fragmentary disc-idols coming from Catania-Barriera and Manfria in Sicily have been described by Bernabò Brea as Sicilian reproductions of the disc-idols from the *Tarxien Cemetery* in Malta (Bernabò Brea 1976-7: 57-8, n.1) (fig. 1.7).

The association of the pottery and other material found in the *Tarxien Cemetery* horizon with Castelluccio (Bernabò Brea 1976-7; Procelli 1991: 252, n.2; Tusa 1991: 273) suggests that the calibrated radiocarbon date of 2500 BC for the end of the Temple period and the beginning of the *Tarxien Cemetery* phase is far too high and should, perhaps, be lowered to around 2200-2000 BC. Very remarkable is the difference in the burial rites between the two cultures: incineration in open pots deposited in an ashy layer in the *Tarxien Cemetery*, and inhumation in rock-cut tombs in the *Castelluccio* culture which parallels much more closely the funerary rites of the Temple culture, even in their collective aspect, as exemplified in Zebbug, Xemxija, Hal Saflieni and now at the Xaghra Circle (Bonanno et al. 1990: 199-203). The exception, of course, is the burial under dolmens which occurs in a number of examples in Malta, precisely in the *Tarxien Cemetery* phase (Evans 1971: 193-8), as well as in Sicily in the *Castelluccio* phase (Procelli 1991: 259, nn.60-61), not to mention the south Italian ones (Palumbo 1956) and the rectangular dolmen of Monte Longu in Sardinia (Ferrarese Ceruti 1980: 67-9,

n.69).

The so-called 'Thermi' or 'grey wares' with dot-filled incised decoration present a completely different story. As the pottery was quite distinct from any of the local wares of the Temple Period, Evans (1953: 68) treated it as belonging to the *Tarxien Cemetery* phase; but in his *Survey* he later assigned it to the earlier, i.e. *Tarxien*, phase (1971: 151-2). The presence of this ware in Sicily of the Castelluccio age - two sherds at Castelluccio itself (Orsi 1893: 45-6, pl. V; Evans 1971: 223) - further suggests the overlap in the connection of the *Castelluccio* culture with first the *Tarxien* people and later the *Tarxien Cemetery* one. A new development regarding this ware is that NAA analyses conducted in Bonn have shown that its constituent elements conform with the rest of the locally produced pottery (Mommsen *et al.* 2006). Whereas it could possibly be inspired by an external source, therefore, it was produced from local clay.

We should not ignore at this stage the late Bernabò Brea's repeated suggestion that a horizon corresponding to the *Tarxien Cemetery* phase on the small island of Ognina was to be interpreted as a Maltese colony on that island (1976-77: 76, 79, 82-85)

When we come to deal with the relations of the Middle Bronze Age people (the *Borg in-Nadur* people) with the outside world, particularly with neighbouring Sicily, we are faced with a yet unresolved enigma. Identical *Borg in-Nadur* pottery has been frequently found in funerary contexts in the Siracusano corresponding with the *Thapsos* culture, in the necropolis of Molinello d'Augusta, of Plemyrion, Floridaia and of Thapsos itself (Bernabò Brea 1976-77: 92-99). We have to admit, whether we like it or not, that in the present state of the archaeological record, *Borg in-Nadur* pottery is much more abundant in eastern Sicily than in Malta itself. The richest cache of whole *Borg in-Nadur* vessels is that from the necropolis of Cozzo Pantano currently on exhibit in the Museo Paolo Orsi of Syracuse (Orsi 1893). So that we are justified to wonder where this ceramic style really originates, whether in Sicily or in Malta. Part of the solution to the enigma might come from a scientific analysis of the pottery on both sides. We have already had the *Borg in-Nadur* pottery from our excavation at Tas-Silg analysed at the Bonn Institute (Mommsen *et al.* 2006). These tests have shown that this fabric falls within the parameters of the other pottery of local production. I would like to see similar analyses conducted on pottery of the same style from southeastern Sicily. For this purpose I invite my Sicilian colleagues to join us in this research programme. We shall be able to say whether the results have led us anywhere only after this proposed research programme is undertaken.

It is from the fortified settlement of *Borg in-Nadur* that the sherd of a

Mycenaean IIIB cup comes, the only one confirmed so far. About this fragment a lot has been written and I shall only permit myself to refer the reader to the available literature, including the most recent items (Evans 1971: 17, fig. 42, pl. 32,6; Trump 2002: 292; Cilia 2004: 212)

A second sherd from the prehistoric material excavated by the Italian *Missione Archeologica* at the site of Tas-Silg in the 1960s was also identified as Mycenaean (Mallia 1966: 50). A recent revision of the same material, however, has placed serious doubts on this identification (personal communication Alberto Cazzella). On the other hand, the recent excavations by the Department of Classics and Archaeology of the University of Malta on the south side of the same site have produced yet another sherd from a pure *Borg in-Nadur* level. We seriously suspected it was Mycenaean; I am pleased to announce that as a result of this seminar we have had our fragment positively identified by Prof La Rosa as Mycenaean. But even if this sherd is confirmed to be Mycenaean, raising the quantity of recorded Mycenaean imports in Malta by 100%, where does it really take us?

Now that Mycenaean pottery has been discovered in discreet quantities in Andalusia and in Sardinia, in the western Mediterranean, besides their more intensive presence in Sicily (Thapsos) and the Gulf of Naples (Vivara), it is no surprise that the odd import is found in Malta. But can we really place Malta in the direct trading maritime networks of the Mycenaeans on the basis of just two sherds? Hardly. In the first place it needs to be established whether the carriers of these imports were Mycenaean (as in the undisputed case of the Vivara depot) or others, like Cypriot, as they are suspected to have been in some areas in the Levant (Manning and Hulin 2005: 276-286). While Cypriot material has occurred in Sicily in discreet quantities (Albanese Procelli, this volume), we do not know of a single sherd from Malta from the Bronze Age. Cypriot goods do reach Malta in later times, in the Archaic age, but that is another matter altogether.

The Bronze Age, therefore, in contrast with the preceding period, marks a very close relationship between Malta and Sicily. At the end of the Bronze Age, Malta is visited and eventually colonized by a literate people from the Levant, the Phoenicians. So while before the close connections were with eastern Sicily, for the next five centuries this trajectory shifted towards the western tip of the larger island, to which the Phoenician colonizers were confined by the Greek colonizers who monopolized the rest of the island.

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