Chapter 15

THE PHOENICIANS AND THE MALTESE PREHISTORIC CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

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Introduction

Sometime in the fourth century AD the skeletal remains of two individuals were discovered below the floor of a church in northern Italy. The circumstances of the discovery, especially the quantity of "blood" (presumably red ochre) covering the original bodies, suggest that they were late Palaeolithic burials. St Ambrose, however, bishop of Milan, inspired by a dream, declared the remains to belong to two early Christian martyrs. Soon the bones proved to be miraculous and their owners were canonised as Saints Protasus and Gervaise (Haldane 1985; Bradley 2002, 112-3).

In Malta, similar early twentieth century discoveries of skeletons in matrices heavily imbued with red ochre, far from being given a religious interpretation, were thought to result from recent murders and were reported to the police (Evans 1971, 6, 190-191). On the other hand, the striking megalithic structures on Gozo, so outstanding in the landscape, conjured up folk tales of a female giant handling gigantic stones with one arm while holding a baby in the other. Maltese place names, the majority of which originate between the Arab period and early modern times, generally dwell on the physical appearance of ancient remains, even the more spectacular ones; only rarely do they attribute religious or cultural connotations to them (Wettinger 2000, xxxv and passim).

From early Medieval times onwards, in spite of the availability of building stone, conspicuous remains of prehistoric and ancient buildings were sometimes exploited only for their stone which was re-cut and re-employed without any consideration for the cultural significance of such remains. The best example is the whole of the ancient city of Melite which has been replaced by present day Mdina and part of Rabat. Another example is the site of the sanctuary of Tas-Silġ where several robber trenches have been traced archaeologically on top of lower courses of huge ashlar blocks. Here stone robbing started very early in the history of the site, and it is not easy to tell which stones were re-cycled for the erection of an early Christian church and which ones were robbed in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries for use as building material for other secular, or religious, buildings in the surroundings.

The above are a few examples of the diversity of attitudes towards the relics of the past (for other examples from northwest Europe see Bradley 2002). In the following paper I shall try to trace the impact that the prehistoric cultural landscape had on the first historical population of the Maltese islands, the Phoenicians.

The date of the earliest Phoenician settlement on Malta is a hotly debated issue. Claudia Sagona (2002; 2003) places it as early as the tenth century BC, without providing sufficiently stringent evidence, as shown by Nicholas Vella (2005, passim especially 442-443) who brings it down to 750 BC or later, on the basis of the available evidence. There is no doubt, however, that the Phoenicians had inserted themselves in the physical and cultural Maltese landscape by the beginning of the seventh century BC (bibl. in Vella 2005, 439; Bonanno 1993, 419-421).

Given the total absence of mineral resources from the geological formation of the Maltese islands - apart from excellent stone for building and clay for pottery making - the major attractions of the latter for the Phoenician seafarers must have been the archipelago's geographical location right in the centre of the Mediterranean and its excellent well-sheltered harbours (Pedley et al. 2002). Whatever currents and wind regimes were prevalent in the Mediterranean at the time (Aubet 1997, 155-162, figures 26-29; Atauz 2004, 43-50) the islands were ideally placed as a convenient port of call on the Phoenicians' frequent voyages from their homeland to their western colonies and trading posts (and vice-versa). This view is in keeping with the perception of the ancients as relayed to us by Diodorus Siculus (V. 12).

What was the landscape like that the Phoenicians found there? The landscape, apart from the general geomorphology (characterized by hilly land with reasonably fertile valleys and sufficient water resources) was very...
different from the present over-urbanized one, segmented as it is into small handkerchief-size fields by myriads of rubble walls and terraced walls. The tree cover might not have been that different, as has been revealed by current research undertaken by Frank Carroll and Katrin Fenech on deep cores taken from the Marsa flood plain (Carroll et al. 2004). What was the impact of this landscape on the Phoenicians and how did they interact with it? The following are just some preliminary observations relating to these questions, concentrating on these oriental sea-traders’ interaction with the Maltese cultural landscape.

When the Phoenicians set foot on the islands, that landscape was mainly characterized by scattered, naturally defended, settlements on high ridges and flat hills inhabited by the Borg in-Nadur and Bahrija population of the islands. But the most striking cultural feature standing out in the natural landscape was the complex megalithic buildings of the previous Temple culture (3600–2500 BC). Like their Medieval successors, who left behind a series of place-names referring to these features, the Phoenician settlers were struck by these strange structures, their most tangible impact being on the Tas-Silg temple complex.

**Tas-Silg**

The site of Tas-Silg is now pretty well known even if the Italian excavators are in the process of revising some of their interpretations of the 1960s and 1970s, following current excavations on strategically selected spots (Ciasca and Rossignani 2000). With their resumption of excavations since 1997, they have even extended their direct interest to the prehistoric phases of the site which they had formerly refrained from investigating in the 1960s. Their excavations of the deposits outside the main surviving temple unit, beyond and to the northwest side of the back exit, have revealed not only a significant Tarxien phase activity in the area, but also a continuation of use later in the Bronze Age; but not, apparently, in the Phoenician period. As this information is still very provisional, I am limiting my reflections to the accounts of the previous excavations.

The megalithic complex of Tas-Silg appears to have been quite extensive. Standing megaliths have been encountered even in the recent University of Malta excavations on the south side of the road, some 60 m away from the main temple unit; other megalithic structures had previously surfaced about 20 m to the north and 40 m to the northwest. But the most significant structure remains the main temple unit with its horse-shoe shaped outer wall and as yet undetermined layout of internal spaces. It is this unit which received the major attention from the Phoenician occupation onwards. It is assumed by the excavators that the temple was in a reasonable state of preservation when it was adopted by the Phoenicians as the hub of their own place of worship. I find it hard, however, to accept the survival of the full elevation of the temple unit as reconstructed in a drawing published by the late Antonia Ciasca (1999) (Figures 15.1 and 15.2). This reconstruction shows a full façade based on the small model found at Tarxien, with a forward monumental extension consisting of two arms ending in two antae with pilasters, each crowned by two superimposed Egyptian cavetto cornices. But even if the surviving elevation of the temple reached only the height of the first course of uprights, as I am inclined to believe, the surviving structure with its peculiar shape was left untouched by the Phoenicians who adapted their ritual architecture to that of the prehistoric temple. They placed a semi-interred altar block (the so-called ‘ground altar’) in the centre, between the new extended entrance and the original one, and enclosed the whole structure within a rectangular wall.

What is striking here is that the Phoenicians sacrificed the rectangular temple plan typical of all the religions of the Levant and of the few surviving ones of their own, such as the temple of Ashtar in Kition (Aubet 1997, 43, figure 12) and the various Punic temples in Sardinia (Moscati 1968, 109–119). The adoption of the curvilinear plan of the prehistoric temple is quite a unique feature in the Phoenician world.

![Figure 15.1. Hypothetical reconstruction of the plan of the prehistoric temple with the Phoenician extension.](image-url)
Whether they assimilated also the deity worshiped previously in the prehistoric temple, as is often claimed, is another matter. All we know for certain is that the new arrangement was for the worship of their major female goddess Ashtart. Previous claims that this marked a continuity of cult of a female goddess of fertility are, to my mind, unfounded. Apart from the fact that we are not at all sure that the prehistoric deity of the temple period was a female one, even less so that it was a fertility one, this claim does not take into consideration the 18-centuries-long hiatus of the Bronze Age occupation of the site, which might well have been a non-religious one. Had there been a real continuity of cult of a female fertility deity, her successor would have been Ashtart in her fertility role of Aphrodite, as in the case of the sanctuary of Aphrodite of Eryx in western Sicily. Although none of the inscriptions found on the site go back to the earlier two centuries of Phoenician occupation (seventh to sixth centuries), they show unambiguously that the Ashhtar of Tas-Silg was the equivalent of the Greek Hera and Roman Juno, the consort of Zeus/Jupiter. Given the topographical location of the sanctuary and its close and intimate connection with the sea, as revealed also by the remains of offerings found during the excavations in the immediate periphery of the building, Ashtart was most probably revered here as the protectress of mariners.

**Other megalithic sites**

Phoenician intervention in, or occupation of, prehistoric megalithic temples is not limited to Tas-Silg, as might appear to be the case from a first impression. For the purpose of this paper I have tried to find out whether there is any mention of Phoenician-Punic finds in the material unearthed during the excavations, scientific or otherwise, of the other prehistoric sites. For this exercise I have consulted John Evans' *Survey of the Maltese prehistoric antiquities* (1971), which has remained unsurpassed for the thoroughness of its documentation of the various sites and their contents.

Unfortunately, Evans’ account does not always mention, or hardly ever refers to, Punic occupation of the prehistoric sites. Out of 56 sites listed and described in his *Survey*, barely eleven mention Punic remains being found in one or another of the stratigraphic units. This cannot reflect the real situation, as I have had the opportunity of verifying when I checked the original account of the Tarxien excavations in Temi Zammit’s Field Notebooks, where I met frequent mention of ‘Punic pottery’ from the very earliest accounts of his 1915 campaign onwards. The only mention of Punic material for Tarxien in Evans is, in contrast, the one relating to the bell-shaped cistern near the entrance of the west temple which contained no material earlier than ‘late Punic and Roman’ (Evans 1971, 118). For this reason, for a proper survey of Punic occupation of prehistoric sites one cannot rely solely on Evans’ accounts.

It is necessary to go to the original excavation accounts, as I did for the Tarxien temples. Such a search is further hampered by the unscientific excavations of the major temple complexes (Ggantija, Hagar Qim, and Mnajdra) in the nineteenth century and by the general belief then that these structures were Phoenician. Furthermore, proper excavation documentation for these temples and for the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum is sadly absent.

**Tarxien**

It might come as a surprise that in the account of the discovery of the Tarxien temples there is so frequent reference to ‘Punic’ pottery. From the very first days of his excavation at Tarxien, Zammit came across pottery which he designated as ‘Punic’. On 21 July 1915 Zammit noted that the ‘proportion of Punic to Neolithic ware [was] about 10 to 1’ (Zammit Field Notebook 11, 2). On the same day he came across a ‘portion of a very thick early Punic bilychnh lamp’.

At Tarxien, there is widespread evidence of quarrying of old building stone. On the upper surface of blocks with missing upper parts there are traces of short channels which served for the insertion of metal wedges used in breaking off building stone. Traces of such use of wedges can also be observed on the upper surface of the remaining lower half of the colossal corpulent figure (N. C. Vella, personal observation). This quarrying activity might be connected with the intensive Punic presence suggested by the abundant
quantity of ‘Punic’ pottery encountered by Zammit in the upper layers during his excavations of 1915–1918.

Assuming that we are right in associating the presence of the Punic pottery with this episode in the biography of the Tarxien temples, this mundane, opportunistic activity contrasts very strongly with the conversion of the Tas-Silġ temple into a Phoenician one. Had there not been any activity at all, one would have interpreted the omission as a possible passive reaction, one of reverence for the surviving physical remains of a sacred (clearly non-secular) building. But actively despoothing the structure of its physical constituent elements surely meant indifference or insensitivity for such sentimental value. This might be taken to show that the remains of the prehistoric sacred building at Tas-Silġ had other qualities that motivated their incorporation into another religious building, qualities that the Tarxien temples lacked. One such quality could be the closer proximity to the sheltered harbour. Besides, it appears that the Marsaxlokk harbour was preferred by the Phoenicians to those on the northern coast of the island (Bonanno 2005, 59–61).

Settlement

The Phoenicians, both in their homeland and in their colonies in the western Mediterranean, followed a fixed pattern in their choice of places for their settlements: a small island in close proximity of the mainland, or a promontory, preferably with a sheltered harbour or anchorage close by. In Malta they made a very conspicuous exception. Although they used extensively the good harbours of the island, especially the south-eastern one, where they even set up a sanctuary, they chose to settle inland, on the tip of an elevated ridge, some ten kilometres from that harbour. It is here, on the headland today occupied by the old city of Mdina, that they set up their abode, eventually consolidating it into the major urban centre. Recent discoveries in various spots of Mdina have revealed very early Phoenician occupation in archaeological strata immediately above Bronze Age ones (Cutajar 2001). If, as is claimed, these finds provide enough evidence of an extensive Borg in-Nadur settlement in Mdina (and possibly in Rabat), implying that the spaces in between were also covered with huts like those excavated by David Trump at Borg in-Nadur, I wonder whether these discoveries can be construed as evidence of proto-urban development which was already in its embryonic stage in the later stages of the Bronze Age and which the Phoenicians merely adopted for their own purposes. This would be very much in line with the Phoenician innate disposition to adapt to circumstances.

Burial

The underground cemeteries of the prehistoric Temple culture must have become invisible and forgotten by the time of the Phoenician colonization. Nevertheless, the Phoenician burial rites reintroduced a tomb typology which was characteristic of the earlier phases of the Temple Period (4100–3600 BC), the rock-cut shaft-and-chamber tomb, rather than the full-scale underground cemetery, typical of the last phase (3000–2500 BC). This burial system, however, was certainly imported from the Phoenician homeland and, apart from Malta, it is found in other Phoenician colonies in the central and western Mediterranean (such as Almufiecar in Spain, the necropoleis of Puig des Molins in Ibiza, Tharros in Sardigna and Carthage itself). This does not exclude the possibility of the occasional discovery and re-use of late Neolithic rock-cut tombs. I am quite sure that on a close examination some of the Phoenician-Punic tombs will turn out to be such re-used shaft-and-chamber tombs; the likeliest being those with a very shallow and circular shaft.

We know for certain that the Phoenicians made use of already existing rock-cut pits in the ground that had a completely different purpose among the previous middle Bronze Age population. Thus, these ancient features were invested with a new meaning. We have several instances, mostly at Mtarfa, a hill close to ancient Melite, where they converted Borg in-Nadur phase ‘silo-pits’ into graves. On their own these tombs, as well as others of different shape, suggest that, whereas the Bronze Age settlement on the Mdina promontory might have well been adopted by the Phoenicians as their main urban centre, the Mtarfa one, which had equally been settled on, as evidenced by the multitude of typically Borg in-Nadur silo-pits, was turned into a cemetery area.

The absence of such rock-cut tombs from within the known boundaries of the ancient city of Melite which had its predecessor in Phoenician-Punic times, and their early concentration in different areas around that city, suggest that, even if they had adopted the major pre-urban settlement that had been established by the Bronze Age settlement, the Phoenicians followed their burial traditions and buried their dead outside their urban centre. Some of the earlier tombs are located on promontories separated from the town by a valley; perhaps not so much the Ghajn Qajjet and Ghajn Klieb, but certainly the Mtarfa ones. Their position is very suggestive, and could be reminiscent, of the concept of the journey of the soul across the waters, immediately after their death.
(Frendo et al. 2005). In Egypt this journey across the water took place over the Nile which separated the world of the living, on the east side of the river, from the world of the dead, on its western side. In the Phoenician world, the cemeteries were also separated from the settlement by a body of water, as in Tyre, Motya, Sulcis, Cadiz and Mogador (Aubet 1997, 253–256).

Maltese geomorphology and hydrology are, of course, quite different. There are no rivers in Malta. At most there are a few perennial springs flowing out from the interface between the upper coralline limestone and the blue clay wherever these are present in the geological formation. Such springs must have been much more numerous and bountiful in antiquity, as evidenced by the old place names, before water extraction by artesian wells became increasingly common since early modern times. The Mdina/Rabat promontory is flanked on two sides by valleys into which such springs flowed more copiously than they do at present. This landscape must have provided the alternative to the body of water that separated the urban settlement from the necropoleis (Frendo et al. 2005).

**Conclusion**

I am presenting this paper not as a result of a career-long piece of research, far from it, but as a new approach to Maltese archaeological studies. It is not even a presentation of work in progress because the work has not even started. All I have done is to explore the potentials of such a field of investigation; an approach which I believe will leave fruitful and rewarding results. I have only scratched the surface. The most pressing investigation should be, in my view, that of the impact of the cultural landscape on the Tarxien Cemetery people. A better understanding of their relationship with the structural monuments bequeathed to them by the previous Temple culture seems to be emerging from the recent Italian excavations outside the temple unit at Tas-Silġ. Such an investigation will perhaps help to solve one of the most intriguing problems of Maltese prehistory, the question of continuity or break between the Temple culture and the following Bronze Age one.

**References**


