

# Xewkija and elsewhere: new thoughts on old sites.

David Trump

The re-publication of Father E. Magri's 1906 report of his excavation at Xewkija in 1904 is indeed very welcome.<sup>1</sup> He himself has tended to be overshadowed by his immediate successors like Dr Thomas Ashby and, even more, Sir Temi Zammit. This book goes some way to restoring his reputation, which would in any case have been much higher had his notes on his work at Hal Saflieni survived.

Although substantial remains of a temple structure had been reported by earlier visitors, as Magri recounts, his trenches found only patches of torba flooring and a considerable quantity of prehistoric pottery. His detailed account of his work at the Xewkija site includes beautifully drawn and, on comparison with the photographs of the same sherds, remarkably accurate reproductions of the pottery he found. He, of course, had not the benefit of John Evans's pottery sequence, not available until fifty years later.<sup>2</sup>

It is hardly surprising, then, that he failed to realize that much of the material he recovered was very much older than the temple. Even Sir Temi made this same mistake when placing the style of pottery he found at Ta' Haġrat at the end of, rather than well before, the *floruit* of this and all other temples.<sup>3</sup> We now know that a number of temples were erected over the remains of earlier, often much earlier, villages, with Skorba, Kordin III and Ta' Haġrat at Mġarr itself very clear examples.<sup>4</sup>

Having discounted the significance to the temple of these earlier sherds, going back to the Għar Dalam phase, what are we left with? There are typical and unsurprising pieces of the

Ġgantija phase, but what is very remarkable, though not previously commented on, is the total absence of any of the Tarxien phase, as found at every other temple site. This is a very striking pottery style, in its several varieties. We would surely assume that Magri would have illustrated it if he had found it. The implication is that, uniquely, it was absent from the Xewkija temple, presumably because this had gone out of use before the Tarxien phase.

If so, a possible cause might be that the Xagħra community, based on the Ġgantija, had established its authority over the whole island, suppressing Xewkija as a rival. Is it known, in the absence of excavations, whether surface sherds from Ta' Marżiena, Borġ l-Imramma or the Għajnsielem sites include any of the Tarxien phase?

There is actually a hint at Skorba that its East Temple had been abandoned while the West Temple was still in occupation. The evidence took the form of a scatter, up to 40 cm thick, of Tarxien phase rubbish across its floor before its roof was destroyed by fire.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth applying this same principle, of considering the absence of certain expected material, to other sites, as it might call into question current interpretations. I have, for example, for some time had doubts about Debdieba, the only temple in the centre of Malta, and the only one with a marked rectilinearity of plan. It was dug by Thomas Ashby in 1914 and, despite those anomalies, was interpreted as a temple on the strength of its plentiful prehistoric pottery and the employment of megalithic blocks in its construction.<sup>6</sup> We have

already noted above the weakness of the first argument, as demonstrated at a number of sites. The second is equally demolished by reference to the site on the Ras ir-Raheb.<sup>7</sup> Here, two patently megalithic blocks were incorporated into a building which produced no single sherd earlier than Phoenician, so megaliths do not have to be prehistoric.

At Debdieba there is other, and even stronger, negative evidence. Ashby discovered no torba on this site, though it is the standard flooring material at every other temple site except where stone paving was employed. In fact, at Xewkija Magri found torba but nothing else by way of structure. The anomaly of Debdieba's rectilinear plan is no longer a problem. It was not built until the Roman period, fortuitously disturbing a long abandoned prehistoric village. Ashby mentioned in passing, indeed, that he recovered Greek and Roman sherds, implying that these were numerically fewer. That could be explained either by his considering them less interesting than the prehistoric ones, or that Roman housewives were more meticulous in keeping their quarters clean.

This case is in a way more serious than that of Xewkija in that Ashby's interpretation of Debdieba as a temple site has been accepted without question, and repeatedly quoted as such, (as, for instance, by Pace in 2004),<sup>8</sup> when it now seems highly unlikely.

The same principle of looking in the original reports for what was not found as well as what was can also be applied to the tombs at Ta' Trapna ż-Żgħira, Żebbuġ.<sup>9</sup> There is no question of their date – Evans made it the type site of his Żebbuġ phase<sup>10</sup> – nor of their function, given the human bone in their contents. Their form is another matter.

As found, they consisted of five oval hollows in the rock surface, 1.21-2.95 m by 1.21-2.05 and from 13 to 84 cm deep. Baldacchino and Evans postulated that these are the exiguous remains of tombs cut into the rock, truncated by later quarrying, either of the shaft-and-chamber type or possibly simple pit graves. In 1954 they could quote only later parallels for the former in Malta, particularly the Xewkija group<sup>11</sup> and for the latter the single tomb of Buqana, also of the Żebbuġ phase.<sup>12</sup> Sicilian

parallels at San Cono and one other, unnamed, site survived only in the form Ta' Trapna did.<sup>13</sup> The former interpretation, as shaft-and-chamber tombs, has been the generally accepted one, strengthened by discoveries of similar tombs in the Xagħra Circle and again in the Tranchina cemetery in Sicily. It remains pure speculation.

We can suggest two sources of doubt. No evidence is quoted in the original report for the postulated quarrying, to an apparently clean level surface under the ploughsoil. And if they were shafts of either plan, cut from a higher surface, it is strange that their floors should have arrived at so closely similar an arbitrary level.

There is a third alternative form, which Evans in 1971 mentioned in passing, 'may originally have been cut simply as shallow depressions', but this has rarely been considered since (though see Pace 2004).<sup>14</sup> The only known parallels are those two Sicilian graves, San Cono and the other unnamed site referred to *supra*, but so slight a form is much more likely to have escaped notice than the two other more substantial ones. It was a very lucky chance that when a trench at Ta' Trapna cut through the tombs there, the significance of their contents was appreciated and reported, and the same applies to Buqana. It so easily might not have been. It could be objected that those shallow pits were quite inadequate for the burial of human bodies. That is certainly so, but if they were only ossuaries, to hold dry disarticulated bones after their flesh and ligaments had decayed, there is no further problem. Buqana, accepted as a pit grave, was at 1m depth, only 17 cm deeper than the deepest of those at Ta' Trapna.

This is, of course, becoming increasingly speculative. Bearing in mind that negative evidence is never as reliable as positive, the most I would urge is that, however frequently an interpretation is repeated, one should always bear in mind that it is only that, very rarely proven fact, and whenever one can go back to the original source, as with Xewkija and Father Magri's account, one should do so, to see if it has facts since overlooked, and can still stand up to question.

## Notes

- 1 C.Cini, (ed. facsimile edition), E. Magri, *Ruins of a Megalithic Temple in Xeuchia (Shewkiyah) Gozo. First Report*. (Malta. Salesians of Don Bosco, Malta, and Heritage Malta, 2008), and E. Magri, *Ruins of a Megalithic Temple at Xeuchia (Shewkiyah) Gozo. First report*. (Malta. Government Printing Office, 1906).
- 2 J.D. Evans, 'The prehistoric culture-sequence in the Maltese archipelago', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, vol. XIX (1953), 41.
- 3 T. Zammit, 'Ta Hajrat Megalithic Ruins at Mjar, Malta'. *Bulletin of the Museum, Malta*, I, i, (1929) 5.
- 4 D Trump, *Skorba. Reports of the Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of London*, XXII. (Oxford. Oxford University Press, 1966), 10-16.
- 5 Ibid., 9-10
- 6 T. Ashby, T. Zammit, G. Despott, 'Excavations in Malta in 1914'. *Man*, XVI, 1, (1916), 17.
- 7 A. Bonanno, *Malta: Phoenician, Punic and Roman*. (Malta. Midsea Books, 2005), 322.
- 8 A. Pace, 'Debdieba', in D. Ċilia, (ed.) , *Malta before History*. (Malta. Miranda Publications, 2004), 145.
- 9 J.G.Baldacchino and J.D. Evans, 'Prehistoric Tombs near Zebbug'. *Papers of the British School at Rome*, XXII, new series IX, (1954), 1; J.D. Evans, *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands*. (London. Athlone Press, 1971).
- 10 Evans (1953).
- 11 Evans (1971), 112.
- 12 Ibid., 6.
- 13 Ibid., 166.
- 14 Pace, 25.