'Prehistoric painted pottery in Malta': a century later

Davide Tanasi

In 1911 T.E. Peet pointed out for the first time the difficulty of interpreting the earliest examples of Maltese prehistoric painted pottery. After a century of excavations and research this issue is still largely open especially with regard to Bronze Age wares. This paper deals with the Bronze Age painted pottery class named 'dribbled ware', characterized by decoration produced with the partial application of a thick slip instead of paint. This ware has been reported from several sites in the Maltese archipelago. Focusing on the evidence from In-Nuffara in Gozo, a new hypothesis about the chronology and function of the dribbled ware will be presented.

Just over a hundred years ago, T.E. Peet (1911) published an article entitled 'Prehistoric painted pottery in Malta'. Focusing on 50 painted prehistoric sherds, he presented their different features. Peet was not able to define the chronology of the sherds and remarked about what for him was the main problem in dealing with painted pottery: 'The trouble hitherto has been that everything found in Malta seemed to belong to one and the same date.' (Peet 1911, 123).

After a century of investigations, the general outline of Maltese prehistory is obviously clearer. However general issues are still open especially for the Bronze Age (Fig. 1), knowledge of which is penalized by the missed reappraisal of some old archaeological contexts and the lack of publication of recent excavations.

Among the material published by Peet, which included pottery ranging from the Neolithic to the Middle Ages, was one painted fragment found during the excavations he had carried out at Baħrija (Peet 1910, 159, pl. 15.63) (Fig. 2a), and others from Ħal Saflieni, partly covered by a dull unpolished slip in matt red or brown colour applied in the shape of discs or vertical and horizontal bands (Peet 1911, 122).

A year earlier, similar prehistoric pottery from the hypogeum of Ħal Saflieni was noted by Tagliaferro (1910, 12-13). He described a 'red ware with rope ornament, incised or in relief', a class of which (his class 15) was characterized by 'painted' bowls and cups. Those vessels were decorated with a thick red slip applied like paint on the inner and outer surfaces and simple motifs ranging from bands to circular spots.

During the excavations carried out in 1921-1922 in the temple of Borġ in-Nadur, Murray found

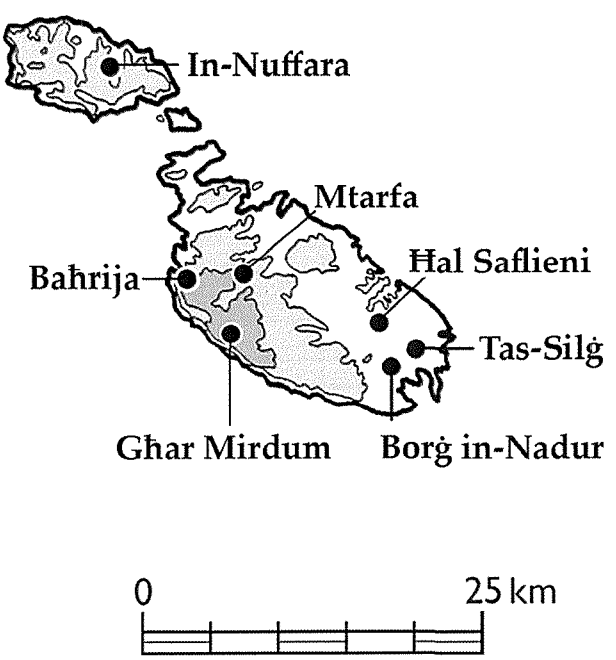

Figure 1. Map of the Maltese archipelago with indication of the principal Bronze Age sites mentioned in the text (drawing by Maxine Anastasi).

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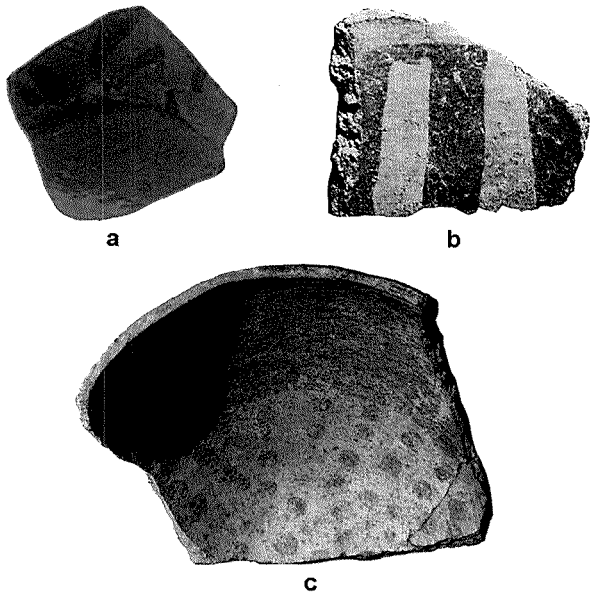

Figure 2. a) Painted sherd from Bahrija (after Peet 1910); b) Dribbled sherd from Borġ in-Nadur (after Murray 1923); c) Dribbled bowl from In-Nuffara (photograph reproduced courtesy of Daniel Cilia).

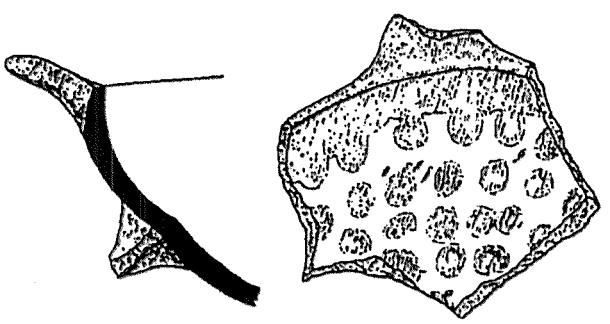

Figure 3. Dribbled bowl from the Apsidal Building of the Borġ in-Nadur temple (Evans 1971, fig. 43.1).

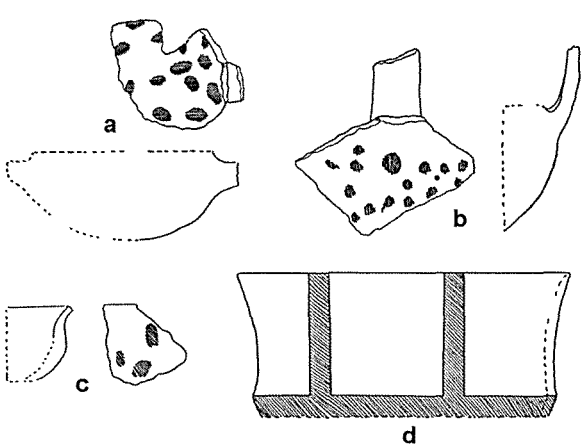

Figure 4. a-d) Dribbled ware sherds H3-H6 from Ħal Saflieni (after Murray 1925, pl. 25).

pottery fragments also decorated with the application of red slip in spots and bands (Murray 1923, pp. 38-39, pl. 20.5-6) (Fig. 2b). One of the two sherds she published was later discussed by Evans (1971, 226, fig. 43.1), who also included a drawing (Fig. 3). In dealing with this uncommon ware, Murray recalled similar pottery from Ħal Saflieni (Murray 1925, p. 35, pl. 25. H3-H6) (Fig. 4).

It was Trump (1961), forty years later, who gave a name to this ware. On the basis of the stratigraphic evidence he observed in the exploration of the Borġ in-Nadur village and at Baħrija carried out in 1959, he identified three classes of fine wares as representative of three chronological phases (II B1, II B2, II B3) spanning seven centuries, from 1500 to 700 BC. Providing for each phase the shapes, the technical features and the decorative techniques, Trump ascribed the painted class with partial application of the slip to the phase II B3 naming it 'dribbled ware' (Trump 1961, 259).

The following year, Trump explored a silo pit on the In-Nuffara plateau, in Gozo (Fig. 5). It had two entrances with internal walls covered by clay renders, partly filled with pottery. In the preliminary report of the excavation, he referred to the discovery of 'dribbled Borġ in-Nadur' pottery, similar to what he had 'noticed at Baħrija' (Trump 1960, 5), of which only one sherd of this type was published many years later (Trump 2002, 272) (Fig. 2c). More recently, examples of dribbled ware have also been found during the excavations of Tas-Silġ at the northern enclosure (*pers. comm.* G. Recchia) and as well as the southern one (*pers. comm.* N. C. Vella).

Between 2007 and 2010, in the context of a research project on the Maltese Bronze Age that grew as a collaboration between Arcadia University (Davide Tanasi), the University of Malta (Nicholas C. Vella) and Heritage Malta (Sharon Sultana), I carried out an overall reappraisal of all the Bronze Age material held at the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta pertaining to the sites of Borġ in-Nadur temple and village, Baħrija, Għar Mirdum, Mtarfa and In-Nuffara. In the course of that study, I also carried out an in-depth examination of the specimens of dribbled ware. These did not include the dribbled pottery found by Peet and Murray at Baħrija and the Borġ in-Nadur temple. Moreover, none were found among the pottery from Għar Mirdum and Mtarfa. The Ħal Saflieni material was not studied, whilst the study of the pottery from Trump's excavation at the Borġ in-Nadur village and

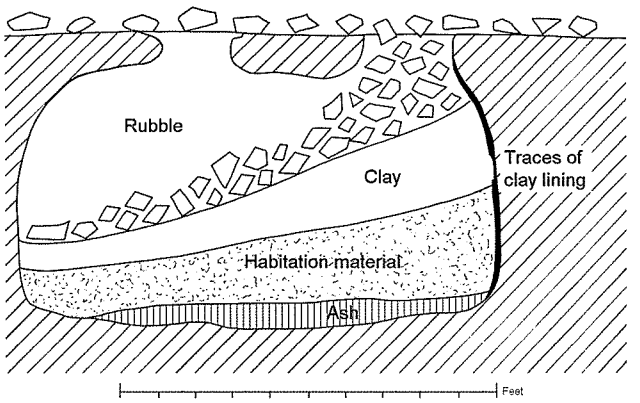

Figure 5. In-Nuffara silo pit (after Trump 1960, graphic elaboration by C. Veca).

Baħrija is still ongoing. Here, I have decided to focus on the significant evidence from In-Nuffara.

Although this context cannot be considered entirely sealed, since a part of the pottery was removed just before Trump's exploration (Trump 1960, 5) it clearly belongs to the Borġ in-Nadur phase, with the exception of a single sherd of Tarxien Cemetery type. It seems clear that at one time the function of the silo pit of In-Nuffara changed from storage space to dumping place for refuse originating in a village, probably located on the top of the plateau. The 2944 ceramic sherds examined include fine and coarse ware, table ware, storage jars and also mud bricks likely used in domestic architecture (Table 1). Materials made from stone were represented by mortars and hones. The application of the method of the minimum number of individuals (MNI) (Protocole Beuvray 1998) to the whole ceramic has given different vessels (MNI). Thirty-four sherds belong to at least 16 different vessels and are examples of dribbled ware.

In order to determine the technical and stylistic characteristics of this pottery class observed at In-Nuffara, it is useful to recall the main features of the Borġ in-Nadur pottery production, of which dribbled ware forms part. In a recent reappraisal of the Borġ in-Nadur phase pottery found at the eponymous temple site (Tanasi 2011a, 89-90), I identified five fabrics, three of which (fabric 1, 2 and 4) are the most common and correspond to Trump's phases of pottery production (II B1, II B2, II B3) (Table 2). The In-Nuffara dribbled ware shows a very hard and non-porous fabric, with very few and tiny calcareous inclusions. The body is usually dark yellow (10 YR 8/3 very pale brown) and the slip goes from dark red (2.5 YR 5/6 red) to very dark brown in colour (2.5 YR 4/1 dark reddish gray). The slip is very thick and solid, it does not crackle or flake off and is never burnished. On the slipped surfaces, which are always polished, it is possible to observe horizontal or slightly oblique pattern traces left by a kind of brush. The sherds are well fired in a uniform way and no signs of temperature alterations or of overburning can be observed. The core shows the same colour of the body. Only one specimen, NNF60/P/2009/18, has a repair hole (Fig. 7a).

It was noticed that the slip is applied with a decorative function following standard rules. Leaving aside the tiny sherds, of the 34 specimens, 17 have a red slip (Fig. 6) and 14 have a black one (Fig. 7). When the black slip occurs, the clay body is well fired, meaning that the darker colour is obtained through a slip with a different composition. The outer walls are generally completely slipped or covered by two or more thick horizontal spaced out bands (Fig. 7p); the inner ones show an irregular series of circular (Figs. 6a-p, 7b-n) or oval spots (Figs. 6j, 7d, 7o) bordered at the top by a

Shape/Part	Number of sherds	Types/Examples/Class
Walls	2140	fine ware: 406; medium ware: 980; coarse ware: 754
Diagnostic rims	242	type I: 74; type II: 9; type III: 50; type IV: 19; type V: 1; type VI: 1; type VII: 25; type VIII: 33; type IX: 2; type X: 2; type XI: 16; type XII: 1; type XIII: 1; undefined: 8
Undiagnostic rims	116	—
Simple bases	93	flat bases: 83; embossed bases: 10;
Footed bases	22	conical feet: 12; bell shaped feet: 10
Handles	126	loop handles: 123; axe handles: 2; strap handle: 1
Storage jars	150	6 vessels
Lids	21	20 vessels
Dribbled ware	34	16 vessels

Table 1. Pottery types from In-Nuffara, Gozo.

Fabric 1 (II B1) *Reddish yellow fabric with thick red slip*	**Fabric 2 (II B2)** *Pink fabric with red mottled slip*	**Fabric 4 (II B3)** *Reddish yellow fabric with dark red to black mottled slip*
Soft powdery fabric, with calcareous inclusions (very fine-fine, 2-5%) and voids (fine-medium, 2-5%); orange body (5 YR 7/6 reddish yellow), gray core (2.5 Y 6/2 light brownish gray); thick crackling slip from red to scarlet (from 10 R 5/8 red to 10 R 6/4 pale red), sometimes applied in two layers, generally burnished. Linear cut out decoration with white inlay.	Hard-very hard fabric, rarely porous, with calcareous inclusions (fine-medium 5%) and voids (fine 5%); pink body (10 Y 7/4 pale red), gray core (2.5 Y 6/2 light brownish gray); mottled crackling slip with several shades of red (from 2.5 YR 4/8 red to 10 R 6/4 pale red) marked by large irregular black blotches, frequently not burnished. Linear cut-out and simple geometric decoration with white inlay.	Hard-very hard fabric, porous, with calcareous inclusions (very fine 2-5%); dark red surface (from 5 YR 7/6 reddish yellow to 2.5 YR 2.5/1 reddish black), grey core (2.5 Y 6/2 light brownish gray); thin slip roughly burnished or not burnished with irregular dark blotches. Linear cut out and simple geometric decoration with white inlay.

Table 2. Borġ in-Nadur pottery fabrics according to Trump (1961) and Tanasi (2011a).

horizontal band (Figs. 6a-f, 7a, 7b) or set into a frame of crossing bands (Figs. 6c, 6e, 6m). One example also shows an additional pattern of smaller spots (Fig. 7m). A kind of motif based on the combination of two or three circular spots can be found on some examples (Figs. 6d, 6n, 7a). Series of horizontal bands are also common (Fig. 6r). On just one sherd there is a partial rough motif, that can be interpreted as an eye (Fig. 6q). In another case, there is a pattern made with knobs of thick slip, which were pierced by a stick before drying (Fig. 6p). In one example, the dribbled decoration is combined with a cut-out line in which small globular pellets are set (Fig. 6s). Apart from this case, all the decorative motifs observed on the pottery from In-Nuffara recall the evidence from other sites.

Almost all the In-Nuffara specimens belong to medium size open vessels, such as bowls or one handled dipper cups with a carinated body and flat base. The material is very fragmentary and only two sherds are well enough preserved to indicate their typology. NNF60/P/2009/1 is a bowl with a shallow carinated body with indistinct everted rim and thinned top (Fig. 8a). The shape recalls the dipper cups of type 3 identified at the Borġ in-Nadur temple, but also evident at Għar Mirdum, Baħrija (Tanasi 2011a, 116-117) and Mtarfa (Sagona 1999, 34, fig. 7.4). Furthermore, it can be compared with sherds H5 and H6 from Ħal Saflieni (Murray 1925, p. 35, pl. 25.H5-H6) (Fig. 3c-d). NNF60/P/2009/2 represents an exception (Fig. 8b). In fact it is the only identified closed vessel, probably the high distinct neck of a jug or an amphora, with indistinct everted rim and rounded top, comparable with the amphorae of type 1C (Tanasi 2011a, 109-111) or the juglets of type 1 (Tanasi 2011a, 111-113) found at Borġ in-Nadur. Finally, the sherd NNF60/P/2009/20 (Fig. 7c), although not well preserved, clearly belongs to a dipper cup comparable with fragments H3 and H4 from Ħal Saflieni (Murray 1925, p. 35, pl. 25 H3-H4) (Fig. 4a-b).

It is hard to find comparisons for this class of pottery outside the Maltese archipelago. However, it is worth pointing out the discovery of some bowls, with the same method of painted decoration, in the sanctuary of Montagna di Polizzello in central Sicily. There a two-handled bowl of Borġ in-Nadur II B3 type has been found inside a circular building dated to the first half of the ninth century BC, on the eastern side of the sanctuary area (Tanasi 2007; Vella *et al.* 2011, 265). In contemporary layers, two bowls decorated with simple motifs obtained by the direct application of a thick slip on the clay body (Fig. 8b-c), a largely uncommon practice in Sicilian prehistoric pottery, were found inside votive pits. Although fabrics and typology do not find a match in Maltese pottery, such a decorative use of slip can only be compared with dribbled ware since no comparisons are known in Sicily.

To establish the chronology of the dribbled ware is a very hard task. This is especially so in view of the debate about the contested chronology of the Maltese Bronze Age (Trump 1961; Evans 1971; Tanasi 2011a *contra* Sagona 2008, 2011) and its links with the Sicilian sequence (Tanasi 2011a *contra* Recchia and Cazzella 2011).

It is however possible to propose some suggestions. The pottery from In-Nuffara, with the exception of one single Tarxien Cemetery phase sherd, seems to belong to Borġ in-Nadur II B1 and II B2, testifying to a long period of use of the pit. The comparisons found for the diagnostic pieces recall shapes of the repertoires identified for the transitional

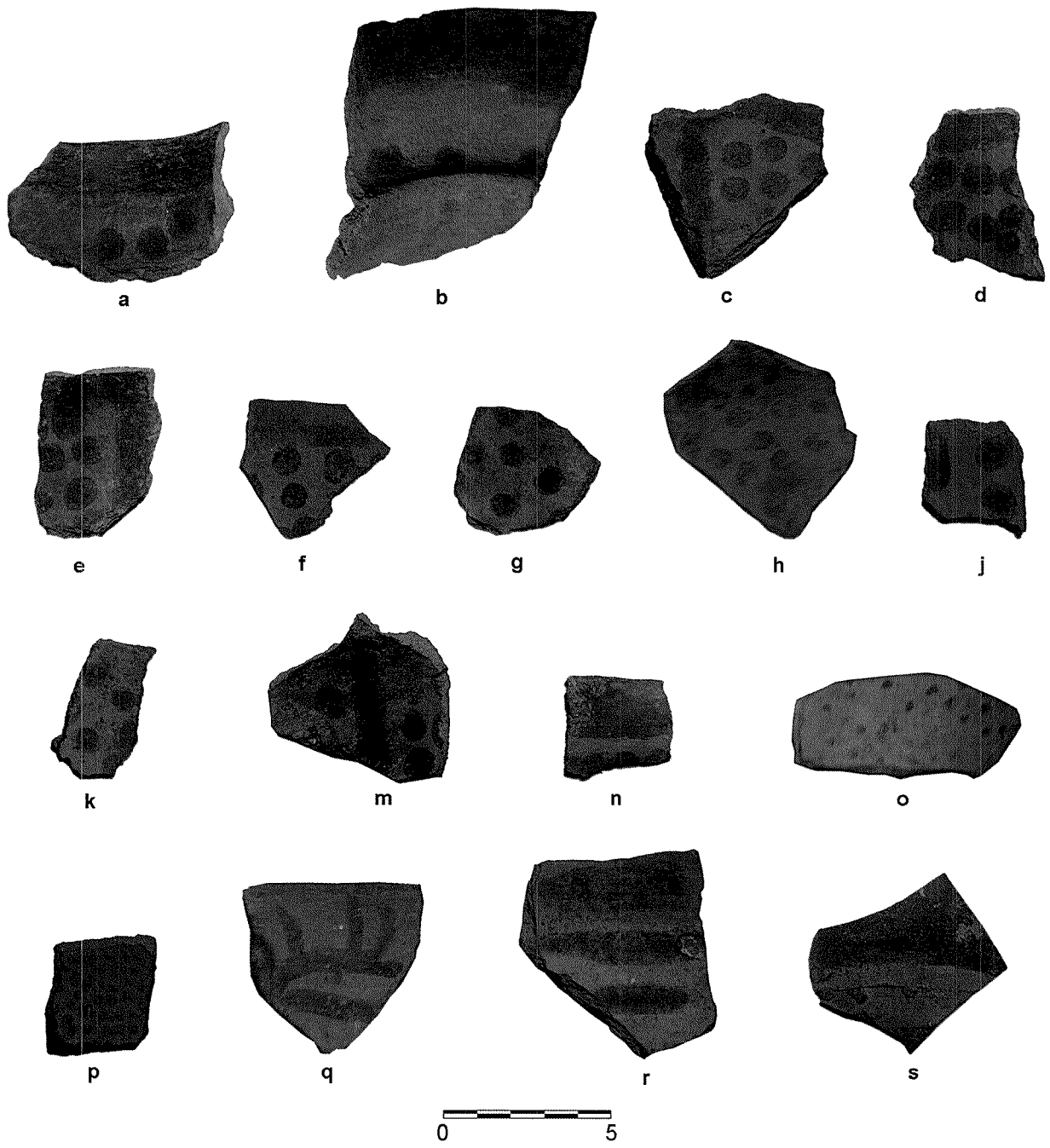

Figure 6. Dribbled ware with red slip: a) NNF60/P/2009/1; b) NNF60/P/2009/2; c) NNF60/P/2009/3; d) NNF60/P/2009/4; e) NNF60/P/2009/5; f) NNF60/P/2009/6; g) NNF60/P/2009/7; h) NNF60/P/2009/8; j) NNF60/P/2009/9; k) NNF60/P/2009/10; m) NNF60/P/2009/11; n) NNF60/P/2009/12; o) NNF60/P/2009/13; p) NNF60/P/2009/13; q) NNF60/P/2009/15; r) NNF60/P/2009/16 s) NNF60/P/2009/17 (photographs by the author).

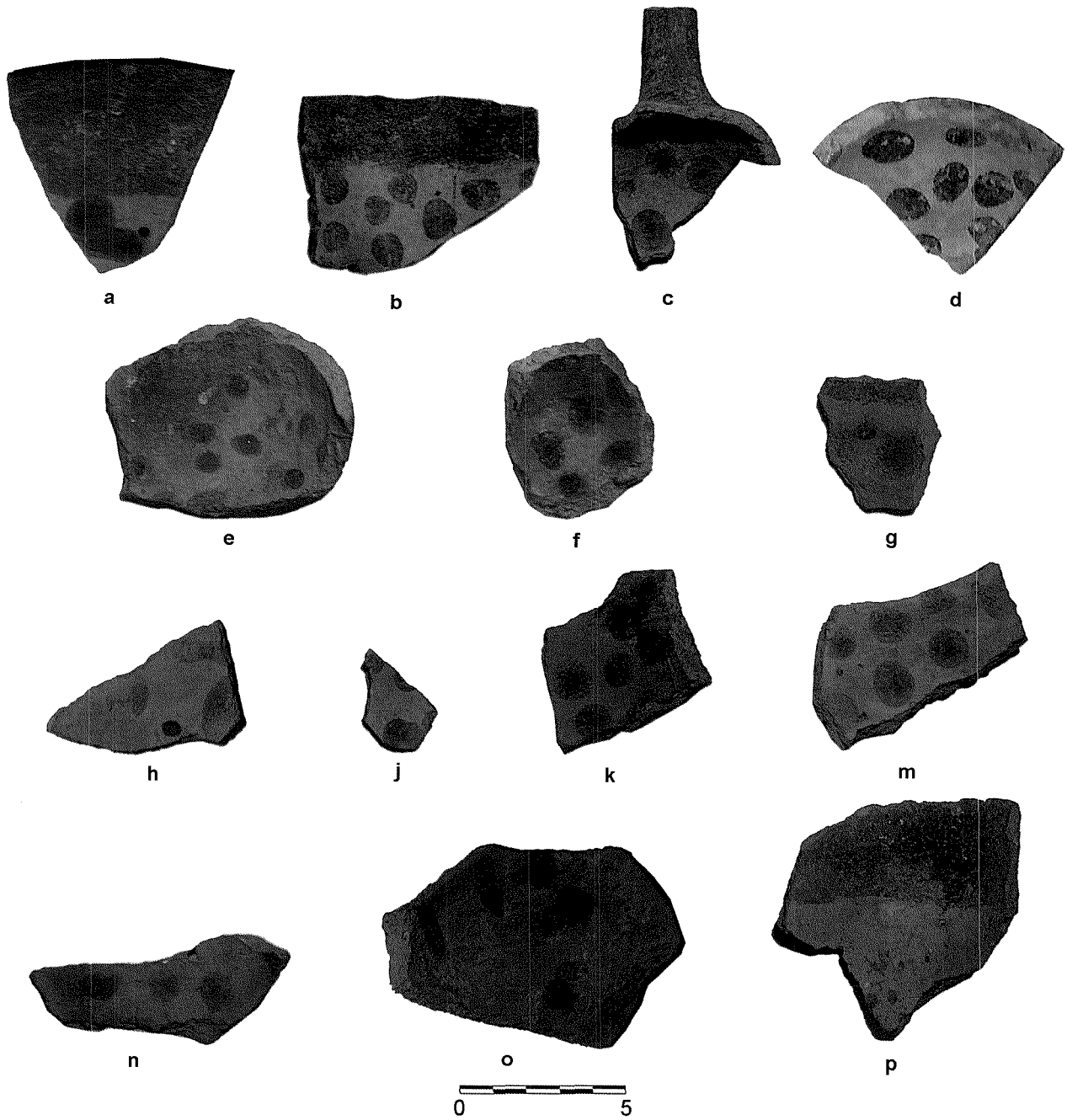

Figure 7. Dribbled ware with black slip: a) NNF60/P/2009/18; b) NNF60/P/2009/19; c) NNF60/P/2009/20; d) NNF60/P/2009/21; e) NNF60/P/2009/22; f) NNF60/P/2009/23; g) NNF60/P/2009/24; h) NNF60/P/2009/25; j) NNF60/P/2009/26; k) NNF60/P/2009/27; m) NNF60/P/2009/28; n) NNF60/P/2009/29; o) NNF60/P/2009/30; p) NNF60/P/2009/31 (photographs by the author).

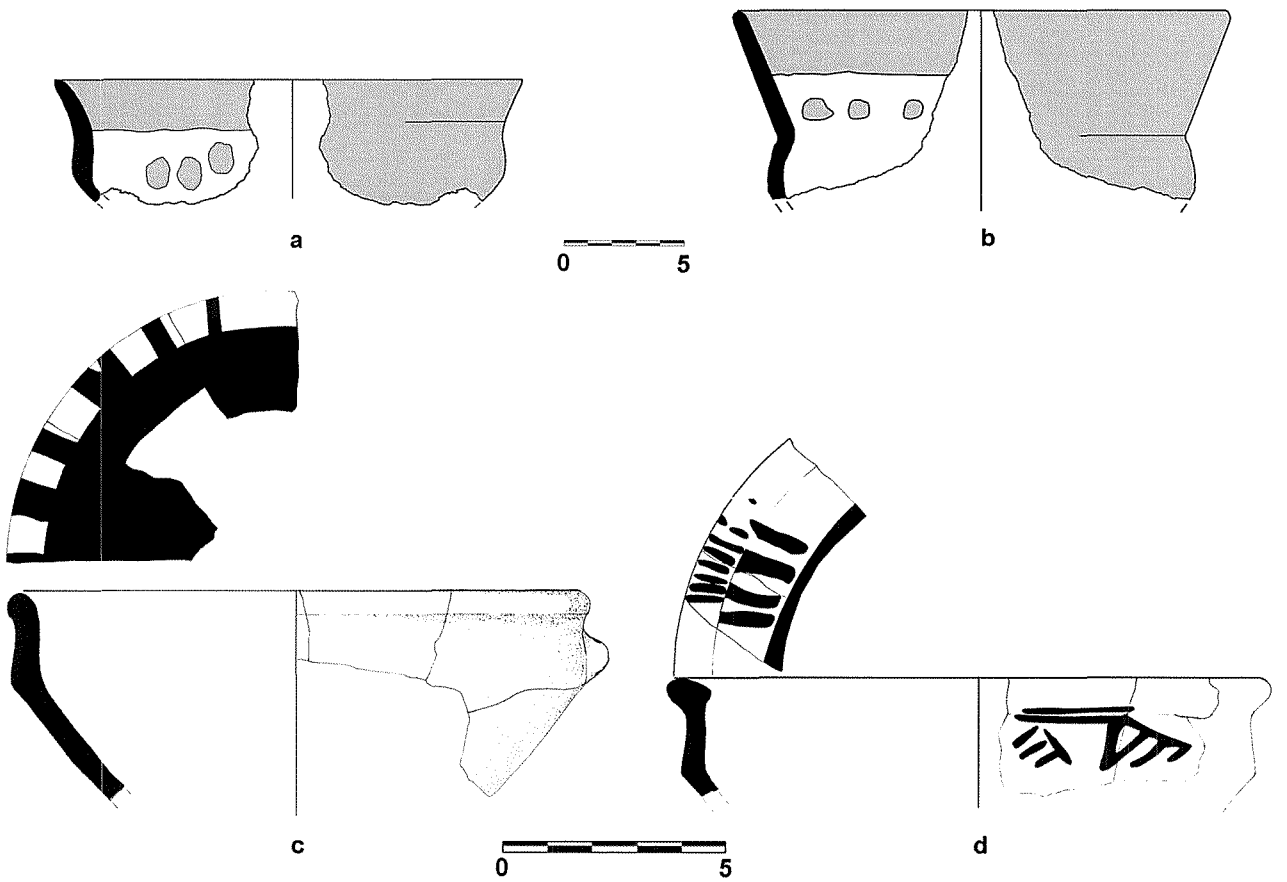

Figure 8. a) NNF60/P/2009/1; b) NNF60/P/2009/2 (scale 1:3, drawing by Carlo Veca); c) Bowl P04/704 from Montagna di Polizzello. d) Bowl 04018 from Montagna di Polizzello (scale 1:4, drawing by Denise Calì).

phases II B1/II B2 and II B2 of the Borġ in-Nadur temple (Tanasi 2011a, 135). In the excavations at Tas-Silġ, examples of dribbled ware have been found in the same layer as the Mycenaean LH IIIB sherd 2169/30 (Sagona 2011, 410), and in other layers on the top of that, all of them sealed (*pers. comm.* N. C. Vella). This datum places the LH IIIB (mid-fourteenth – early thirteenth century BC, a period corresponding to the principal part of Borġ in-Nadur II B2; Tanasi and Vella 2011, 8), as at least the *terminus ad quem* for the production of the dribbled ware. But, as mentioned earlier, in his preliminary report of the excavations at Borġ in-Nadur village and Baħrija, Trump included the dribbled ware in the II B3 period (Trump 1961, 259). This would suggest a longer period of production or use for this class of pottery, possibly well into the opening centuries of the first millennium BC. This would fit chronologically with the appearance of the 'dribbled examples' of Montagna di Polizzello. A connection between the Maltese Archipelago and central Sicily at this time is testified by the Borġ in-Nadur II B3 type bowl from Polizzello and by the Maltese pottery found in the phase III layers at Cannatello (Levi 2004, 237).

If this reading is correct, dribbled ware seems to have been produced using the same criteria for several centuries, from phase II B2 to phase II B3 and with a repertoire of at least two shapes, one of which being the ubiquitous dipper cup. In the conservative nature of this production, ritual practices could have played a major role since symbolic conceptions are considered one of the most conditioning factors of conservative behaviours (Gosselan and Livingstone Smith 2005, 41). This reading could also justify the limited presence of dribbled pottery as in the In-Nuffara deposit. Dribbled ware is also set apart from the rest of the pottery production of Borġ in-Nadur II B2 and II B2 phases. Indeed the fabrics are completely different (Table 2). Dribbled ware appears to be more advanced in terms of purification of clays, manufacturing technique and above all in the control of firing conditions. These special technical features could have represented distinctive characteristics of a pottery class of high level produced perhaps by

the most skilled potters who were responsible for producing the handled bowl for ritual rather than everyday use.

Little is known about the ritual practices of the Borġ in-Nadur period. It is clear that a Maltese ritual vessel set, composed of a two-handled bowl, an open-mouthed jug, and a pedestalled basin, existed and was used in religious and funerary rituals in Malta and in Sicily (Tanasi and Vella in press; Tanasi 2011b, 304). Since this set, in evidence in the Double Chapel of Borġ in-Nadur and in tomb 23 at Cozzo del Pantano and tomb 6 at Matrensa (Tanasi 2008, 77), does not include the handled bowl, and since Murray reported a concentration of dribbled ware near the entrance of the Apsidal Building of Borġ in-Nadur temple and within it (Murray 1923, p. 38), it may be possible to propose that different rituals including different sets of vessels were carried out in the Double Chapel and in the Apsidal Building respectively.

In conclusion, after a century the same problems experienced by Peet in dealing with the prehistoric painted pottery in Malta are still relevant. The recent reappraisal and publication of cultural material, especially pottery, from old excavations and the beginning of a constructive and continuous dialogue between Maltese and foreign scholars are beginning to throw new light on the Maltese Bronze Age. Crucial for an overall improvement will be the final publication of the results of the excavations carried out at Tas-Silġ by the Italian archaeological mission and the University of Malta. No doubt many questions will be answered and not only those related to the pottery that was the subject of this paper.

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