

The Maltese Archipelago at the Dawn of History

Reassessment of the 1909 and 1959
excavations at Qlejgħa tal-Baħrija
and other essays

Edited by

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The Tas-Silġ sanctuary between the late 2nd and the early 1st millennia BC

Alberto Cazzella, Giulia Recchia

1. Introduction

The site of Tas-Silġ was extensively unearthed during the 1960's by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Malta (Figure 1). Excavations were chiefly focussed on the Historic phases of the sanctuary (Phoenician-Punic and Hellenistic-Roman). Between 1996 and 2005 the University of Malta carried out excavations in the southern part of the site (Bonanno and Vella 2015), while in 1995 the Italian Mission resumed explorations in the northern part (Rossignani 2009). The sanctuary represents an extraordinary case of long-lasting use of a cult place from the 3rd millennium BC to the Byzantine period (Ciasca 1976-77; Amadasi Guzzo 2011; Rossignani 2009; Bonzano 2017).

Field research, especially aimed at investigating the prehistoric phases of the sanctuary, were carried out by the Sapienza University and Foggia University research units of the Italian Mission in the northern part of the site between 2003 and 2011 (Cazzella and Recchia 2012). Bringing to light hidden megalithic structures and well preserved stratigraphic sequences, these explorations have provided new insights on the complex system of Late Neolithic megalithic buildings and its transformations and patterns of use up to the first phase of contact with the Phoenicians (Cazzella *et al.* 2016). In particular, primary deposits belonging to the late 2nd – early 1st millennia BC have been explored in various areas of the site, producing new data on both the chronological and cultural sequence in Malta during this period (see Bonanno 2013; Recchia and Cazzella 2011; Tanasi 2015) and interactions with the central-eastern Mediterranean. Here, we will specifically discuss these two subjects.

Key issues with regards to the chronological and cultural sequence appear to be: 1) the end of the Borġ in-Nadur period and the beginning of the Bahrija period; 2) the identification of characterising pottery features of the Bahrija period; 3) the first contacts with the Phoenicians.

We are inclined to consider Borġ in-Nadur and Bahrija as two distinct chronological periods rather than just different stylistic features in pottery (as proposed by

Trump 1961; 2002, p. 274) and therefore we will use these terms accordingly. Nonetheless, as we shall see, distinct pottery productions of the Borġ in-Nadur period (hence Borġ in-Nadur type pottery) often occur in Bahrija deposits, either as residual shards or as productions still in use in this later period. Thus, we will also use the terms 'Borġ in-Nadur type pottery' and 'Bahrija-type pottery' to indicate specific stylistic features. As far as the absolute chronology of these periods is concerned, including the possibility to single out some phases within the Borġ in-Nadur period (Copat *et al.* 2012), we have promoted a program of radiocarbon dating at Tas-Silġ North, the results of which are forthcoming. In any case, cross-dating is a viable means to obtain both a chronological framework that can be further refined, and assess cross-cultural interactions. Thus, we propose a correspondence between the Sicilian and Maltese Late Bronze Age – early Iron Age sequences, mostly based on the evidence of contacts between the two regions in these periods. Thus, the late Borġ in-Nadur phase may correspond to the Recent Bronze Age in Sicily (approximately 1250-1050 BC), while the Bahrija period to the Final Bronze Age (1050-850 BC) and the early Iron Age (850-730 BC) in Sicily. Early contacts with the Phoenicians are widely thought to have occurred in the late 8th c. BC (*contra* Sagona 2014).

2. The late Borġ in-Nadur phase (mid-13th – mid-11th centuries BC)

The identification of phases within the Borġ in-Nadur period is not straightforward due to the scarcity of excavations carried out according to modern standards and of undisturbed stratigraphic sequences.

On the basis of the stratigraphic sequence at Tas-Silġ North and the analysis of the pottery (based on quantitative analyses and the incidence of specific features) we have proposed to single out three phases within the Borġ in-Nadur period and in particular to distinguish a late phase from a 'classic' phase (Recchia and Cazzella 2011; Copat *et al.* 2012). Tanasi's recent reappraisal of the pottery assemblage from the settlement of Borġ in-Nadur has provided supporting evidence for this hypothesis (Tanasi 2015, pp. 87-89).

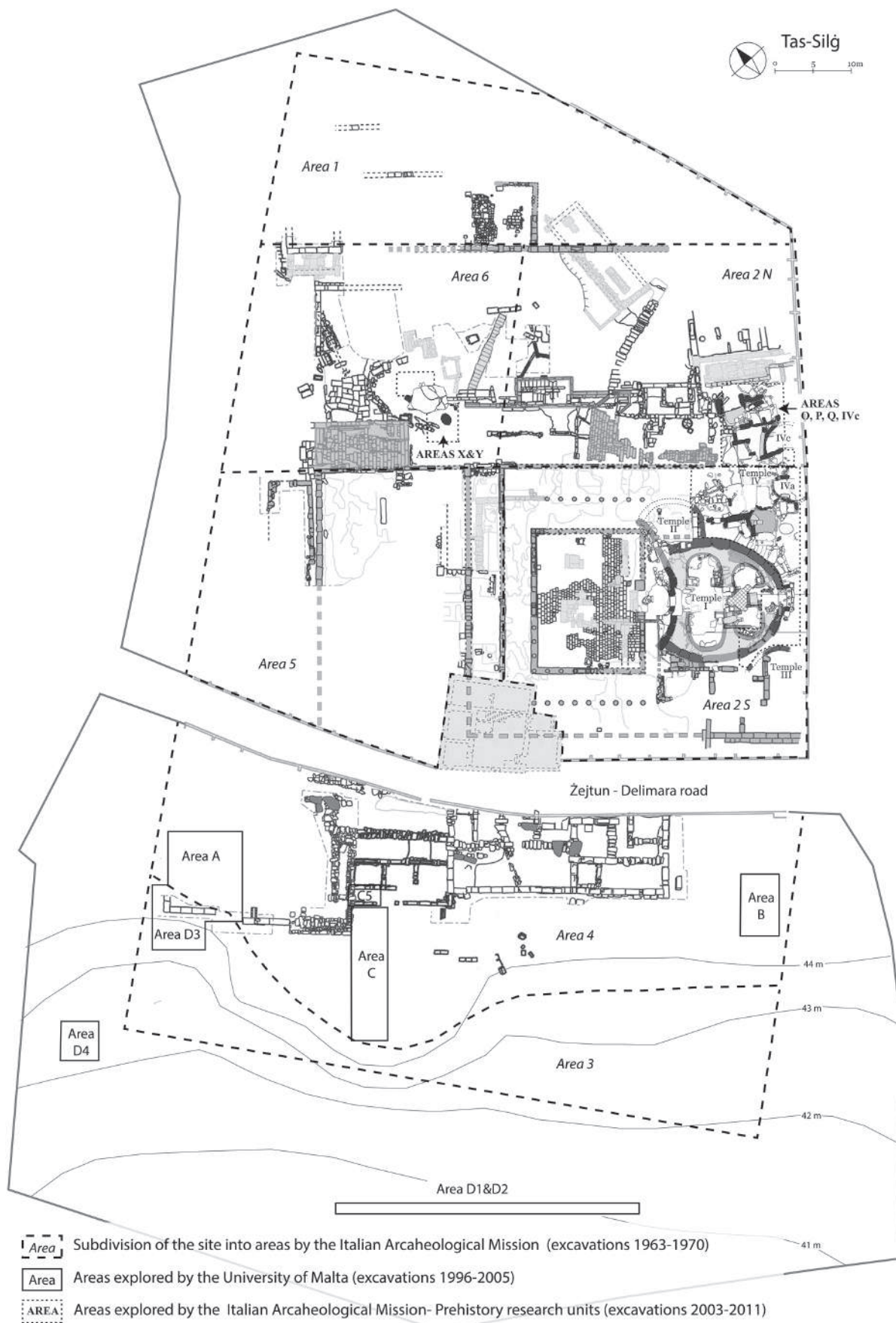


Figure 1. Tas-Silġ (Malta). General plan of the site showing the areas explored by the Italian Archaeological Mission (excavations 1963-1970 and 2003-2011) and the University of Malta (excavations 1996-2005). (Modified from Bonanno and Vella 2015, fig. 1:3; Cazzella and Moscoloni 2004-2005, fig. 1).

As is well known, ‘classic’ Borġ in-Nadur pottery occurs in Sicilian contexts belonging to the local Middle Bronze Age (Thapsos – Milazzese), thus dating to the 14th – mid-13th centuries BC. Therefore, the late Borġ in-Nadur phase is likely to have begun after the mid-13th c. BC (of the same opinion as Tanasi 2015, p. 92). As far as the general terminology is concerned, labelling Borġ in-Nadur as (Maltese) Late Bronze Age may appear as an incongruity, especially in comparison with Sicilian terminology. Yet, the Maltese Bronze Age is generally subdivided into two main periods (instead of three or more): the Tarxien Cemetery period, labelled as Early Bronze Age and the Borġ in-Nadur period, inevitably labelled as Late Bronze Age due to the lack of a third intermediate period.

One of the main distinguishing features of the late Borġ in-Nadur ceramic productions is the high incidence of brownish and dark slipped surfaces, whereas the ‘classic’ Borġ in-Nadur pottery is chiefly characterised by red-slipped surfaces. Specific shapes and decorative patterns occurring in the late Borġ in-Nadur phase (Figure 2) appear to be: curvilinear bowls and pedestalled hemispherical bowls decorated with a series of little knobs, both with strap handle; globular or heart-shaped jars with conical or cylindrical necks; ovoid jars with no distinct neck and a deeply incised line on the shoulder; trays with concave tronco-conical walls or slightly inverted rims (see Copat 2018). A type of decoration particularly characterising late Borġ in-Nadur pottery productions appears to be the fine and closely-spaced incisions forming triangles and zigzags, sometimes associated with small knobs (Copat *et al.* 2012, pp. 58-60, Figure 8).

The lower chronological limit of the late Borġ in-Nadur phase and the transition with the Baħrija period is more difficult to define. At Tas-Silġ in particular, owing to the unbroken occupation of the site, the high incidence of residual Borġ in-Nadur shards in the Baħrija deposits on the one hand, and the endurance of some distinct ceramic productions on the other hand, makes it problematic to clearly distinguish this transition, as we will discuss below in detail.

Dribbled Ware is a very characteristic ceramic production that does not have precise parallels outside the Maltese archipelago and exact chronology of which is still matter of debate (Figure 3, 1-2). This distinct pottery production appears to have started already in the late Borġ in-Nadur phase (Tanasi 2008-2009; 2015): indeed at Tas-Silġ North it occurs in both Late Borġ in-Nadur and Baħrija deposits. At Tas-Silġ South fragments of Dribbled Ware (Sagona 2015, fig. 1:19:8-13) are stratigraphically associated with a wheel-made painted shard that has been proposed to pertain to a LH IIIB Mycenaean production (SU 2169, Sagona 2015, pp. 81, 82, fig. 1:121:7), thus constituting a chronological reference for the Maltese painted ware. However, the actual nature and provenance of the wheel-made painted shard has yet to be verified. According to M. Bettelli (*pers. comm.*), assuming that this is a Mycenaean-type production it may well belong to the LH IIIC rather than to the LH IIIB. Therefore, the context could be dated to the 12th-11th centuries BC (see also the discussion below). Thus, the production of Dribbled Ware might have started in a very late phase of Borġ in-Nadur and then continued in the following Baħrija period.

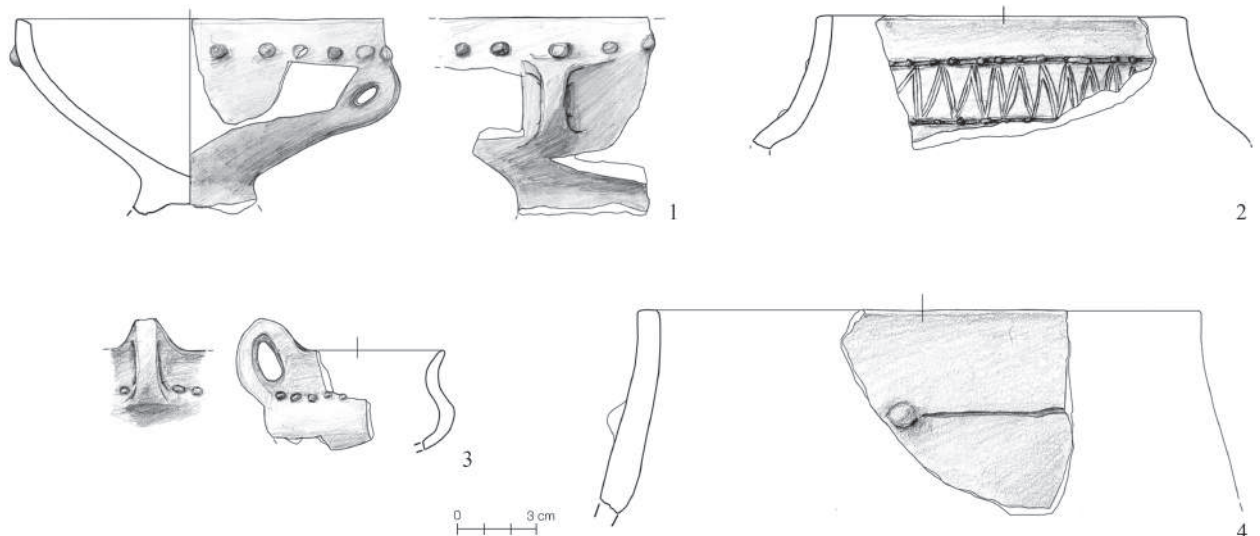


Figure 2. Tas-Silġ, Late Borġ in-Nadur pottery from the North side of the site (excavations 2003-2011). 1: pedestalled bowl decorated with small knobs; 2: jar decorated with fine zigzag incisions and small knobs; 3: small cup decorated with small knobs; 4: jar decorated with incised line and small knob (after Copat *et al.* 2012).

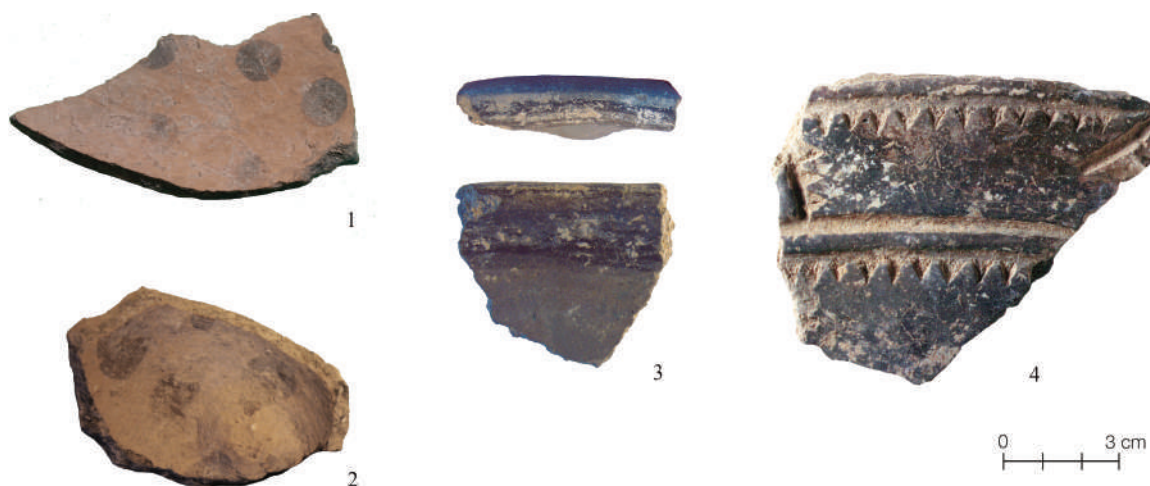


Figure 3. Tas-Silġ, Dribbled Ware and Bahrija pottery. 1-2: Dribbled Ware (North side, excavations 2003-2011); 3: bowl with painted band on the rim (North side, excavations 2003-2011); 4: sherd with excised decoration (excavations 1963-1970), (Photos Italian Archaeological Mission).

2.1 The Tas-Silġ sanctuary in the late Borġ in-Nadur phase

The occupation of the Tas-Silġ sanctuary appears to have been particularly intense during the latest phase of the Borġ in-Nadur period (Figure 4). Apart from the areas affected by plundering and disturbances in modern times, late Borġ in-Nadur deposits were found in the vast majority of structures and spaces explored with the 2003-2011 excavations (which focused on the prehistoric phases). As is well known, prehistoric deposits inside temple I were cleared by the subsequent use of the building in Historic times, but this must have been still standing during the Late Bronze Age/early Iron Age and doubtlessly used, possibly retaining a symbolic character (Cazzella and Recchia 2012; 2016).

Late Borġ in-Nadur primary deposits have been found in both the unearthed apses of temple IV (IVa and IVc), which possibly maintained the original Late Neolithic outline. This evidence might strengthen the hypothesis that most of the original megalithic buildings were still standing and occupied in this period without major architectural transformations, although in several areas the floors were raised from the original level and the roofing was possibly replaced. Nevertheless, some minor changes were made, as structural evidence in area M indicates.

Here a small wall was built, made by three adjoining blocks, which closed this small room isolating it from the courtyard E (Cazzella and Recchia 2012, fig. 8) (Figure 4.). Further late Borġ in-Nadur deposits were preserved just north of temple IV (areas O and Q) and in the area located 40 m to the West of the main cluster of megalithic buildings (areas X & Y), where a megalithic structure, possibly a dolmen, had been raised in the Tarxien Cemetery period (Cazzella and Recchia 2015,

151, figs 6 and 10). In all of these areas (O, Q, X & Y), as well as in apse IVc, Bahrija layers were preserved above the late Borġ in-Nadur deposits.

The University of Malta’s excavations in the southern area of the Tas-Silġ sanctuary have brought to light primary deposition layers belonging to the Borġ in-Nadur period particularly in area C (fig. 1; Vella *et al.* 2015, fig. 3:200). According to C. Sagona pottery from these layers would pertain to Trump’s 2BI phase and they would date from the 1500-1450 to 1000 BC rather than just to a late phase of this period (Sagona 2015, pp. 22, 27)

Nonetheless, the pottery assemblage from stratigraphic groups C3, C4 and C6 (Borġ in-Nadur phase III in the phase-sequence proposed for Tas-Silġ South; Vella *et al.* 2015) includes distinct pottery types that, in our opinion, came into use in the late Borġ in-Nadur phase, such as the Dribbled Ware (see discussion above) and the motifs with fine and closely-spaced incisions forming triangles and zigzags (Sagona 2015, fig. 1:12:9). Moreover, the shard reportedly of Aegean-Mycenaean type from one of the layers of group CG3 (SU 2169), does not constitute strong evidence for an earlier chronology. Having said that, these deposits may well indicate that the late Borġ in-Nadur occupation of the site not only encompassed the core area of the sanctuary, but also its southern fringe.

2.2 Evidence of maritime contacts and exchange with Mediterranean contexts

Various finds from Tas-Silġ and other Maltese contexts possibly belonging to the late Borġ in-Nadur phase illustrate the participation of the Maltese archipelago in the broader Late Bronze Age Mediterranean maritime networks.

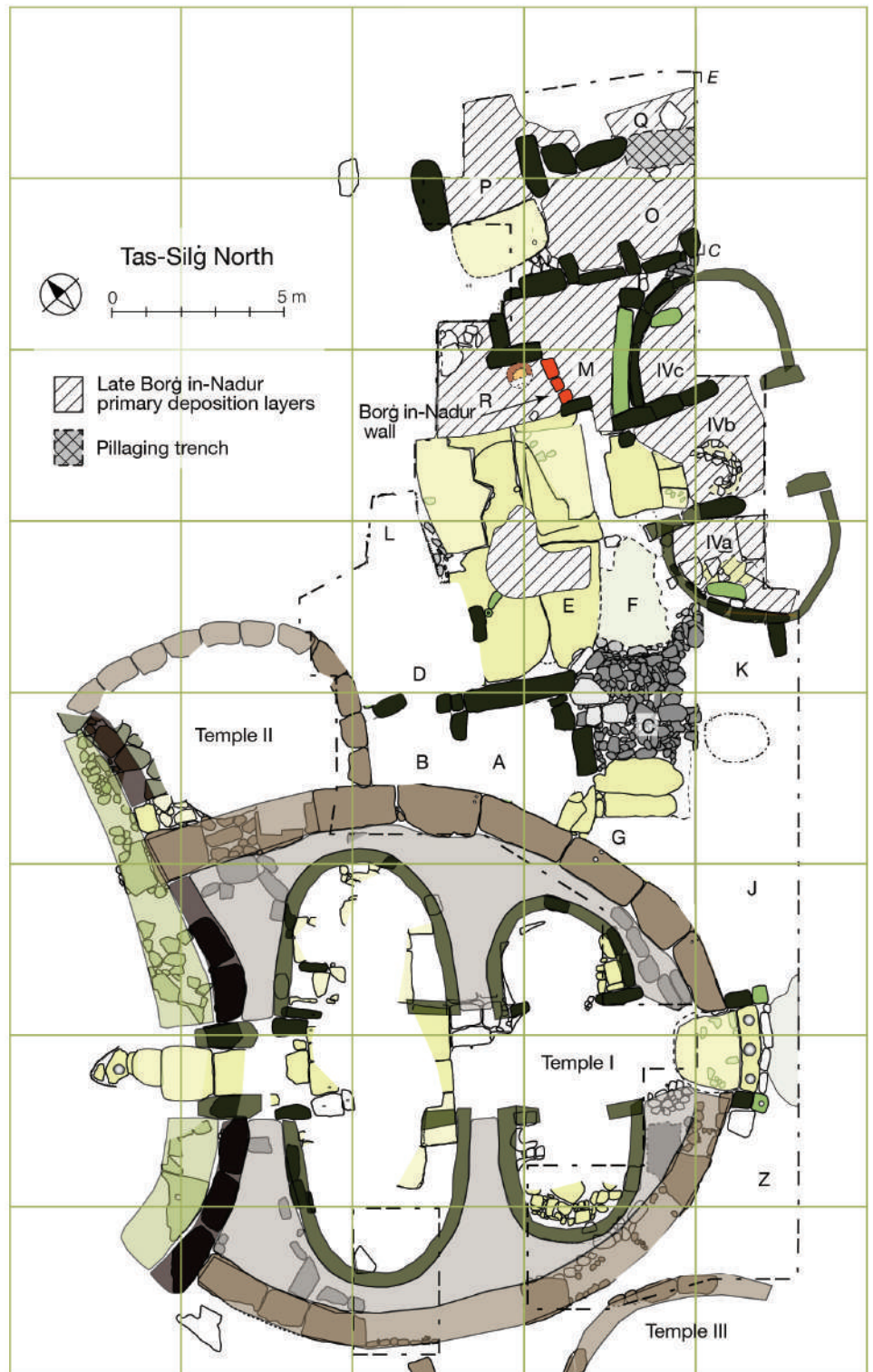


Figure 4. Tas-Silġ, north-east side of the site (excavations 2003-2011). General plan of the prehistoric structures with indication of the extension of primary deposition of Late Borg in-Nadur layers. Lighter shades indicate the suggested reconstruction of some features.

Being the westernmost find of a 2nd millennium BC cuneiform inscription, the fragment of inscribed agate from Tas-Silġ is of exceptional importance (Cazzella *et al.* 2011). In all likelihood the agate fragment is part of a lunar crescent (Figure 5); the inscription has been deciphered and translated by Fr Werner Mayer (2011) of the Pontificio Istituto Biblico. On the basis of both the types of characters and names of the dedicants,

Mayer has suggested that the inscription dates to the Kassite period, between 1330 and 1230 BC. The dedicants' names also suggest that the object was made in Nippur (Mesopotamia). The agate fragment has been found in the northern area of the Tas-Silġ sanctuary as a residual object in the substrate layer (SU 10786) of a *torba* floor, probably dating to the 2nd-1st centuries BC. Specifically, this chronology has been suggested

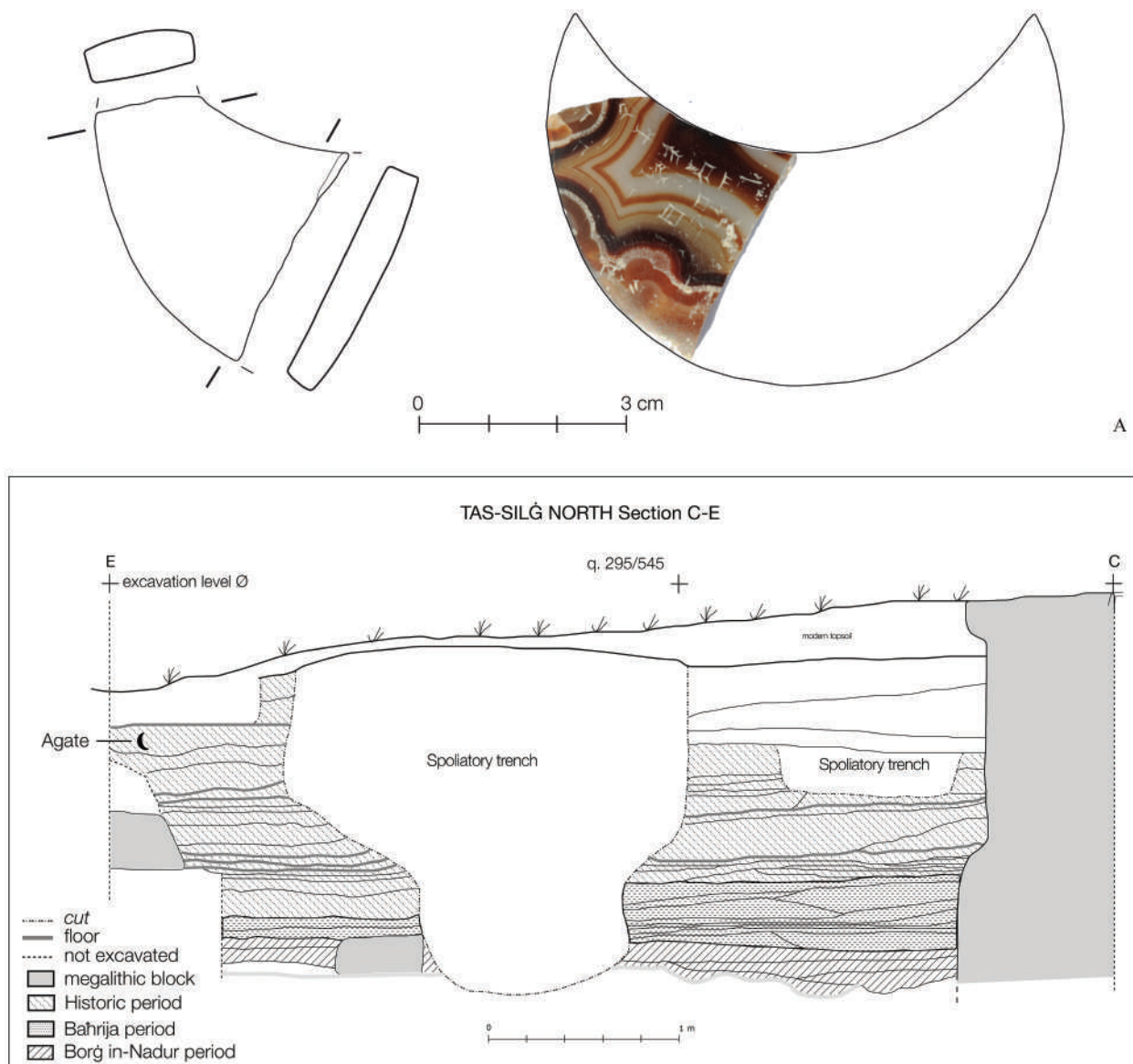


Figure 5. Tas-Silġ, north-east side of the site (excavations 2003-2011). A: Lunar crescent with cuneiform inscription made of agate; B: section C-E showing the stratigraphic position of the agate crescent (Photo Italian Archaeological Mission).

by G. Semeraro, A. Saponara and F. Notarstefano on the basis of the pottery types from the same layer and associated deposits. Hence this was not its primary deposition context and we have little evidence to date the arrival of the agate crescent in Malta. Nonetheless, in our opinion it is unlikely that the crescent arrived in the island in the Phoenician-Punic period, between the late 8th and the 4th centuries BC. Once the new cultic cycles had begun at Tas-Silġ (Phoenician-Punic and then Hellenistic-Roman), a precious object of that sort, possibly re-dedicated in the Maltese sanctuary, would have been hardly discarded as waste.

The problem remains as to how the agate arrived in Malta. In all likelihood, enemies of the Babylonians took it away from the temple of Nippur, where it had

been originally dedicated. In dealing with this issue, Fr Mayer (2012, p. 95) pointed out another peculiar find that entails a link between the Mediterranean (the eastern part in this case) and Mesopotamia: the occurrence of votive cylinder seals made of semi-precious stones (chiefly lapis lazuli) inside a building dating around 1220 BC at Thebes in Greece. The most recent among these seals belong to the Kassite period too, thus from Babylonia they would have reached a Greek Mycenaean centre in a few years. E. Porada (1981-1982) has highlighted how during the invasion of Babylonia the Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta took away as spoils a number of sacred objects. According to Porada, after that the abovementioned (stolen) cylinder seals arrived in Greece quickly, as gifts from the Assyrian king to the Mycenaean princes, who were

potential allies against the Hittites. It is tempting to hypothesise that the agate crescent found at Tas-Silġ first arrived in Greece via the same chain of events. From Greece, then, it could have reached the central Mediterranean by way of either Mycenaean or Cypriot maritime exchange activities, in which Sicily was at that time deeply involved. That (inscribed) artefacts of Near Eastern provenance circulated through the eastern Mediterranean exchange networks is also attested by an ivory plaque with cuneiform inscription, dating to the late 13th c. BC, which has been found at Tiryns. This is likely to have come from Ugarit, and C. Cohen, J. Maran and M. Vethers (2010) have suggested that its arrival in Greece was due to the Cypriot or Levantine exchange network with the Peloponnese.

The presence of an exotic object such as the inscribed agate in a Maltese sanctuary of the Late Bronze Age may not have been accidental. In Malta the inscription was probably not understood by the users of the sanctuary who, on the other hand, may have appreciated the value of the raw material and the quality of its craftsmanship. Being the recipient of such a singular object during the Late Bronze Age, the sanctuary of Tas-Silġ may have had a reputation that was broader than local knowledge, as would be the case later in both the Punic and Roman periods.

Given the crisis that the Mycenaean world underwent in the late 13th – early 12th centuries BC, other human groups coming from the Mycenaeanised eastern Mediterranean regions rather than the Mycenaeans themselves might have been the main actors in Mediterranean exchange networks. In this framework Cyprus, which was also connected with Crete, probably played a central role in trading with Sicily and Sardinia and, as mentioned above, could have had a role too in the shipping of the agate crescent to the central Mediterranean. Recently, Russell and Knapp (2017) expressed criticism about the assumption of Cypriot sailors being the prominent and active actors in the network with Sardinia. Nonetheless, at present little evidence supports the reverse hypothesis that the Sardinian sailors had a far more active role in relationships with Cyprus (Cazzella and Recchia 2018).

In Sicily, the fine wheel-made Mycenaean-type pottery, highly appreciated in the Middle Bronze Age, seems to have lost appeal after the mid-13th c. BC. This does not mean that the relationships between the eastern Mediterranean and the island had ceased, but the provenance of the exotic goods that arrived in Sicily is more difficult to be traced. In fact, an array of productions, objects and raw materials attests the involvement of Late Bronze Age Sicily in the Mediterranean network. These include the

production of wheel-made plain red-slipped pottery imitating some Mycenaean pottery shapes (Pantalica, Montagna di Caltagirone), gold craftworks (Pantalica), metal vessels (Caldare, Monte Campanella, Contrada Capreria) – which are debatable in chronology but can be placed between the Middle and the Late Bronze Age – mirrors (Pantalica), fragments of ox-hide ingots (Lipari, Ustica, Thapsos and Cannatello) – probably falling between the Middle and the Late Bronze Age – and ivory objects, such as the mirror handle from Pantalica and daggers from Dessucri that have been attributed to the Late Bronze Age (Albanese Procelli 2012, pp. 196-198, 216; 2013, pp. 111-113; Albanese Procelli and Chilardi 2005, p. 99; Bietti Sestieri 1979, pp. 608-610; Castellana 2000, 212-237; Lo Schiavo *et al.* 2009, pp. 135-221; Panvini 2005). Moreover, the so-called *anaktoron* at Pantalica is thought to have been inspired by eastern models (Militello 2004, p. 322). Among these elements both the ox-hide ingots and metal vessels are possibly of Cypriot provenance, although their chronology is still a matter of scholarly debate (Lo Schiavo *et al.* 2009; Tanasi 2009; Vagnetti 1968).

Relevant to the subject of the relationships between Sicily and Malta is the bone necklace spacer decorated with incised multiple circlets from a late Borg in-Nadur layer at Tas-Silġ North (Figure 6; Cazzella and Recchia 2012, p. 34). Although the spacer is not chronologically indicative, both the technique and pattern of decoration closely recall bone and antler craftworks (including necklace spacers) widespread in Sicily – and in Late Bronze Age peninsular Italy as well (Provenzano 1997). In particular, good parallels can be found among the grave goods of the Final Bronze Age cemetery at Madonna del Piano (eastern Sicily – Albanese Procelli 2003, p. 108; Albanese Procelli and Chilardi 2005, p. 97). In Malta, this distinctive incised decoration with multiple circlets also occurs on a bone hilt from Għar Mir dum, that according to D. Tanasi (2014, figs 17 c, 18 a, b), could date to the Early Bronze Age.

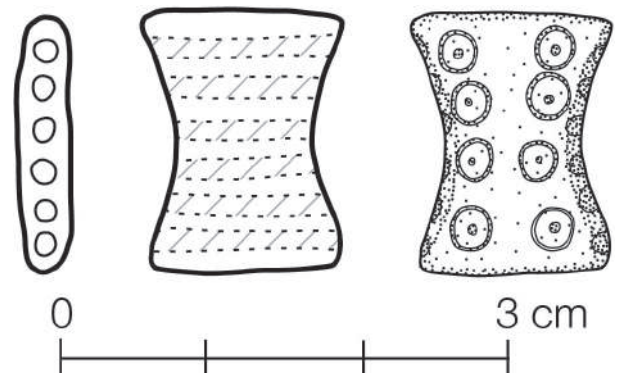


Figure 6. Tas-Silġ. Decorated bone necklace spacer from a Late Borg in-Nadur layer (North side, excavations 2003-2011; authors' drawing).

If we are to judge by the Maltese pottery imports in Sicily, it would seem that the relationships between Sicily and Malta were not particularly intense in this period, but future archaeological research might rapidly change this picture. Being associated with LH IIIA-III B Mycenaean pottery imports, the vast majority of the Borġ in-Nadur pottery from the tombs in south-eastern Sicily appear to belong to the late 14th – early 13th c. BC (Tanasi 2008). Results of the excavations at the settlement of Thapsos are largely unpublished, so we have little evidence to verify the chronological sequence of the site and the contexts of the provenance of the finds. According to G. Voza (1992), the construction and use of the multicellular rectilinear buildings (buildings A and B) would date to the 13th – 12th c. BC, although some scholars disagree with this proposal. Some late Borġ in-Nadur pottery is possibly associated with these buildings, such as the two bowls with T-shaped handle from surface layers of the central building area (Voza 1973, pp. 44–45, ns. 139–140, Recchia and Cazzella 2011), while the Borġ in-Nadur pottery from complex A is not described (Voza 1972, p. 185).

In the light of the dearth of Mycenaean type pottery in Sicily in the late 13th – 12th c. BC (and possibly the reduction of direct Mycenaean contacts with the island), the paucity (if not lack) of Aegean – Mycenaean pottery in Malta in this period is not unexpected. The only occurrence would be the possible LH IIIC Mycenaean-type shard from Tas-Silġ South (discussed above), whose actual nature and chronology are yet to be verified. Unlike in Sicily, Maltese pottery productions imitating the shapes and/or replicating the manufacturing techniques of the Mycenaean-type vessels do not seem to occur. This is not surprising, however, since in the previous period Mycenaean-type pottery is extremely scarce in Malta, only consisting of the well-known LH IIIA2-III B Mycenaean type shard from Borġ in-Nadur (Pace 2004, pp. 211–212). Although this example has been recently analysed through PXRF (Pirone and Tykot 2017, p. 218; see chapter 7) and the results indicate its local production, this appears to conflict with the lack of wheel-made painted pottery in Malta in that period (*contra* Tanasi in chapter 3). Supplementary analyses such as NAA would be useful to ascertain the actual provenance of this sherd.

Although available data illustrating the occurrence in the Maltese islands of exotic goods between the 14th and the 12th centuries BC is far more limited than in Sicily, it cannot be ruled out that the archipelago was either directly or indirectly involved in the eastern Mediterranean exchange network. For instance, D. Tanasi (2009) has pointed out the presence of a possible metal vessel at Borġ in-Nadur (area of the former Late Neolithic sanctuary). Two, possibly imported, gilded bronze bracelets also come from this site (Evans 1953, p. 72; Tanasi 2009, p. 16).

3. The Baħrija period (mid-11th – 8th centuries BC)

3.1 *The desertion of Malta around 1000 BC: an unlikely hypothesis*

Already in 1970 M. Cagiano *et al.* (1973, p. 100) pointed out the continuous occupation of the Tas-Silġ sanctuary during the 9th–8th centuries BC, highlighting the stratigraphic association of Borġ in-Nadur/Baħrija pottery and imported Phoenician types.

Other authors have been critical about this hypothesis of continuity, suggesting instead that at the threshold of the 1st millennium BC the Maltese archipelago was virtually deserted. For instance, in 1993 P. Brusasco suggested that: ‘...when the first Semites settled in the prehistoric centres, they did not live side by side with the local inhabitants; rather they built their settlements on top of the abandoned predating centres’ (*Quando i primi semiti si insediarono nei nuclei preistorici, lo fecero senza convivere con le genti locali e anzi in genere sovrapposero i loro stanziamenti su quelli più antichi già in disuso*) (Brusasco 1993, p. 16).

Brusasco based this hypothesis chiefly on the results provided by the 1960’s Italian excavations at Tas-Silġ. He considered ‘the archaic Phoenician presence [at Tas-Silġ], that is that of the first colonists, ...rather limited’... ‘whereas, the passage from the Borġ in-Nadur/Baħrija period and the full Phoenician-Punic period of the 7th–6th centuries BC is evident across the entire sanctuary...’ (*la presenza fenicia arcaica, quella cioè dei primi coloni, ...abbastanza modesta’ ... ‘In tutto il santuario è invece evidente il passaggio dal periodo Borġ in-Nadur/Baħrija al pieno periodo Fenicio-Punico del VII–VI secolo a.C.*) (Brusasco 1993, p. 15).

A few years later, Vidal Gonzalez (1998) reaffirmed the hypothesis that Malta was nearly deserted by the time the Phoenicians colonised it. He confuted the validity of the chronological association between the Borġ in-Nadur pottery and a Phoenician lamp in the dump deposits filling the Mtarfa pit (Ward Perkins 1942), as well as the validity of analogous associations acknowledged by scholars dealing with this subject. A critical attitude towards a too broad use of the concept of ‘association’ is certainly beneficial, especially when it comes to archaeological contexts where the risk of accidental associations between materials of different phases is high, such as long-lasting sites. Moreover, it is difficult to prove the concurrence between two extremely diversified cultural aspects, whose chronology is not well defined, in contexts lacking in reliable stratigraphic sequences. Notwithstanding this, what is unconvincing in Vidal Gonzalez’ proposal is the historical implications he seeks to draw from this attempt to prove the inconsistencies in the overlapping or quick succession between a local traditional cultural

aspect (Borġ in-Nadur/Baħrija) and a new one of Levantine origin (Phoenician). As G. Semeraro (2002) and A. Pace (2004, p. 201) have rightly pointed out, why would the Maltese archipelago have been suddenly deserted after millennia of unbroken occupation?

It is true that, for instance, L. Bernabò Brea (1958, p. 143) underlined the desertion of the Aeolian Islands between the end of Ausonian II, around 850 BC, and the Greek colonisation of the archipelago in 580 BC, suggesting a violent war event as a cause for this long gap in the settlement of the archipelago. Even assuming that this was actually the case for the Aeolian Islands, there is no evidence that the Maltese archipelago experienced a phenomenon of that sort. Moreover, according to Diodorus Siculus (V 9, 1), when the Knidians arrived in Lipari in 580 BC – although according to other authors that arrival should be placed some decades earlier – the island was not completely deserted, as approximately 500 indigenous people lived there. Five hundred individuals, that is 15 inhabitants per sq. km, is not a negligible population size for a small island such as Lipari in the Iron Age.

Stratigraphic evidence from the more recent excavations at Tas-Silġ North sheds light on the unbroken occupation of the sanctuary at the edge of the Phoenician colonisation. Moreover, this data significantly contributes to the understanding of the pattern of use of the sanctuary during the Baħrija period and to better define the chronological framework and cultural aspects of this period in the archipelago.

3.2 Defining the Baħrija period: open problems and some hypotheses

Within the stratigraphic sequences at Tas-Silġ North we identify as Baħrija the series of deposits starting from the lower layer yielding typical diagnostic Baħrija pottery types (Figures 3.3-4 and 7), such as carinated bowls with high strap handle, bowls with inverted rim and black or grey pottery with excised decorations (Figure 7) (Onnis in press). The upper levels of the Baħrija sequences have, in some cases, yielded a few Phoenician shards, which possibly indicate the beginning of contacts with the Phoenicians. Whereas, the building of Phoenician cultic structures at the Tas-Silġ sanctuary clearly marks the beginning of the new historic cycle.

The number of diagnostic Baħrija shards found at Tas-Silġ is small. Typical Baħrija shards from the Italian excavations 1963-1970 amount to less than 50 fragments (corresponding to the 2% out of the total prehistoric pottery), while those from the 2003-2011 excavations (in the northern sector) amount to approximately 100 fragments (corresponding to slightly more than 1% of the total prehistoric shards). As for the University of Malta's excavations 1996-2005 (in the southern sector),

C. Sagona (2015, p. 32) has pinpointed four typical decorated Baħrija shards. Yet, three more diagnostic Baħrija shards are recognisable among the pottery that she has considered as Tarxien Cemetery productions (Sagona 2015. fig. 1:11:4, 8; 1:151:5).

A large number of pottery productions in Borġ in-Nadur tradition occur in these Baħrija layers, including the distinct red-slipped ware. Given the long-lasting and repeated occupation of the same areas through time, residual shards are very common across the entire stratigraphic sequence at the site. For instance, Late Neolithic Tarxien pottery amounts approximately to 25% of the pottery assemblage in these latest prehistoric layers. Thus, a number of Borġ in-Nadur shards may be in fact residual. Nonetheless, it is likely that ceramic types that had come into use in the Borġ in-Nadur period were still produced during the Baħrija period, but the problem is distinguishing these ongoing productions from the residual shards. In this respect, quantitative analysis of the incidence of various types and pottery fabrics across the various deposits may provide supporting evidence for this distinction. The case of Dribbled Ware, discussed above, is illustrative of a production that possibly started in a very late phase of the Borġ in-Nadur period and then continued during the Baħrija period. Besides this, other stylistic traits may have come into use in the late 12th – early 11th c. BC and then endured in the first centuries of the 1st millennium BC (Copat in press).

Apart from the possible persisting production of Borġ in-Nadur type red-slipped ware, the most common types of surface finishing in the Baħrija period are black slips, dark red/black slips and brown surfaces. Moreover, a distinctive feature of the Baħrija productions appears to be a black band (slipped or painted) on the rim of bowls with inverted rim, whose surface treatment simply consists of burnishing (Figures 3.3 and 7, Onnis in press).

Although the research at Tas-Silġ and the re-examination of old excavations in Malta (Tanasi and Vella 2015) have provided new insights into the Baħrija period, its overall chronology and internal development still remain unclear. The forthcoming results of a series of radiocarbon dates from Tas-Silġ North will help to address this matter.

As mentioned above, the transition between the late Borġ in-Nadur and the Baħrija periods remains difficult to chronologically define. Considering the Maltese Late Bronze Age sequence as parallel to the Sicilian one, we suggest that Baħrija can be paralleled with the Sicilian Final Bronze Age and early Iron Age, and hence that it possibly started in the mid-11th c. BC. The occurrence of Baħrija-type vessels at Thapsos complex C, which dates to the final Bronze Age (Voza

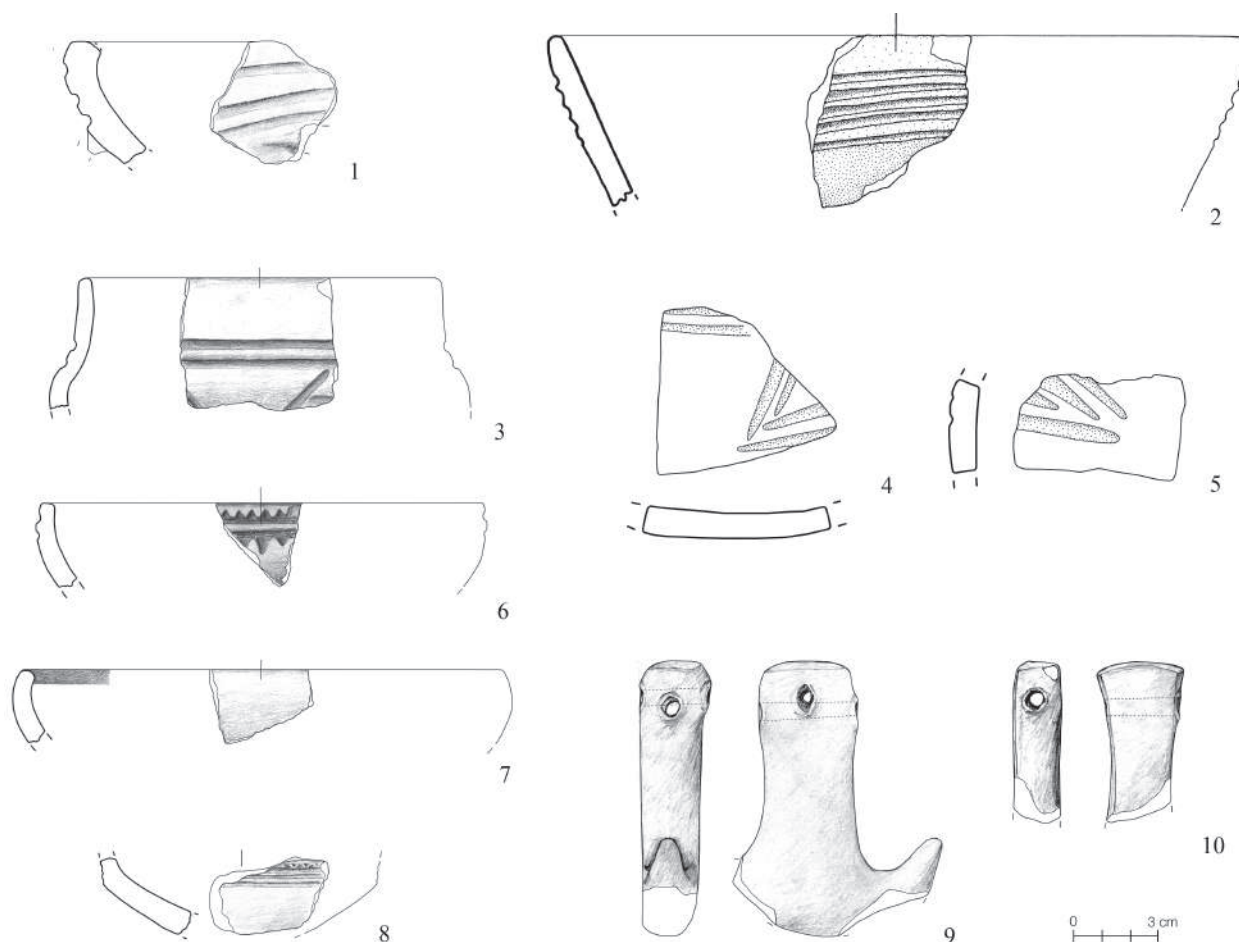


Figure 7. Tas-Silġ, Baħrija pottery and clay anchors. 1-2, 8: bowls with incised and excised decoration (excavations 1963-1970); 3: jar with excised decoration from area O (North side, excavations 2003-2011); 4-5: sherds with excised decoration (South side, excavations 1996-2005 – University of Malta; ns. 2102-2109/3, 2146/6); 6: bowl with excised decoration (North side, excavations 2003-2011); 7: bowl with painted band on the rim (North side, excavations 2003-2011); 9-10: clay anchors from area O (North side, excavations 2003-2011). (3, 9-10 drawing E. Onnis; 4-5 modified from Sagona 2015; 6-7 after Onnis in press).

1973; Alberti 2007), may provide supporting evidence for this hypothesis (Recchia and Cazzella 2011). As for the phase-sequence of the Thapsos settlement, we tend to follow Voza’s hypothesis that there was not a long gap in the occupation of the settlement between circa 1250 and 1050. The reverse hypothesis that the settlement was abandoned around 1250 and then reoccupied some 200 years later (Alberti 2007, p. 373) implies that some of the former rectangular structures of complex C (that appear to be fragile types of buildings) would have remained standing for two centuries until they were reoccupied. In any case we cannot rule out that the Baħrija period in Malta began earlier than 1050 BC but supporting evidence for this is scant.

Recently D. Tanasi (2015, p. 93) pointed out that the late Borġ in-Nadur – Baħrija transition could have taken place ‘much before the early 11th c. BC’. He based this hypothesis on the association in the H2 context at Borġ in-Nadur between Baħrija pottery and a distinct type of

vessel neck (Tanasi 2015, nr. 31062, fig. 162), which he compares to the neck of a Borġ in-Nadur type amphora from Cannatello (Tanasi 2015, fig. 35a). However, this is not a strong argument for retro-dating the beginning of Baħrija before the mid-11th c. BC. The two types of necks are not strictly similar, and besides that, necks of the kind found in H2 are quite common among Baħrija pottery productions. Even assuming that these neck types come into use during the late Borġ in-Nadur, they could have been still in fashion in the Baħrija period as is the case with other pottery types, thus they do not represent a good chronological marker.

Strong chronological evidence for the mature phase of the Baħrija period is provided by the occurrence of Sicilian-type artefacts in primary deposition Baħrija layers in the northern apse of temple IV (apse IVc) at Tas-Silġ North. These are: a serpentine bow fibula with curved pin of Sicilian type (*fibula ad arco serpeggiante*; Figure 8) and various fragments of plumed ware (*ceramica piumata*; Figure 8), possibly belonging to the

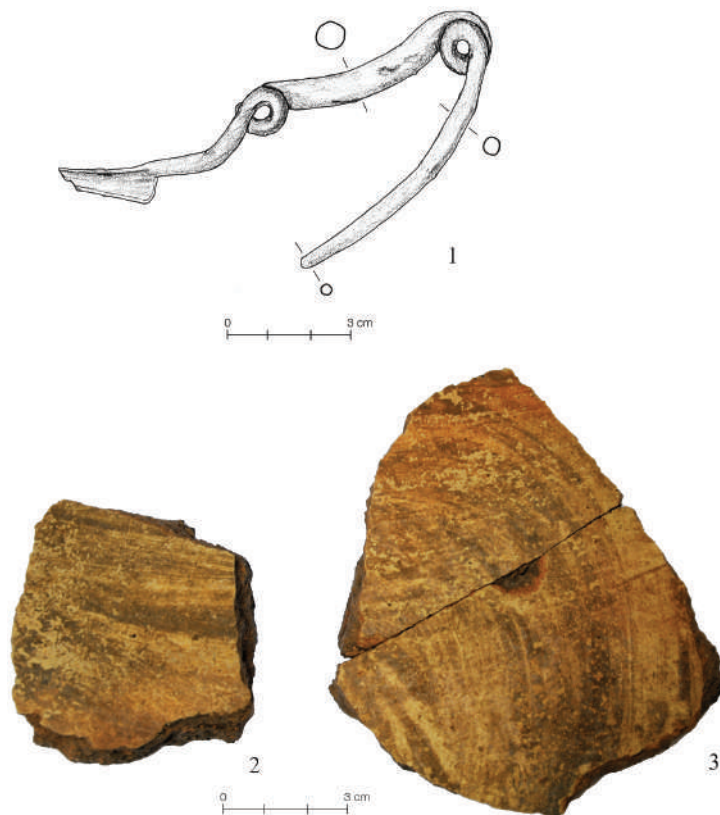


Figure 8. Tas-Silġ, finds from Bahrija layers in apse IVc (north-east side, excavations 2003-2011). 1: serpentine bronze fibula; 2-3: Plumed Ware (1 authors' drawing, 2-3 photos Italian Archaeological Mission).

same jar. In Sicily, both types of artefacts pertain to a phase between the end of the Cassibile period and the beginning of Pantalica Sud, that is between phases II and III of A. M. Bietti Sestieri's chronological proposal (Bietti Sestieri 1979). The overall time span of this phase is 1050 – 750 BC, but the serpentine bow fibulae with curved pin in particular would date between 900 and 750 BC.

Some similarities between distinct pottery productions from Malta and Sicily/southern Italy have been noted that may provide support for the parallelism between the Maltese and Sicilian chronological sequences, although the exact chronology of these productions has yet to be defined. The shards with painted hatched triangles from Malta (Trump 1961, p. 259) may recall Sicilian and southern Italian pottery productions with painted geometric motifs. Painted hatched triangles particularly recur in the early phase of Ausonian II (Bettelli *et al.* 2012), which dates to the 11th – mid-9th c. BC. Moreover, various scholars have pointed out parallels between the excised Bahrija pottery and shards from western Sicily belonging to the so-called 'protoelima' ware (Tusa 1992; 2012, p. 217; Spatafora 1996; Vella *et al.* 2011, fig. 9,7), that would date to the early Iron Age (9th-8th c. BC). Yet, these fragments of 'protoelima' ware are mostly surface finds and their chronology has yet to be confirmed.

The beginning of the Phoenician colonisation in Malta marked the end of the Bahrija period. The most widely accepted date for this turning point is the late 8th c. BC (Amadasi Guzzo 2011).

3.3 The Tas-Silġ sanctuary in the Bahrija period

Being the uppermost layers of the Prehistoric sequence at Tas-Silġ North, the Bahrija layers are likely to have been affected by disturbances and clearance in the subsequent Historic phases of occupation. Yet, undisturbed deposits survived in some areas (Figure 9), particularly in one apse of temple IV (apse IVc), in spaces located just North of temple IV (areas O, P, Q) and in the area located some 40 m West of the main megalithic buildings (areas X and Y). Moreover, the spatial distribution of distinct residual Bahrija pottery found in Historic layers at various areas of the site gives us a hint of the original extent of the occupation during this period. It should be taken into account, however, that the number of residual Bahrija shards is likely to be underestimated, since the most typical Bahrija pottery is only a portion

of the overall pottery production of this period, which also included ceramic productions of Borg in-Nadur tradition.

The analysis of the distribution of residual Prehistoric pottery from the excavations of the 1960's has shown that the typical Bahrija sherds mostly come from areas 2N, 2S, 4 and 6 (fig. 1; Cazzella and Moscoloni 2004-05, fig. 1, tab. 1). Areas 2N and 6 actually encompass the zones where the recent excavations have unearthed Bahrija deposits (areas IVc-O-Q and X-Y respectively), while in area 2S (mostly occupied by temple I) no Bahrija deposits were preserved, due to intense occupations in later periods. As for the southern part of the site, the excavations carried out by the University of Malta between 1996 and 2005 appear to confirm the picture provided by the 1960's excavations (Sagona 2015, p. 32). Trenches B and C (corresponding to area 4 of the 1960's excavations) have yielded some Bahrija shards, while none appear to come from trenches A and D3 (located in area 3 of 1960's excavations), D1 & 2 and D4 (located south-west to area 3 of 1960's excavations). To those, as mentioned above, three more Bahrija shards can be added to the 4 identified by C. Sagona (2015), all coming from area C (one from SU 2146, one from SU 2102-2109 and one from SU 2109). In this perspective, it would seem then that the southernmost part of the site was not occupied during this period.

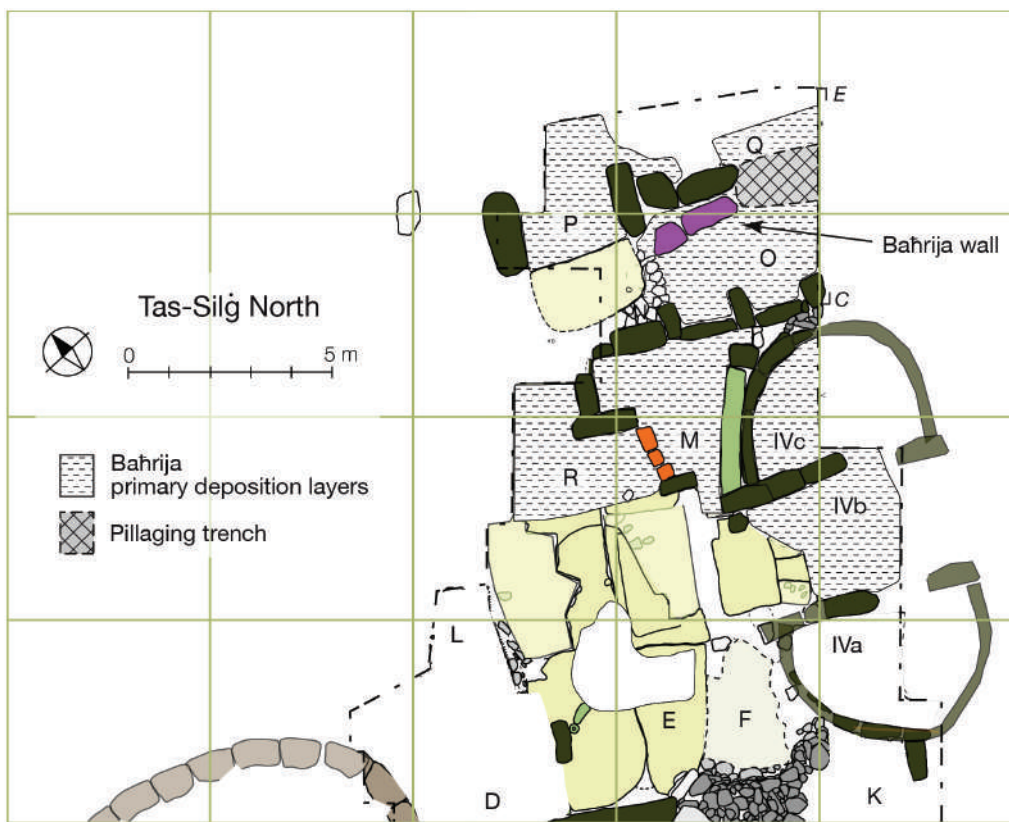


Figure 9. Tas-Silġ, north-east side of the site (excavations 2003-2011). Plan of the prehistoric structures with indication of the extension of primary deposition of Bahrija layers. Lighter shade indicates the suggested reconstruction of some features.

The early Phoenician pottery from the 1960's excavations appears to be mostly distributed in areas 2S, 3 and 4; during the recent field research shards of this type have also been found in area 2N (Semeraro 2004-05, pp. 320-323; 2012, pp. 113-114, 117, Cazzella *et al.* 2016, p. 424). Thus, the areas of distribution of the Bahrija and early Phoenician pottery largely overlap, apart from the different occurrences in areas 6 (only Bahrija) and 3 (only early Phoenician). On the other hand, the area chiefly yielding Phoenician architectural features is that of the megalithic temple I (area 2S), which was partially transformed and integrated into the new architectural scheme of the sanctuary (Ciasca 1976-77; Rossignani 2009).

Evidence of the Bahrija occupation from apse IVc and area O is of particular interest. The stratigraphic sequence at both zones shows an uninterrupted occupation from the late Borg in-Nadur phase. Although only a small portion of apse IVc has been explored (Figure 10), the presence there of a Bahrija deposit indicates that temple IV (or at least some portions of it) was still occupied at the threshold of the 1st millennium BC. It is possibly not by chance that the objects chiefly illustrating close contacts with Sicily, such as the serpentine fibula and the plumed ware, have been found in this spot. The sequence of

Bahrija layers in area O was rather homogeneous as for both the nature of the deposits and type of finds. In particular, it was characterised by the presence of loom weights, spindle whorls and clay anchors (Figures 9-10); which were probably related to weaving processes as well). The original planimetric outline of this space – once not completely enclosed – was deeply modified during the Bahrija period by the building of a massive wall that closed its northern side and turned it into a narrow chamber. This newly-created room was repeatedly used over a certain span of time for the same pattern of activities, which included spinning and weaving. These are likely to have entailed a symbolic meaning, assuming that the sanctuary (or some parts of it) still had a ritual function in this period (Cazzella and Recchia 2017).

One issue that remains to be deeply investigated is that of the possible survival of the production of red-slipped pottery at the time in which the Phoenicians settled Malta. In particular, the problem consists of whether the occurrence of hand-made Phoenician-type red-slipped pottery together with the typical wheel-made Phoenician red-slipped pottery is due to the endurance of a long-lasting local pottery tradition or whether it is just a non-specialised



Figure 10. Tas-Silġ, north-east side of the site (excavations 2003-2011). Primary deposition of Bahrija layers in Apse IVc (photo Italian Archaeological Mission).

Phoenician pottery production, and not really linked to the previous Bronze Age tradition (cfr. Sagona 2015, pp. 34-35). In any case, as the stratigraphic evidence at Tas-Silġ north is indicating, the Bahrija period is likely to have lasted until the arrival of the Phoenicians to the Maltese archipelago in the 8th c. BC, which hence was not deserted. Thus, patterns of interactions between the local communities and foreign groups should be investigated. For instance, the reasons why the Phoenicians turned one of the megalithic temples at Tas-Silġ into the cell of the sanctuary dedicated to Astarte probably went beyond the good state of preservation of the megalithic building and the convenient geopolitical location of the site (Grima and Mallia 2011). Not only was a local community occupying the Tas-Silġ sanctuary when the Phoenicians arrived in Malta, but also the pattern of occupation is likely to have had a strong symbolic character. The Phoenicians might have created a link with this symbolic sphere, putting new meanings into it, as a way to both express their ideological dominion and legitimate their political power in the archipelago (contra Vella 1999).

3.4 Evidence of cross-cultural interactions with the Mediterranean sphere

Apart from the abovementioned finds attesting to the endurance of the relationships between Malta and Sicily and possible links with southern Italy too (Bahrija pottery at Thapsos, plumed ware, similarities with the 'protoelima' ware, painted ware possibly of proto-geometric/ geometric type, serpentine fibula), evidence of interactions with the Mediterranean sphere, particularly the eastern Mediterranean, is lacking, at least until the earliest contacts with the Phoenicians began. Scholars dealing with this subject have expressed different positions. A. Ciasca (1982) favoured the hypothesis that pre-colonial contacts with the Phoenicians scarcely affected Malta, while C. Sagona (2008, pp. 504-512) is inclined to raise the chronology of the earliest Phoenician pre-colonial contacts on the basis of some pieces of evidence from the area of Mdina. The recent excavations at Motya would indicate that imports from the eastern Mediterranean occasionally occur at the site between the 11th and 9th c. BC, while they significantly increase in number in the first half of the 8th c. BC, that is when the Phoenicians possibly settled there (Nigro 2016, pp. 355-357). In any case, a phenomenon of this kind does not necessarily apply to Malta. To date, the excavations at Tas-Silġ have not provided new evidence to assess the engagement of Malta in long-distance exchange networks during the first centuries of the 1st millennium BC. In this framework, however, the occurrence of loom weights and clay anchors in a Bahrija deposit in room O might offer a hint on intangible cross-cultural interactions. Aside from the typology and cross-comparisons of these objects – clay anchors occur in Malta since the Early Bronze Age (Malone *et al.* 2009; Cazzella and Recchia 2015, fig. 9) – the significance of this evidence lies especially in the possible linking between weaving activities and a cult place. This in fact could be related with a wider central Mediterranean phenomenon of textile activities and/or textile tool deposits in sanctuaries that developed particularly in the 1st millennium BC.

Endnote

This paper presents the views held by the two authors. In particular, A. Cazzella has written the following section: The late Borġ in-Nadur phase (mid-13th – mid-11th c. BC). G. Recchia has written the rest: The Bahrija period (mid-11th – 8th c. BC).

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