

The transition between the Late Bronze Age and the Phoenician world in Malta

This article tries to shed some more light on the final chronology of the Late Bronze Age and also about the possible coexistence and mutual cultural influences between the indigenous world and the first Phoenician settlers in Malta.

El presente artículo pretende aportar nueva luz sobre la cronología final del Bronce Final maltés, así como la posible coexistencia e influjo cultural entre el mundo indígena y los primeros colonos fenicios del archipiélago maltés.



Fig. 1. Malta in the Mediterranean.

Introduction

The Maltese Late Bronze Age has been largely unnoticed in archaeological research. This can also be said of the first historical phase of the island, when the first Phoenician colonists arrived on the islands. This great gap in research is explained by the importance of the megalithic remains of the previous periods, on which archaeologists and prehistorians have concentrated all their efforts. This imbalance in research has caused many questions to go unanswered, for example: how long the Late Bronze Age phases have lasted, their chronologies; the coexistence among the inhabitants and the first Phoenicians, as well as the possible local influences on the culture of the first Phoenician settlers.

Tarxien Cemetery

The Late Bronze Age starts with the Tarxien Cemetery phase, around 2500 BC, distinguished by the arrival of a new population coming from nearby Sicily.

Two sites, so far not associated to any settlements, are documented with burials in cinerary urns, in the megalithic complexes of Tarxien and at the Brotchorff Circle, in Gozo (Bonanno, 1993: 231). Pottery statuettes also appear stylistically representing disc-shaped idols. Other sites of this period are Ta' Hamut and Wied Moqbol, excavated by John Evans (1956). Dolmens used for burial purposes are also assigned to this period, such as the Misrah Sinjura, Mosta, Tal-Garda, Hlantun, Safi, Ta' Gherwa, Birg in-Nadur, Il-Brolli, Tal-Bidni and Wied Znumber, and in Gozo, Id-Dura tal-Mara and Qala. The beginning of the use of silos is characteristic of this phase. These became widely used in the next phase (Bernabo Brea, 1976-77: 67-68).

This culture was contemporary to that of Castelluccio, in Sicily, and of "Capo Graziano", in the Eolian Islands, as shown by the co-existence of pottery elements of this culture among those found in the small island of Ognina, near Siracuse (Bernabo Brea, 1966), which was thought to be a Maltese commercial trading centre on the eastern Sicilian coast (Idem, 1976-77: 83 and 99).

Some pollen samples, collected from a silo in Luqa, show that the vegetation of this phase is similar to that of

the present day: some pines, herbs and Mediterranean thicket (Trump, 1976: 607).

Borg in-Nadur

The second phase of the Maltese Bronze period is the so called Borg in-Nadur. In this phase a new contribution by immigrants is equally observed (probably of Sicilian origin). They settled in two places on the island, Mdina and Borg in-Nadur.

According to Trump (1961: 259-260) the island was completely deserted when this new group arrived, or, if not, the settlers of the Tarxien Cemetery culture were quickly dominated by their successors who enslaved them. On the other hand, Evans (1971:225) suggests the survival of a previous group when these new emigrants arrived, although not attributing them much cultural influence.

This period is distinguished by insecurity and concern about fortifying the settlements, as the position of all these sites shows, without exception, both in high sites and in those of easy defense (Mallia, 1968). Ramparts were built when the place did not provide any natural protection. This insecurity was probably due to an outside threat, and Evans (1971: 200) suggests the presence of pirates, although it could also have been due to constant dispute among the inhabitants for the control of the crop areas and the use of drinking water springs.

The presence of bottle-shaped depressions are also typical of this phase. They were excavated in the rock, and were used to store grain, like silos, or as cisterns. These silos are generally found in settlement sites of this phase.

An especially significant element is the absence of tombs for this period, as well as temples or places of worship. We only know the fortified inhabited places. As it has been just mentioned, the silos, so representative of this phase, were used for storage purposes, and no example has been found of any burial in them.

The characteristic pottery of this phase is handmade, with a blackish inner core, showing the poor quality of the baking process. The surface is covered with a faint decoration of red glaze (Evans, 1971: 225) over very irregular hand-made shapes.

The type site is situated on a small hill, at the SE of the island. Borg in-Nadur dominates St. George's Bay and the western area of the great Marsaxlokk harbour, the most important of the island after the Valletta port. This enclave is distinguished by the defensive rampart which hinders the only part of the area not naturally protected, in the same way as the re-use of some megalithic structures of a temple of the Tarxien phase. Other sites are those of Tas-Silg, Wardija ta' S. Gorg, in Siggiewi; Il-Qortin and the Qala hill, next to Saint Paul's Bay; il-Qlejgha, in Bahrija; Ras il-Gebel, also known as Fawwara, next to Ghajn Tuffieha; Il-Qolla, next to Burmarrad; Mdina and In-Nuffara, in Gozo.

A problem exists when one tries to establish a date for such a long-lasting phase as this. Evans subdivided it in three (1971: 226-227).



Fig. 2. Late Bronze Age settlements. 1. Borg in-Nadur. 2. Tas-Silg. 3. Il Qortin. 4. Qala. 5. Il-Qlejgha, in Bahrija. 6. Ras il-Gebel. 7. Il-Qolla. 8. Mdina. 9. In-Nuffara, Gozo. 10. Wardija Ta S. Gorg.

The only clear element of real dating is the presence of two pieces of Mycenaean pottery. The first one was found in the Borg in-Nadur excavations (Murray, 1929: 8 and pl. XX:1), unfortunately out of context and classified as LH III b (Taylour Lord, 1958: 80). The second piece, equally out of context, has been found in the excavations of the Italian Mission in Tas Silg (Missione, 1965: 50).

Another dating element is the presence of pottery of the Borg in-Nadur culture in Malta, but no other elements exist to establish the survival of this culture, beyond that of co-existence, in an advanced period of this phase, with the Bahrija culture, established from the Il-Qlejgha excavations.

Bahrija

This new phase, contemporary of Borg in-Nadur III, was formed by a small intrusive group, which settled in a headland remote from Marsaxlokk and lacked easy access to the sea nearby.

The peculiar pottery to this phase is of dark grey or black fabric, covered with a shiny black slip. It shows a more elaborate and complex decoration to that of Borg in-Nadur, with zig-zags, triangles and meanders, blended one into the other.

Elements of this culture can be found not only at the type site at Bahrija, but in others of the contemporary

phase, as at Borg in-Nadur, Tas-Silg and Ghar Dalam. This shows the co-existence between both cultures.

The analysis of the pottery's decoration of this new phase allows the contact elements to be distinguished with the Late Bronze Age cultures of Italy, at Campania and Calabria (Trump, 1961: 261). This presents a dating of the ninth century BC for the Bahrija phase as well as for phase III of Borg in-Nadur.

Nevertheless, Bernabò Brea suggests a dating for this Bahrija phase found in the Thapsos necropolis, together with the stylistic parallels with the Ausonio culture II of Lipari, among others. Therefore, he establishes a much older dating for this period, without being able to propose any argument to put back its chronology to the ninth or eighth century BC.

Dating of the End of the Late Bronze Age and Possible Co-existence between the Indigeneous and Early Phoenician Element

A problem exists when looking for a reference to place the end of the Late Bronze Age on the island. Traditionally, this period has coincided with the arrival of the first Phoenicians. The local population rapidly saw their customs and traditions absorbed by the arrival of a new much more developed culture, which caused theirs to quickly disappear.

Baldacchino (1939: 12) mentions the existence of a period of co-existence, although he does not provide data on which to base this opinion. In the same year, Ward Perkins presented the first evidence for co-existence when he carried out the excavation of a silo in the Mtarfa Hill, near Rabat. In this silo pottery belonging to the local Late Bronze Age were found, together with a "Punic" bilicnic lamp. The impression made on reading the news of the find (1) is that we are dealing with an indigeneous burial, explained by the survival of the local traditional pottery, but which has assimilated the Phoenician ritual. This would explain the use of the bilicnic lamp for burial purposes.

There has been no discovery up until now in the two phases of Late Bronze Age of burial taking place. There is no archaeological evidence that a silo was used for burial. Nevertheless, the fact that the silo was partially emptied (despite the fact that the author emphasized how homogeneous and contemporary the base substrato was) should put us on guard over the truth of the find. Endless examples exist of silos of the Borg in-Nadur phase being reused as tombs in the first Phoenician phase, as the one found in Mtarfa on the 27th of November 1923 (MAR, 1923-24: 3), or the Marsa tomb (MAR, 1917-18: 12) in which an artificial chamber appears with Bronze Age pottery and a stone used for crushing olives. In the higher levels Punic pieces are documented.

The remains found in Iddura, Qallilija, near Rabat, would also support the idea of a possible co-existence, on the same site, of materials of the Final Bronze Age and of

the early Phoenician phase. Two jars appear "of early Punic type" (Zammit, 1913: 3-4) in the upper level.

Another example, repeatedly quoted by Bonanno (1988: 420; 1991: 213; 1993: 238) is the one referred to as an ossuary found in Victoria, Gozo, in August 1923. It is a burial site with peculiar characteristics and which we have quoted entirely because of its interest:

"Of the Phoenician period we have, practically, nothing but the rock-cut tombs and these are only met with accidentally when fields are worked deeply or when, in the course of building operations, the rock surface is laid bare.

An early burial site enclosed by large boulders was accidentally discovered on the south side of Strada Corsa, at Victoria Gozo, in the course of widening the road near Villa Rundle in August 1923. Under about 1 metre of the field surface a circle of boulders, with a diameter of about 9 m. was found; the boulders, not in any way squared, measuring about 1 m. in diameter. In the middle of the circle, half covered by a large stone slab was a heap of human bones mixed with fragments of rough clay vessels. The pottery, hopelessly broke, was originally of the usual type of funerary ware of about the 5th century BC., viz: plates, water jugs and ointment vessels". (MAR, 1923-24: 2-3).

We observe in these cases, that it is not a question of co-existence but of stratum superposition indicative of the presence of two separate chronological periods.. The fact that no intermediate level is documented permits us to carry out a great number of hypothesis about the relation between the indigeneous and the colonial newcomers. In a recent work, Ciasca (1995: 706) admitted how difficult it was to relate the local Bronze Age pottery with the Phoenician one in the same archaeological context, therefore pointing out how difficult it was to identify a period of coexistence (2).

It is equally interesting to emphasize the use, not only by Zammit, of the term Punic in a loose sense, concerning the Carthaginian world, as it is understood today, but meaning also Phoenician, (understood in its wider sense only as Semitic). Only in this way can the works carried out over this period be understood without confusion.

Trump (1961: 262) also argues for a superposition between the first moments of the Final Bronze Age and a successive one he calls phase III A, basing himself on Ward Perkins' work about the Mtarfa silo, the same as Evans (1971: 227) does later.

An important step in solving this problem was the excavations of the Italian Mission at Tas Silg, at the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies, where strata were located with materials of both periods, the Borg in-Nadur phase and early Phoenician. The complex stratigraphy of the site, where strata were crowded together from the Eneolithic phase to the Arabs, in a shallow deposit that only reached half a meter (with the unavoidable removal of strata which this continuous superposition implied), made it practically impossible to keep the strata intact. It is also important to remember that, at the end of the Temple Period (2500 BC) this site was abandoned during the Tarxien

Cemetery phase (2500-1500 BC; Stoddart et al. 1993: 9), and reused in an advanced moment of the Borg in-Nadur phase. The temple structure was then fit for completely different purposes to those which were characteristic of it, and for which it was initially intended. The megaliths used for its building served human settlement defensive purposes, from which the island's main port in ancient times, the strategic Marsaxlokk Bay was controlled. So, there is no continuity in the use of the temple, nor assimilation between the ritual of the mother goddess, typical of the indigenous world and the worship on the part of the Phoenicians of the goddess Astarte (3).

The Phoenicians made use of the megalithic elements of this privileged topographical location for a different purpose other than that which was characteristic of the previous phase - that of a walled bulwark - restoring the ritual function which, it is important to emphasize, had stopped being carried out in this place for at least a thousand years. This makes us believe that there is no sense in referring to the Tas Silg temple as a meeting point of two religions, two cultures, under the sanctuary common roof.

The re-use of a female statue of the Tarxien phase, in this initial period of the Phoenician use of the shrine, shows the uncertainty of the Semitic construction at first which it is also noted in the lack of reforms of the architectural structure. The Phoenicians appeared, in the first phase which we would date to the seventh century BC, as we will argue later, to have been more interested in securing a place of worship than in carrying out a great work to honour the goddess Astarte. This concern tried to justify, in accordance with the Eastern customs, the control of the island by the newcomers. This aim was achieved when a place of worship to the goddess was founded and so the new lands became an extension of the native land (Van Berchem, 1967: 76).

In regarding to the phase that concerns us, i.e. the step from the Final Bronze Age to the Phoenician period, the team responsible for the excavation of the site concluded that a contemporary-quality existed between the last phase of Borg in-Nadur/Bahrija and the first Phoenician presence (4), an idea which is emphasized subsequently: "La concidenza di questa associazione di ceramica del Bronzo e ceramica fenicia è così costante a Tas Silg che difficilmente potrebbe essere ritenuta occasionale" (Ciasca, 1971: 66).

This statement has been subsequently taken up in publications by various authors who have followed the conclusions of the Italian team (Ciasca, 1982: 139; Bonanno, 1991: 213; Gouder, 1991: 4; Aubet, 1994: 206).

Recently, however, Brusasco (1993) did a critical revision of the provisional conclusions on the Tas Silg excavations. In this work he called into question the existence of a contemporary level of occupation between the Final Bronze phases and the initial Phoenician phase. This criticism was based on how confusing the archaeological strata were, presenting a depth of about fifty centimeters for all the occupation phases, as well as the existence of constant removal of

material for the subsequent constructions, which damaged the integrity of the stratigraphy. In short, Brusasco defended the existence of a superposition of levels, but denied the presence of a co-existence period. This hypothesis was also supported by the absence of Phoenician remains in other classical sites of the Borg in-Nadur and Bahrija phases.

The last way to explain the contemporaneity of both periods would be to find traces of survival of indigenous features among the pottery household furnishings of the first Phoenician phase, as Culican had suggested for the "vases chardon" (1970: 72) or for the hand-made cooking pots in red slip (1982: 73).

There cannot be any doubt today about the Phoenician origin of the "vases chardon", because this shape is one of those relating to the Phoenician archaic household furnishings in the central Mediterranean, such as in Carthage (Harden, 1927: 299; Delattre, 1891: 66; 1896: 32 and f.), in Mozia (Tusa et al, 1972 and 1978), in Sardinia (Pesce, 1968: 343; Del Vais, 1994), on the Algerian coast (Vuillemot, 1965), and in the western Mediterranean.

With regards to the cooking pots, the fact that these vases with rough appearance were largely hand-made has created confusion among scholars (Culican, 1982: 73), especially because these were more numerous in the archaic Phoenician strata. So much that the first finds were interpreted to be the presence of relations with the neighbouring indigenous world or even the establishing of an initial occupation period of the local Final Bronze Age where the Phoenician settlement was established. The same happened with the Toscanos material (Schubart, Niemeyer and Pellicer, 1969: 128 and f.), and also with the "Laurita" necropolis in Almuñecar (Pellicer, 1962: 61), and with Trayamar (Schubart and Niemeyer, 1976: 91 and f.). It was only that Schubart raised a set of questions when he failed to note these pottery types among the local Andalusian Bronze Age material. On the basis of excavations at Morro de Mezquitiella he argued the case for a Phoenician origin for these cooking pots (Schubart, 1985: 162-163). To these Andalusian materials have to be added also the examples of Sa Caleta (5) and of Puig des Molins (Ramón, 1982: 27; Gómez Bellard et alii, 1990: fig.7 n° 22 y fig. 17 n° 40) for Ibiza, or Castillo de Doña Blanca (Ruiz Mata and Pérez, 1995: 59), in Cádiz, to mention some Spanish examples.

With regards to the Maltese materials, some scholars have put forward arguments to explain the survival of the indigenous substratum in the shape's resemblance to some of the Final Bronze Age repertoire (Ciasca, 1982: 139; Frendo, 1995: 117). This is seen as well in the application of red slip, similar to the decoration on the Borg in-Nadur and Bahrija pottery and the absence of a potter's wheel for its manufacture. Nevertheless, the only shape that can show a certain similarity to the one we are dealing with is shape I of the pottery of the Tarxien Cemetery phase (Evans, 1971: fig. 39 and pl. 52-6 to 14), a period which, as mentioned, ends in 1500 BC and so very remote chronologically so as to establish, in our opinion, no parallel.

The Dating of the First Phoenician Phase

Another element for discussion is to establish the chronology of the earliest presence of the Phoenician settlers in the island. Traditionally, this moment was dated to around mid-eighth century BC, according to the highest chronology offered by Dunbabin (6), and based on a protocorinthian kotyle discovered with other Phoenician material, in a rock-cut tomb at Ghajn Qajjet, next to Mdina-Rabat (Baldacchino, 1953).

The high chronology offered by this kotyle was rapidly accepted as the date for all the household furnishing of the tomb, without taking into account that the rest of the material was dated to the seventh century. Yet, this date corresponded easily with the established chronologies of nearby sites like Carthage and Mozia, so no other reference was looked for to certify the early presence of Phoenician navigators in the route towards the West. So, Trump (1972: 261) dated the first presence as of the eighth or seventh century BC and therefore the end of the Final Bronze period IIB/IIC. Equally, Culican (1970: 7) as well as Bisi (1970: 166) and Ciasca (1971: 64) followed this early dating taking the Ghajn Qajjet protocorinthian piece as a reference datum.

However Culican rectified the date of the first Phoenician presence in the island, lowering it to 675 BC (1982: 148). Ciasca will follow this new date, after taking into account the chronological revision carried out by the former on the exhibited materials at the Museum of Roman Antiquities in Rabat. Only later, (Ciasca, 1995: 600) the author takes this date of the seventh century BC as valid, although she continues to date the first Phoenician presence on the

island as the eighth century BC, based on the stylistic comparisons of local pottery with Near East examples and other from Carthage and Sulcis.

Gouder, former director of the Maltese Museum Department, who followed the first date to point out the most ancient chronology of the island (1979: 180), still dates the piece, and so dating the first moments of Phoenician presence on the island, as the end of the eighth century BC (1991: 6 and 12).

Another Greek piece of great interest, for its association in a tomb to other Phoenician materials, is a protocorinthian kotyle found in Is-Sandar, on the Mtarfa Hill, next to Rabat. It was dated by Bisi (1970: 164) to the last quarter of the seventh century BC, for its relation to other examples known from Mozia and Almuñecar. Later, Culican (1982: 76-77) did a compilation of all the material present in the tomb, and identified the material associated to the Greek piece, but the author did not carry out any archaeological assessment (f. 49 and pl. 2a). Only later, was a revision made to raise the chronology, dating the piece to around the beginning of the seventh century BC (d'Agostino, 1977: 49). Johannowsky and Gras provided a dating to the first half of the seventh century BC (Bonanno, 1988: 419. note 2). With the data supplied by both dates we will have a reference to the first Phoenician presence on the island.

Conclusions

With the data set out earlier, we think that it is necessary to do a profound revision of the assumptions about the last phase of the Maltese Bronze Age and for the first Phoenician presence on the island.

In the first place, we think that no element exists that shows the survival of the Borg in-Nadur and Bahrija phases beyond the ninth century BC, in accordance with parallels found in southern Italy.

Therefore, no data exists that can establish the continuity of the Final Bronze Age throughout the eighth century BC, just as we do not find, at least in the present stage of research, elements that can tell us anything about the Phoenician human settlement on the island beyond the first half of the seventh century BC, from the dating of the protocorinthian kotyle found in Is-Sandar, in the Mtarfa Hill, next to Mdina-Rabat.

The evidence shown is insufficient to prove a co-existence between the Late Bronze Age and the first eastern settlers. A thorough revision of the data offered from the Mtarfa silo, or in the Tas Silg excavations, does not let us to draw any conclusions in favour of the contemporaneity of both cultures (Vidal González, 1996: 100-101).

The Phoenicians did not settle on the island to trade with the local population, which, if there was any, was not in a position to offer any product of interest, because the island lacked all types of raw materials, apart from water and scant crops that could be grown in such an unfavourable soil.

The reasons for the Phoenician human settlement have



Fig. 3. Main Phoenician and Punic sites. 1. Tas-Silg. 2. Mdina-Rabat. 3. Mtarfa. 4. Ghajn Qajjet. 5. Pawla. 6. Tal Liedna. 7. Ras ir-Raheb. 8. Saint Pawl Milqi. 9. Zurrieq. 10. Ras il-Wardija. 11. Victoria.

to be found, then, outside commercial interests. Between the end of the eighth century and the beginning of the seventh century BC, the Greek colonists started a methodical control of the SE Sicilian coast, which meant an additional obstacle for Phoenician navigation in the Central Mediterranean. They had used the Syracuse coast throughout the eighth century the Syracuse coast to reach port (7), after the voyage across the Adriatic Sea from Crete. It would be at this moment that Malta, which until then was far removed from the navigation routes, as the limited presence of Mycenaean materials shows, turns into a privileged strategic position, as the first secure port, in Diodorus' words, for the Phoenician navigators.

We believe that the presence of the first Phoenicians in Malta must be interpreted in this sense as the occupation of an abandoned island, shown by the quick interest in setting up a place of worship even if this meant re-using some former ruins, making the occupation legitimate, and establishing the habitat area in a privileged position, for its altitude, dominating the island and the scarce resources of the island's drinking water, in the hill of present day Mdina-Rabat (Vidal González and Groenewoud, in press).

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Notes

- (1) We reproduce, for your interest, Ward Perkins's account (MAR, 1938-39: 12). "The first, ..., was a silo form, about 14 feet deep with a narrow bottle-neck mouth. The cap-stone had been displaced and the tomb was found to be full of red earth, liberally mixed with charcoal, and stones. It had evidently been rifled in antiquity, but in the lowest levels were found a great quantity of broken pottery and a number of animal bones. The pottery formed a homogeneous group, and it will ultimately be possible to reconstruct a number of vessels. These are of characteristic bronze Age fabric and include the remains of two large cinerary urns with handles and a number of smaller vessels decorated with white incrustation. The most important find from the lowest levels of the deposit was a lamp of characteristically Punic form which in the absence of any other trace of intrusive material must undoubtedly belong to the original tomb furniture".
- (2) "et ce, même si, pour l'heure, il n'y a pas de contextes archéologiques sûrs, "fermés" avec de la céramique maltaise du Bronze et de la céramique phénicienne".
- (3) Excavations have been resumed in the southern area of Tas Silg under the directorship of the Department of Prehistory and Archaeology, University of Malta. It is hoped that this research will throw new light on the intricate details about the site's history.
- (4) As for example in stratum 4 of area 2 north (Ciasca, Missione, 1965: 42-43).
- (5) In this Phoenician settlement handmade pottery has been found and at present is exhibited at the Ibiza Archaeological Museum.
- (6) "The heavy fabric, as well as the profile, suggest that this belongs to the eighth century. The decoration is common in sub-geometric of the seventh century, at Corinth and elsewhere, but is not unknown on simple vases of certain eighth-century date.
Some time in the second half of the eighth century is the most likely date for this cup, but the early seventh century cannot be excluded, particularly if, as is possible, it is not a corinthian vase, but the product of some other Greek fabric" (Dunbabin, 1953: 40).
- (7) Pieces of red slip plates found in Messina (Bacci, 1978), Phoenician pottery pieces of the Ortigia island, in Syracuse (Pelagatti: 1978: 130), both in contexts of the eighth- seventh centuries BC, a piece of red slip found in a well of the Agora quarter of Megara Hyblea, dated as of mid-seventh century BC by Villard (quoted in Gras, 1985: 303. note 32), as well as the existence of a set of red slip ped Phoenician pottery coming from old excavations carried out in the Ortigia island and the other points (Niemeyer, 1990: 488-489).

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