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# The Maltese Islands and the Sea in Antiquity

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*The events of history often lead to the islands...*

F. Braudel

THE STRETCHES OF SEA EXTANT BETWEEN ISLANDS AND mainland may be observed as having primary-dual functionalities: that of 'isolating' islands and that of providing connectivity with land masses that lay beyond the islands' shores. On smaller islands especially, access to the sea provided a gateway from which people, goods and ideas could flow. This chapter explores how, via their surrounding seas, events of history often led to the islands of Malta and Gozo. The timeframe covered consists of over one thousand years (circa 700 BC to circa 400 AD); a fluid period that saw the island move in and out of the political, military and economic orbits of various powers that dominated the Mediterranean during these centuries.

Another notion of duality can be observed in the interaction that plays out between those coming from the outside and those inhabiting the islands. It would be mistaken to analyze Maltese history solely in the context of great powers that touched upon and 'colonized' the islands. This historical narrative will also cover important aspects such as how the islands were perceived from those approaching from out at sea: were the islands a hazard, a haven or possibly both at one and the same time? It is also essential to look at how the sea was perceived by the islanders: did the sea bring welcome commercial activity to the islands shores; did it carry

pirate vessels and enemy ships? As important as these questions are, this narrative would be incomplete without reference to how the sea helped shape and mould the way in which the people living on Malta and Gozo chose (or were forced) to live. By this I refer to choices such as where to live, what to grow and how to adapt to and take advantage of evolving maritime networks. It is also essential to understand how the sea shaped the identity of the islands' inhabitants. Although the focus shall be on the Maltese archipelago, it is unwise and indeed impossible to separate its history from that of the broader context of the Mediterranean. Given the extended timeframe covered, it will also be possible to explore these and other notions, as well as their effects in the *longue durée* of Maltese and Mediterranean history.

For the exploration of such notions, this chapter draws upon both archaeological and, when available, historical evidence. Whereas the former is abundant the latter is at best fragmentary but important nonetheless. For the sake of narrative, the chapter is divided into two 'periods': 1. Phoenician-Punic; 2. Roman. Although this division is based on definite chronological events, the cultural and economic changes that took place were by no means clear-cut. As shall be seen below changes were slow and gradual.

### **Phoenician-Punic**

When the Phoenicians sailed westwards from their homeland in present-day Lebanon they set up a series of colonies on islands along the Mediterranean coastline and even along the coast of the Atlantic. Aubet refers to two phases of Phoenician expansion in the west: the 'pre-colonial stage' (12<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC) and the 'colonial stage proper' (8<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC).<sup>1</sup> A recent reappraisal of Phoenician and Punic material evidence from Malta pushes back the Phoenician colonization of the islands to circa 1000 BC.<sup>2</sup> However, it is important to highlight that the first archaeological evidence for Phoenician presence in Malta dates to the late 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>3</sup> It could well be that prior to the early 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, Phoenician contact and interaction with the Maltese Islands has, to date, remained invisible in the archaeology of Late Bronze Age Malta, a status that is paralleled by a silence in literary sources.<sup>4</sup> There are plausible explanations for this suggestion. Firstly, the type of materials (such as cloth) traded locally during this period does not survive in

the archaeological record. Alternatively, Phoenician seafarers sailing in the central Mediterranean simply made use of the islands' harbours as havens with little or negligible contact between them and contemporary local inhabitants. The absence of any serious rivals probably did not necessitate the permanent colonization of the Maltese Islands until the Greeks made inroads in the central Mediterranean during the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. This suggested cause and effect is substantiated by the presence of evidence for permanent Phoenician settlement in Malta of which the most telling are burial sites situated around present-day Mdina-Rabat.

At this stage, it is important to discuss why Malta and Gozo would have proved attractive and useful to Phoenician seafarers. It is an established fact that after setting off from their bases in the eastern Mediterranean, Phoenician ships made their way west, as far afield as the Atlantic mainly in search of metals.<sup>5</sup> In order to facilitate this cross-Mediterranean movement of ships and goods, Phoenician seafarers used a network of harbours and anchorages that permitted them to trade and just as importantly to seek shelter so as to wait for optimal sailing conditions. It is in the context of this maritime network that Phoenician Malta is best understood. Despite a lack of raw materials, the geography and topography of the islands combined to offer the Phoenicians safe shelter in the central Mediterranean.

The geographical location of the Maltese Islands sees them included in recent nautical charts of both the western and eastern Mediterranean.<sup>6</sup> An early seventeenth century chart of the eastern Mediterranean attributed to Joan Oliva includes Malta on its western extremities. Of major interest is that of all the ports and harbours in Malta and Gozo, only one is listed by name, *Marzasiroccho*, present-day **Marsaxlokk**. In the context of an east-west crossing of the Mediterranean, the significance of the omissions of other Maltese harbours, but more importantly, the sole inclusion of Marsaxlokk cannot be underestimated. It is listed not because it is the island's sole or indeed safest harbour but rather because it is the first that one would come across when approaching from the eastern Mediterranean.

It is therefore no coincidence that some of the earliest and most important evidence for Phoenician activity (apart from tombs) in Malta is situated in Marsaxlokk. The sanctuary of Tas-Silġ is situated on a low hill overlooking the entire harbour of Marsaxlokk. Evidence from this site, including pottery sherds, a 'fat lady' statue and structural remains point to the presence of a sacred building datable to circa 3000-2500

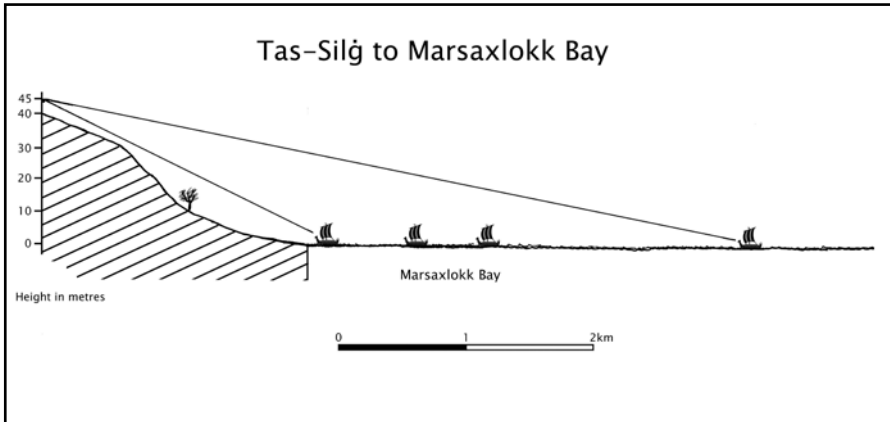


Figure 1. Lines of sight from Marsaxlokk Bay to/from the site at Tas-Silġ

BC.<sup>7</sup> What is important to the present discussion is the reutilization of this strategic site that is not linked to any known urban development but rather looks seaward, connected to those ever-important sea routes. It is not known whether the temple had a fire which would have proved essential to approaching seafarers both at night (the flames) and by day (the smoke). Those approaching the islands on their ships from the east would have seen the white cliffs of Delimara as their first landfall with the temple of Tas-Silġ becoming more visible as the vessel gradually approached Marsaxlokk (**Fig. 1**).

In ancient seafaring the synergy between temple and landfall went far beyond the practical notion of waypoint identification. Seafarers used these temples so as to 'link them to their sacred benefactors'.<sup>8</sup> It was at such temples that ancient mariners would offer prayers to their gods in supplication for a safe journey as well as in thanksgiving for a safe deliverance at the end of a crossing. For later centuries in the period under discussion, such a practice may be deduced from the presence of numerous ceramic objects with the dedication 'to Astarte' inscribed on them. These may be considered as a form of offering left by seafarers making their way up to the temple from the harbour below.

The notion of maritime sanctuaries is certainly not exclusive to Malta as the Phoenicians built temples in other areas of navigational importance including both harbours and promontories. In Byblos for example, the stairs leading to the temple are made from 'mock' anchors which were never used at sea but were carved specifically for this sacred shrine.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, maritime sanctuaries were not exclusively a Phoenician phenomenon. The ancient Greeks also built numerous



Figure 2. The promontory of Ras il-Wardija as seen from out at sea

temples with direct maritime links: ‘on the right, as one sails towards the city,<sup>10</sup> is the Poseidon, a promontory with which Mount Mykale forms the seven stade strait; and it has a temple of Poseidon.’<sup>11</sup>

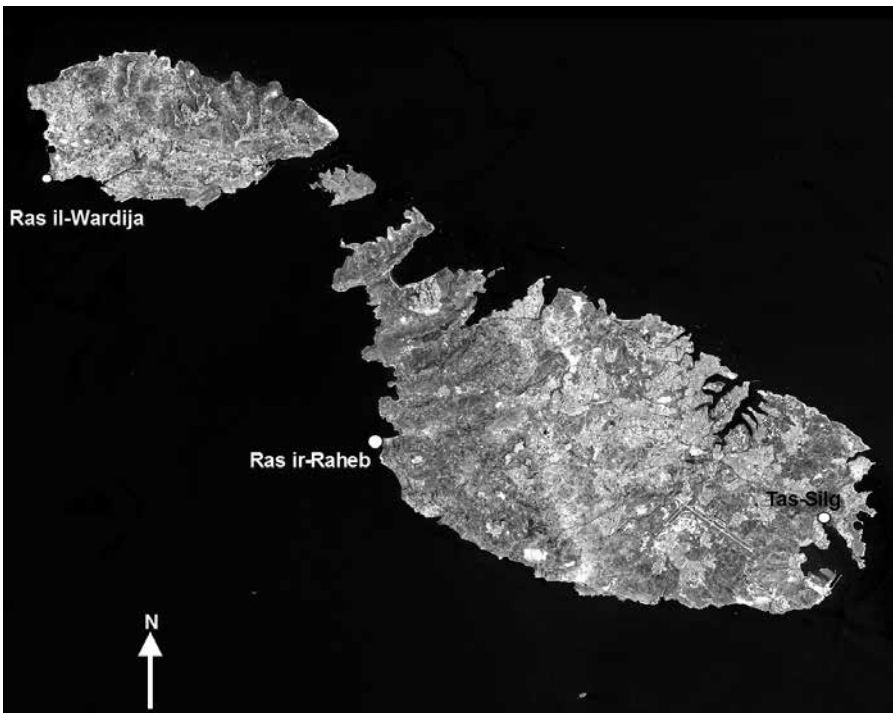
Natural features such as headlands, offshore islands and straits posed dangers to ancient seafarers for a variety of reasons. Around headlands, currents, winds and waves combine to create localized treacherous conditions. Fear of such localized conditions were very much present in the psyche of the ancients as is epitomized by the monsters Scylla and Charybdis that were believed to dwell on either side of a narrow strait navigated by Odysseus. It is therefore unsurprising that such natural features of navigational importance or hazards were also marked with sanctuaries.<sup>12</sup> In the case of headlands, their significance to mariners could be dual. As highlighted above, they could be dangerous but on the other hand their height above sea level made them indispensable landmarks for navigators. It is the headland not the sanctuary built on it that would be first observed. Prayers, dedications and thanksgiving would probably have been made when the vessel was closer and the temple visible.<sup>13</sup>

Two headlands on the Maltese Islands are known to have archaeological remains believed to be those of temples: Ras il-Wardija and Ras ir-Raheb. The first is situated on the westernmost tip of Gozo on a cliff that is over 144 metres high.<sup>14</sup> Vessels approaching Gozo from the west would have made landfall on the high cliffs extant on this side of the island (**Fig. 2**). The headland itself would have provided a waypoint that would prove essential for vessels wanting to stop at the nearby harbour of Xlendi as well as for the continuation of a journey that would skirt the south of the island. For Ras ir-Raheb (48 metres above

sea level), a recent interpretation of some objects recovered from the site in the 1960s together with a novel approach to Strabo's *Geography* points to a sanctuary dedicated to Herakles-Melkart.<sup>15</sup> The Phoenicians considered this god as 'a guardian of voyagers' and many promontories were dedicated to him.<sup>16</sup> What is of relevance here is that natural features of navigational importance on three different approaches to the Maltese Islands were marked by sacred structures (**Fig. 3**).

Once arrived safely at Malta, the master could guide his vessel into one of the many harbours and anchorages in both Malta and Gozo. In the case of early Phoenician vessels sailing across the Mediterranean, the reasons for stopping could be simply to seek shelter from adverse weather conditions or to wait for an ideal wind that would help them on their way. There is however a third reason and that is for trade. It is not certain whether production on Malta in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC went beyond agricultural self-sufficiency. A recent theory propounds the idea that the Phoenicians actually dyed cloth on the islands and that an extant textile industry was one of the main factors that attracted the Phoenicians to Malta.<sup>17</sup> Although interesting, there is a lack of evidence

Figure 3. Satellite image of the Maltese Islands showing location of three maritime sanctuaries



for dyeing which would be present in the form of the waste generated by this activity, mainly discarded murex shells.

A form of activity that may have taken place would have been the exchange of goods between different Phoenician merchants present on vessels anchored in Maltese harbours. Goods originating from various parts of the Mediterranean could be exchanged so as to be transhipped to markets elsewhere. Although one may use the absence of archaeological evidence against this idea, this type of activity would, by its very nature, be invisible in the archaeological record. The key answer to this question may lie in the silted harbours of Malta and Gozo, as well as in the thick mud deposits that are present below the seabed.

A brief passage by Diodorus Siculus does shed important light on the role of the islands as well as on the types of economic activity that took place. The entire passage reads as follows:

*For to the south of Sicily three islands lie out in the sea, and each of them possesses a city and harbours which can offer safety to ships in rough weather. The first one is called Melite, which lies about 800 stadia from Syracuse and possesses many harbours which offer exceptional advantages, and its inhabitants are blessed in their possessions; for it has artisans skilled in every manner of craft, the most important being those who weave linen, which is remarkably sheer and soft. The dwellings on the islands are worthy of note, being ambitiously constructed with cornices and finished in stucco with unusual workmanship. The island is a colony planted by the Phoenicians, who, as they extended their trade to the western ocean, found it a place of safe retreat, since it is well supplied with harbours and lay out in the open sea; and this is the reason why the inhabitants of this island, since they received assistance in many aspects through the sea merchants, shot up quickly in their manner of living and increased renown. After this island there is a second one which bears the name of Gaulos, lying out in the open sea and adorned with well situated harbours, a Phoenician colony.<sup>18</sup>*

This passage was written in the mid-first century BC and it seems to be a brief and condensed history of the Phoenician and Punic phases of the islands' history. It clearly substantiates the aforementioned proposals as to harbours and location being what originally attracted the Phoenicians to the islands. Contact with the Phoenicians also led to the development of weaving, possibly of fibres and thread brought by merchants specifically to be worked in Malta and Gozo. Some form of industrial activity related

to textiles was probably the basis upon which rural farmsteads were set up. One such farmstead is that at San Pawl Milqi, an area with evidence for occupation and use datable to as far back as 4000 BC. An agricultural complex, probably linked to the processing of flax,<sup>19</sup> at least in part, was constructed some time during the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC or possibly earlier.<sup>20</sup>

The change in land occupation and utilization coincided with a more permanent Phoenician/Punic colonization of the islands. Prior to this, the islands' Bronze Age inhabitants chose to live on high ground and fortified areas such as Il-Qolla near Burmarrad and Il-Qarraba overlooking Ghajn Tuffieħa Bay.<sup>21</sup> In the Punic period, some of the population continued to inhabit such strategic hilltop locations such as the Mdina-Rabat plateau and the areas around Bidnija and Wardija. Other sectors of the population moved into and settled in most parts of both islands. The main body of evidence for this 'invasion' of rural areas is the numerous tombs that literally dot the islands.<sup>22</sup> Some of these burial sites, such as those at Xlendi and San Tumas are situated by the sea. Others, such as those at Hal Far and Żurrieq are situated within walking distance from access points to the sea (Birzebbuga and Wied iż-Żurrieq respectively).

This phenomenon coincides with the period when Malta and Gozo found themselves within the political, military and economic orbit of Carthage and no longer heavily linked to the Phoenicians from the east. During this period Carthage was at war with the Greeks in Sicily and the Etruscans in the Tyrrhenian.<sup>23</sup> Although one may assume that such wars may have had some influence on the Maltese Islands, the retention of just two major fortified spaces (Mdina-Rabat in Malta and Rabat in Gozo) and the parallel spread of the population into rural areas points to a people who were not afraid of seaborne raids. Absence of any literary references to Malta in the wars fought by the Carthaginians with the Greeks in Sicily makes the interpretation of the islands' role more difficult. However, it is plausible to suggest that the island of Pantelleria, situated on the direct sea route between Carthage and other Punic colonies on western Sicily, may have played a far more important role than Malta and Gozo.

A tangible site migration occurs around Malta's main harbours. Whilst tombs from the Early Punic period are situated in and around the Qormi area, later ones are found further north and north-east in Hamrun and Marsa. The slow move away from Qormi towards Marsa was probably induced by the gradual silting up of the lagoonal bay that stretched far inland.<sup>24</sup> The people living in this area must have moved away from marshy areas associated with floodplains to get away from



unhealthy living conditions brought about by mosquitoes breeding in the stagnant waters. Furthermore, shallower waters would have also had a drastic effect on the maritime functionality of the area. It is therefore not surprising that in the Late Punic period the main maritime activities around the Grand Harbour were concentrated around Marsa, Little Marsa<sup>25</sup> and what is today referred to as French Creek. Numerous tombs have been discovered in and around the Paola area including in Ghajn Dwieli leading down to the head of French Creek. The latter is one of the best protected sites within the Grand Harbour and it must have provided access to the sea for a maritime enclave settled in the area. Due to the huge modifications brought about by the construction of the dockyards in the late 1800s any evidence (both on land and underwater) for activities such as fishing has since been lost.

Intense maritime activity during the Late Punic period is evidenced by the presence of one or more wrecks discovered off the coast of Gozo at Xlendi Bay. Amphorae recovered over the decades since its discovery consist mainly of Punic types Ramon 2.1.1.2, Ramon 2.2.1.2 and Ramon 3.2.1.2 (6th, 5th and 3rd centuries BC respectively).<sup>26</sup> It is not yet certain as to the origin or destination of the cargoes being carried by the ships that went down in the area. There are three scenarios: 1. cargoes of local produce destined for an overseas market; 2. foreign (North African or Sicilian) produce destined for the Maltese Islands and 3. cargoes of vessels that were en route elsewhere in the central Mediterranean but came to grief before reaching the safety of Xlendi harbour.

The role of the Maltese Islands and their harbours during the First Punic War is enigmatic and again one is forced into a number of assumptions based on the theatre of this war and Malta's geo-strategic position. However, there is a fragment of literary evidence which sheds some light on an event which came as a consequence of Carthaginian possession of Malta and Gozo. Gnaeus Naevius writes that 'the Roman army crosses over to Malta and devastates the island and plunders the possessions of the enemy'.<sup>27</sup> This episode probably occurred during the First Punic War around the year 250 BC.<sup>28</sup> Given that this is the only fragment of literary evidence available, which to date has not yet been fully corroborated in the archaeological record, one must refrain from reading too much into it. However, we can safely assume that some form of raid did take place in the ambit of the First Punic War.

It is during the early phases of the Second Punic War that the islands are conquered by the Romans. Again, it is a fragment of literary evidence

that informs us of the Roman attack of 218 BC. In his *War with Hannibal* Livy writes: 'Arrived at the town [Lilybaeum], Sempronius dismissed Hiero and the royal fleet, left the praetor to guard the Sicilian coast, and sailed for Malta, which was in Carthaginian hands. Hamilcar, the son of Gisco, commander of the island's garrison, surrendered with nearly 2000 men, and the island and its town passed into Roman control. A few days later Sempronius returned to Lilybaeum, where his prisoners of war, together with those taken by the praetor, with the exception of the noblemen among them, were sold at public auction. Enough now seemed to have been done to secure the eastern parts of Sicily, so Sempronius crossed to the Vulcan Islands where a Carthaginian squadron was said to be stationed.'<sup>29</sup>

Malta and Gozo must have played an important role in the Carthaginian war effort. This is attested by the presence on the island of a relatively large garrison under the command of a Carthaginian nobleman, which is reflective of the military effort that the Carthaginians were willing to invest in the Maltese Islands. There can be little doubt that such a military presence would have placed much pressure on the islands' limited agricultural resources. One must therefore consider the logistical effort aimed at maintaining the islands' garrison, an effort that would have included numerous shipments of staples needed to feed the 2000 soldiers. Also of great interest is the final part of the passage, a section that sheds light on how the islands were perceived by Roman strategists. The capture of Malta played an important role in rendering the east coast of Sicily safe. From this one may infer that the Carthaginians had, prior to 218 BC, used the Maltese Islands as an advanced naval base from which it could launch attacks on Sicily. Despite the Roman military victory in Malta, Roman culture was to take much longer to percolate through a society that had its roots firmly embedded in its Carthaginian origins.

### **Roman Period**

Once under Roman rule, the Maltese Islands were incorporated into the province of Sicily, and the end of the Second Punic War meant that Malta's importance as a naval base diminished. Within a span of around four centuries the islands had evolved from a Phoenician staging post, to Punic base, to a Roman possession. This brings to mind Braudel's erudite interpretation of how Mediterranean islands could be affected by military

and political turmoil: 'some accidental change of ruler or of fortune may bring to the island's shores an entirely different civilization and way of life, with its dress, customs and language'.<sup>30</sup> In the case of Malta and Gozo after 218 BC, the islands certainly came into the orbit of Rome but there is also evidence that Punic culture survived, as is attested by the continuity of burial customs and the survival of the language. The reference to the local inhabitants as 'barbaroi' by the narrator of Paul's shipwreck clearly indicates that at least until 60 AD the locals were not speaking Latin or Greek but probably some derivative of the Punic language.

Despite the clear continuity of Punic culture there is evidence for shifts away from other trends. This is especially true for the origin of goods imported into Malta and Gozo during the years that followed the Roman conquest of the islands. The vast majority of imports studied at Tas-Silġ and San Pawl Milqi originate from the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic areas.<sup>31</sup> However, a direct link between the islands and areas of production in the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic are not to be taken for granted. One must keep in mind the possibility of goods arriving to the islands via closer harbours of transshipment, a practice that was not uncommon in ancient times.<sup>32</sup>

A short reference to piracy in Cicero's *Verrines* has led some scholars to believe that Malta was used as a pirate base in the years after 218 BC.<sup>33</sup> Certainly, in the decades prior to the final eradication of piracy by Pompey the Great, Cilician and other pirates roamed the Mediterranean in search of booty and prizes.<sup>34</sup> It is reasonable to assume that pirate vessels did occasionally call into and make use of Maltese harbours but, aside from the mention in Cicero's passage there is no further literary evidence for Malta and Gozo being used as a pirate base. Cicero's speech must be read and interpreted within the context it was delivered. By comparing Verres to pirates, Cicero exaggerated Verres' actions so as to show the latter in an even more negative light. This may also have been done to illustrate the contrast between what Verres should have done 'as a Roman magistrate', and what he actually did, which was rob sections of the empire entrusted to him.<sup>35</sup>

Cicero does mention that the temple of Juno (Roman equivalent of the Punic Astarte) was one of the richest and most venerated in the Mediterranean world. It supposedly housed numerous treasures including ivory objects and statues. This description somewhat matches the archaeological record. At Tas-Silġ there is strong evidence for the total remodelling of the sanctuary during the second century BC.<sup>36</sup> The enhancement of the sanctuary reflects the continued importance of this

site. Ceramic remains from the sanctuary datable to the same period are reflective of increased activity. Numerous imports present in the archaeological record point to a continued link between the sanctuary and the harbour below. It has recently been suggested that trade and exchange may even have taken place in the sanctuary itself thus making it the affluent centre that it was.<sup>37</sup> Although evidence from recent amphora studies point to a dearth of imported Sicilian objects, there can be little doubt on the connectivity between the two islands. It could well be that at least some of the amphorae originating in the Tyrrhenian areas were transhipped in Sicily.

The close relationship with Sicily alluded to above must also be considered from a geographic perspective. Malta, situated just over 90 kilometres away from Capo Passero, may be considered as an offshore harbour of Sicily. A voyage from a city such as Syracuse to Malta must have been perceived as no more perilous than a voyage to any other Sicilian port. The connectivity between the two islands can also be deduced from yet another passage in Cicero's *Verrines* (II, 4, 36-42). In this passage the author accuses Verres of trying to get his hands on two silver cups that were the work of Mentoris, a renowned silversmith. These belonged to a certain Diodorus of Malta (Melitensis Diodorus), who had left the island to settle in Lilybeum. Upon being informed by Diodorus that the cups were still in Malta, Verres sent his men to retrieve them. In the meantime, Diodorus wrote to his contacts on Malta instructing them that, when questioned, they should inform Verres' men that the cups had been sent to Lilybeum a few days earlier. The passage is interesting as it sheds light on a number of details. Firstly, that a noble person like Melitensis Diodorus once resided on Malta suggests that the island was not considered as some backwater. The fashionable cups mentioned in the passage also point to the fact that Malta was not bypassed when it came to contemporary fashion and tastes in luxurious items. Of interest is the ease with which both Verres and Diodorus were able to send people and/or letters between Sicily and Malta, indicating the existence of regular crossings between the two islands. The passage is also indicative of the existence of contact networks.

### **Roman Port**

During the Roman period the area around Marsa assumes a degree of increased maritime importance as is attested by the numerous

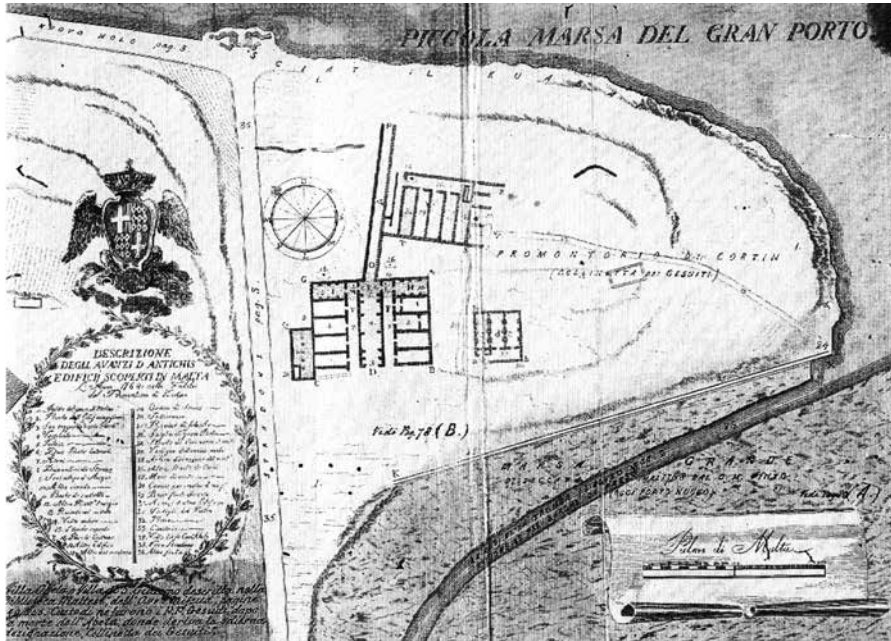


Figure 4. Eighteenth century plan by Count Babaro of Roman warehouses on Ras-Hanzir (Jesuit's Hill), Marsa

archaeological finds that were made over the past three centuries. Remains of a large mole were visible in the seventeenth century and described by a contemporary antiquarian as 'a mole built of very large blocks'.<sup>38</sup> In the latter half of the eighteenth century, a large warehouse complex was unearthed, surveyed and published (Fig. 4). In the 1950s, part of another Roman warehouse complex was discovered close to Xatt il-Mollijiet where fifty years later another part of this same complex was brought to light (Fig. 5).<sup>39</sup> When considered collectively, these structures would have constituted a major port complex that provided thousands of square metres of storage space, which went far beyond the needs of the islands' population during this period.<sup>40</sup> Although no urban remains have been discovered, the presence of large burial complexes in Marsa (Fig. 6) allude to the presence of a harbour town that would have housed persons providing maritime related services such as merchants, stevedores, shipwrights and ropemakers.

At a glance it would seem that such a port complex may have been too large for a small island like Malta. The answer lies in the massive movement of goods, foodstuffs and other raw materials (such as marble), from North Africa (especially Egypt) towards Rome. The latter consumed huge amounts of grain and it was ultimately the state's responsibility



Figure 5. Remains of port structures unearthed during civil works in Marsa in 2005

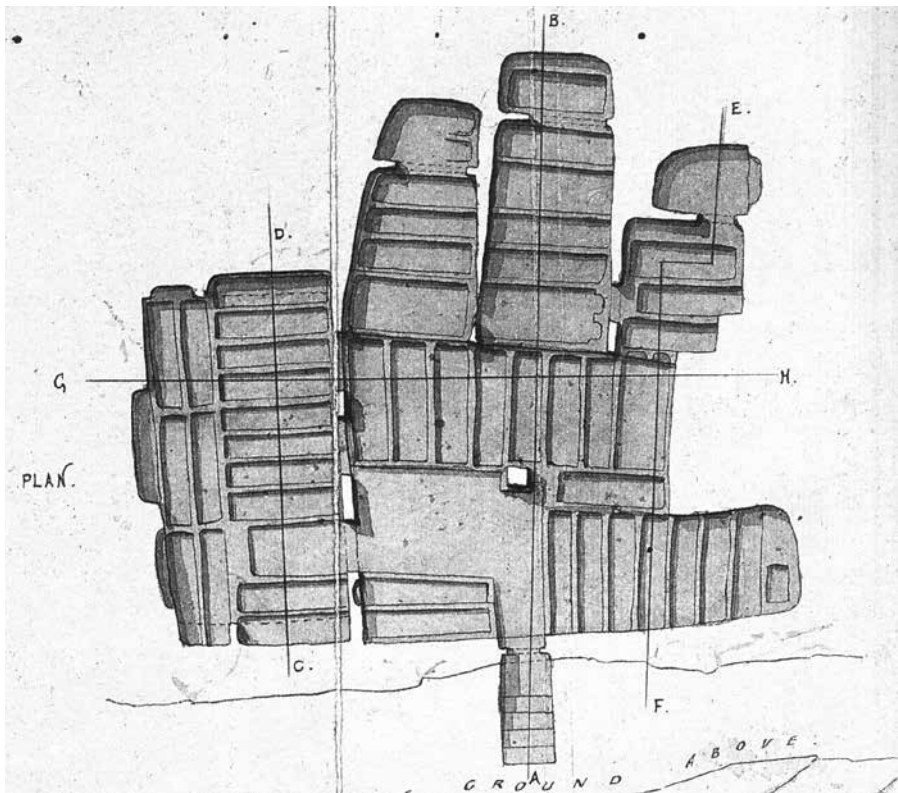


Figure 6. A Palaeochristian burial complex discovered in Marsa in the nineteenth century



to engage individuals to ship the merchandize across from the eastern Mediterranean. The size of the ships used to transport grain varied. A few reached extraordinary sizes and carried large quantities of grain in their hold.<sup>41</sup> Roman merchant vessels sailed mainly during the summer months (*mare apertum*) with the period between November and March being the closed season (*mare clausum*) during which maritime traffic was much reduced.<sup>42</sup> Vessels trying to fit in a second crossing and/or those making slow progress due to light winds would sometimes get caught out and have to winter in a safe harbour. However, grain does not tolerate high levels of moisture.<sup>43</sup> This means that grain stored in sacks within the hold of a ship would have surely rotted over the winter months.

Due to a variety of reasons, including its geographical location and its deep harbours, Malta became a busy and significant transshipment hub in an official Roman network, that of transporting grain from the key province of Egypt to the megalopolis that was Rome. Vessels caught out in the central Mediterranean could stop at the island, offload the grain for temporary storage at the Marsa warehouses and continue with their journey after the opening of the sailing season. One such ship of Alexandria carried Paul to Puteoli via Syracuse after wintering in Malta: ‘Three months later we set sail in a ship which had passed the winter at the island. It was an Alexandrian vessel with the ‘Heavenly Twins’ as its figurehead’.<sup>44</sup> The harbour at Marsa would have been both large and deep enough to accommodate several grain ships of any size. The discovery of a large Roman anchor stock, probably from a grain ship, measuring over four metres in length and weighing over one ton provides further evidence supporting this suggestion.<sup>45</sup> Malta would therefore have formed part of Rome’s ‘façade maritime’, one of a series of interrelated ports throughout the Mediterranean that served Rome and the Roman world.<sup>46</sup>

The role of Roman Malta in the supply of grain to Rome is similar to that of the island of Tenedos during the Late Antique period (a small island in front of the Hellespont) in relation to the supply of grain to Constantinople in the sixth century:

‘in case of adverse wind, the ships could not pass the straits of the Dardanelles and had to wait for a favourable wind. To avoid deterioration of the grain, Justinian had built on the island a granary for the ships of Egypt before 542. The ships were unloaded there and then could return to Egypt to make a second or third trip.’<sup>47</sup> The estimated surface of the Tenedos granaries is of 2000

square metres, considerably less than those situated around the Marsa harbour.

The storage of grain on the island provided a source of staple foodstuff for the local population. This must have decreased the dependency of the inhabitants on locally grown cereals thus paving the way for the production of other more profitable cash crops. There are in fact the remains of a number of Roman villas with olive oil producing capabilities distributed throughout the islands. Some of these, such as those at Burmarrad, Bidnija and Ta' Kaccatura are within relatively easy access of the sea in line with Cato's suggestion that farms should be within easy access to water so as to facilitate the movement of goods.<sup>48</sup>

It was not just agricultural villas that were situated close to the sea during Roman times. A number of Roman buildings have been discovered around coastal areas of both Malta and Gozo, including Ramla il-Hamra, Marsaxlokk and Floriana. It is not certain whether any of these sites were linked to marine industries such as the production of garum and/or salt. What is certain is that they were built on the water's edge and thus commanded excellent views of the sea. All three were endowed with bath complexes pointing to a degree of luxury present within the edifices. This is confirmed by an eighteenth century description of high-quality mosaics of fish and dragons that were still visible in the villa situated overlooking the Grand Harbour in present-day Floriana.<sup>49</sup>

To date, no remains of Roman coastal settlements have been discovered. However, large burial complexes, such as those at Marsa and Salina, close to the sea, point to thriving Roman settlements in proximity to harbour areas. Evidence from these sites points to a long period of use stretching from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>50</sup> Settlements in these areas would have been home to those involved in maritime services including sailmakers, carpenters, stevedores, merchants and prostitutes. The proximity of these burial sites and Roman coastal villas point to a population that, over a significant stretch of time, must have felt relatively tranquil living by the water's edge.

## Conclusion

One may speak of two main factors that determined the maritime role of the islands. The first being the availability of large safe harbours which



could accommodate the largest ships extant in Antiquity. The second factor was the islands' position in the central Mediterranean. However, the centrality of the islands was only relative if supply and demand elsewhere in the Mediterranean necessitated the use of Malta for shelter and trade. When geography, politics and economic factors combined, the islands harbours provided a place where ships could stop, crews could rest and goods traded. Whether the islands were used as a stopover along a long distant route or as a link between an area of production and one of consumption depended on contemporary geo-politics and economics. Economic benefits from such connectivity percolated into various strata of local society as is attested by numerous well-decorated buildings and burial complexes extant throughout both Malta and Gozo.

Across the sea came not just goods but also people and their ideas. Cultural influences from various parts of the Mediterranean including the east, North Africa, Sicily and Italy can be noted throughout the period under discussion. Phoenician and Punic deities were worshipped in coastal sanctuaries which were eventually not only maintained but also upgraded by the Romans after their arrival in 218 BC. Furthermore, artistic objects such as statues and jewellery illustrate that the populous of the Maltese Islands were aware of fashion developments across the Mediterranean and could indeed afford to import such luxury items. The presence of contemporary Mediterranean luxuries in the archaeological record illustrates that 'distant' island groups are not to be considered as backwaters. Essentially, the sea must be looked at as a medium that connected the Maltese Islands to the rest of the Roman Empire, rather than a barrier which cut it off from mainstream activities.

#### Notes

- 1 Aubet, M.E. (2001) *The Phoenicians and the West: Politics, Colonies and Trade* (Cambridge University Press).
- 2 Sagona, C. (2002) *The Archaeology of Punic Malta* (Ancient Near Eastern Studies Supplement 9) (Belgium: Peeters): 24.
- 3 Vella, N.C. (2005) Phoenician and Punic Malta *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 18: 436-450: 439.
- 4 Bonanno, A. (2005) *Malta - Phoenician, Punic and Roman* (Midsea Books): 18-19.
- 5 Aubet 2001: 161
- 6 See Admiralty Charts 4301 Mediterranean Sea Western Part and Admiralty Chart 4302 Mediterranean Chart Eastern Part. Both are published by the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office.

- 7 Trump, D.H. (2002) *Malta: Prehistory and Temples* (Malta: Midsea Books): 138-139.
- 8 Brody, A.J. (1998) "Each man cried out to his God" *The Specialized Religion of Canaanite and Phoenician Seafarers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press): 39
- 9 Ibid. 44.
- 10 Reference is here being made to Samos.
- 11 Strabo, *Geography* 14.1.14, 20.
- 12 Morton, J. (2001) *The Role of the Physical Environment in Ancient Greek Seafaring* (Leiden: Brill): 310.
- 13 Brody 1998: 81.
- 14 Unlike Tas-Silg, no hard evidence was discovered that ascertains the sacred nature of this site. However, there is enough circumstantial evidence, including known contemporary practices described above and its location on the cliff's edge away from the ancient centre of habitation but close to an important harbour, to safely suggest a sacred function linked to the sea.
- 15 Vella, N.C. (2002) The Lie of the Land: Ptolemy's Temple of Hercules in Malta, *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 39: 83-112.
- 16 Brody 1998: 33-37.
- 17 See Sagona, C. (1999) Silo or Vat? Observations on the ancient textile industry in Malta and Early Phoenician interests in the island *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 18.1: 23-60.
- 18 Diodorus Siculus Book V – 12.
- 19 One such process could have been retting.
- 20 Bruno, B. (2004) *L'Arcipelago Maltese in Età Romana e Bizantina: Attività economiche e scambi al centro del Mediterraneo* (Bari: Edipuglia): 127. Bruno suggests that the various channels and pits were used for the dyeing on textiles, however no murex middens were ever discovered nearby. .
- 21 Trump 2002: 252.
- 22 Said-Zammit, G.A. (1997) *Population, Landuse and Settlement on Punic Malta: A Contextual Analysis of the Burial Evidence* (Oxford: BAR 682).
- 23 Bonanno 2005: 74-75.
- 24 Gambin, T. (2004) Islands of the middle sea : an archaeology of a coastline in De Maria L and Turchetti R. *Evolucion paleoambiental de los puertos y fondeaderos antiguos en el Mediterraneo occidental : I Seminario, el patrimonio arqueologico submarino y los puertos antiguos, Alicante, 14-15 noviembre*: 127- 145.
- 25 Today occupied by a Malta shipbuilding site.
- 26 Azzopardi, E. (2013) The Shipwrecks of Xlendi Bay, Gozo, Malta. *International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, 42: 286–295.
- 27 Gnaeus Naevius Bell Pun IV – 37.
- 28 Bonanno 2005: 78.
- 29 Livy *War on Hannibal* XXI.51.
- 30 Braudel, F. (1972) *The Mediterranean and Mediterranean World In The Age of Philip II*, (The Folio Society): 122.
- 31 Bruno 2004: 132.
- 32 Nieto, X. (1997) Le Commerce de Cabotage et de Redistribution in Pomey, P. (ed.) *La Navigation dans L'Antiquité* (Paris: Edisud): 146-59.
- 33 Cicero *Verrines* 2.4: 103-4
- 34 de Souza, P. (2000) *Piracy in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press): 97.
- 35 Ibid. 153-54.
- 36 Bruno 2004: 107.
- 37 Ibid. 100-11.
- 38 Abela, G.F. (1647) *Della Descrittione di Malta* (Malta): 17

- 39 For a detailed description of the archaeological remains discovered around the Marsa area see Gambin, T. (2004-5) Archaeological discoveries at Marsa over the centuries *Malta Archaeological Review Issue 7*.
- 40 For a description of the Roman port of Malta see Gambin, T. (2005) Ports and port structures for ancient Malta in Gallina Zevi, A. and Turchetti, R. (eds) *Le strutture dei porti e degli approdi antichi*: 159-174 (Italy: Rubettino Editori).
- 41 Houston, G.W. (1988) Some comparative materials on Roman merchant ships and ports *American Journal of Archaeology* 92: 553-64: 555.
- 42 Meijer, F. (1986) *A History of Seafaring in the Classical World* (London & Sydney: Croom Helm): 227.
- 43 To avoid rot, grain should not be stored in areas that have more than 15% humidity. For storage of grain in ancient times see Rickman, G.E. (1971), *Roman Granaries and Store Buildings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- 44 Acts of the Apostles XXVIII: 11-12.
- 45 Museums Annual Report 1963: 7.
- 46 See Purcell, N. (1996) The ports of Rome: evolution of a 'façade maritime' in Gallina Zevi, A. and Claridge, A., (eds) '*Roman Ostia*' Revisited: *Archaeological and Historical Papers in Memory of Russell Meiggs* (British School at Rome, London, in collaboration with The Soprintendenza Archeologica di Ostia): 267-279.
- 47 Sirks, B. (2003) Some observations on Edictum Justiniani XIII.8. A reaction to Jean-Michelle Carrié in Marin, B. and Virlovet, C. (eds) *Nourrir les cités de Méditerranée Antiquité-Temps modernes* (Paris: Maisonneuve and Larose): 213-219.
- 48 Cato *De Agricultura* published in the Loeb Classical Library, 1934.
- 49 Barbaro 1794: 10
- 50 Buhagiar, M. (2000) Four new Late Roman and Early Byzantine burial sites in the island of Malta *Melita Historica* 13.1:23-37.



The central Mediterranean area as charted by Ptolemy in his Geographia, Rome 1490