

TEA

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Studying sustainability and fragility in prehistoric Malta

by Rowan McLoughlin, Simon Stoddart and Caroline Malone

The five year FRAGSUS project (1 May 2013 – 30 April 2018) (PI Caroline Malone) - formed to study the sustainability and subsequently radical change amongst the Maltese Temple Building populations of prehistoric Malta in the fourth and third millennia BC. - has just entered its third year, and the following presents a brief outline of activities prior to full publication (Stoddart 2014). The

current work has focused on the island of Gozo, most particularly the re-analysis of the human remains of the Brochtorff Xaghra Circle, and fieldwork at four settlements: Tac Cawla, Santa Verna, Ggantija and In Nuffara. The “settlements” of Santa Verna and Ggantija are better known for their monumental (“temple”) phases, but recent fieldwork at Santa Verna has confirmed that the monumental phase developed out of a village from the earliest occupation of the Maltese islands. An environmental core has been successfully extracted from the Mgarr ix Xini valley in Gozo, but the main thrust of work has been on Malta where the June-July field season will now be centred.

A first key question of the project has addressed the impact of human settlement. The main field season of April to July 2014 principally investigated the settlement site of Tac Cawla, showing the development of settlement activity from the earliest occupation of the island until the Bronze Age, centred on a water source. Early analysis suggests a diverse plant diet, where animal rearing was anchored on sheep and goats. Material culture was very impoverished, compared with the temple offerings, although the human populations may have retained what counted for their survival from the food remains. A later intensive activity on the site was recorded from the late Punic early Roman period, when vine trenches were cut into the pre-existing deposits. The second field season systematically tackled the pre-temple phases, the temple phases and the post temple phases. At Santa Verna, excavations followed in the footsteps of Thomas Ashby and R.N. Bradley in 1911 and David Trump in 1961, establishing the location of their activity where their trial trenches permitted reinvestigation of the salient features of the site. The model of ritual monumentalisation from village origins, first shown convincingly at Skorba by David Trump, was confirmed at Santa Verna during the season. The later monument protected deposits that dated to the Ghar Dalam and Skorba periods, from the late sixth and fifth millennia BC, indicating the elaboration of successful settlements into a sequence of monumental constructions. It can be tentatively shown that a temple was successively embellished and dismantled, leaving only floors and the multiphase deposits of the earlier monument in place. Many of the larger stones and facilities of the monument were robbed from the monument, at stages that varied from prehistory to quite recent times. The study of the forecourt of the Ggantija temple, in two locations, illustrated once again how there remain windows of opportunity to study preserved original landscapes. In these locations, relatively well preserved palaeosols have been preserved that are contemporary with the Neolithic farming communities, and which do not survive in the open, heavily worked agricultural landscapes of modern Malta. The aftermath of the temple period was studied in further protected location: the Bronze Age plateau of In Nuffara. The work required the investigation of deeply cut grain (?) silos to locate intact deposits from the succeeding Bronze Age. The original landsurface in the location had been almost entirely eroded to bedrock, and indeed the whole mesa top is suffering from a long term process of fissuring, as the mesa collapses towards the east. Two time capsules were investigated. Ironically the most promising silo, that was found with its capstone in place, appeared to have been abandoned empty but for a clay lining, and then refilled in a much later period. However, a second neighbouring silo of larger size (some 2.6 metres in depth), had substantial intact Bronze Age deposits, sheltered by successive Punic, Roman and Medieval layers, which should provide precisely the environmental sequence of the post Temple landscape. The systematic gathering of bulk sediment and micromorphological samples, as well as extensive sieving programmes from all significant layers should have provided the opportunity for the project to study the impact of human activity on the landscape from within a tightly defined subsample of the island of Gozo focused on the Ramla valley between Xaghra (Ggantija/Santa Verna) and In Nuffara, and another just to the south of Victoria/Rabat (centred on Tac Cawla).

These site specific studies will be able to be set within more regional studies of the landscape provided by the sinking of apparently successful pollen cores and the study of early and later modern land use studies. Successful cores have been implemented not only at Mgarr ix Xini on Gozo, but also at Salina on Malta, and this evidence can be added to the pre-existing successful core from Marsa and the more partial evidence from Xemxija, Wied Zembaq and Marsaxlokk, set within studies of modern pollen from Malta and Sicily. A modern time frame has also been established by looking at the cabreo maps from the 1860s which discuss the soil suitability of a sample of the landscapes of the Maltese islands. The location of the preserved Neolithic palaeosols (such as from Ggantija) appear to provide an interesting contrast with the studies of the best modern soils. The 1860 pattern, and most probably the pattern from the 1500s, appears to be much closer to that recorded by Lang (1960) than

the patterns which existed in the Neolithic period. Neolithic monuments, for which read the most successful settlements, were probably located close to key agricultural requirements such as water, prime soils and a favourable aspect. Further analysis will assess these conclusions.

The project has also made good strides towards answering a second question of how the Neolithic societies managed to sustain a complex ritualised life style. It is clear that many symbolic valuables were differentially deposited in the temples, be they exotic refashioned valuables, such as greenstone, elaborated local materials, such as figurines, or special animal parts such as horns. Settlement sites appear to be relatively impoverished, as suggested by the relative paucity of temple material culture, and the highly fragmentary evidence of lithics. Similar strides are being made towards answering a related third question of what foodstuffs were consumed to maintain the Neolithic life style. Sample sizes remain small, but have been enhanced by systematic sieving and floatation. Initial results suggest a focus on sheep and goat and broad spectrum plant remains. A fourth questions addresses the nature of the Maltese population through the re-study of human remains, drawing on the expertise of a team that includes Jay Stock, Tamsin O'Connell, Ronika Power and Bernadette Mercieca. This study indicates an intriguing combination of indigenous and exotic traits, as well as a considerable resilience of the population, that could lead to a long life once adolescence was passed. Oral hygiene was not good, but teeth may have been protected by the presence of fluoride in the water, as suggested also by modern studies of the Gozo water supply. Particular craft strategies were developed that appear to show the use of a third hand in the mouth, and high stress on the fingers and the lower back. There is great hope that answers to the fifth question of the project will also emerge: why did the temples cease to be used in their original way? The human bones from the temple period show a surprisingly low level of stress, but further answers may emerge from the soils and food remains, and perhaps the legacy of this change will be visible in the silos of the Bronze Age.

The record of the structural remains uncovered by the projects has been greatly enhanced by the deployment of laser scanning, the work of John Meneely, supplemented by the output of photomontage (Barratt et al 2014), the work of Rob Barratt and Donald Horne. These data will provide an invaluable framework for the more traditional archaeological record, ranging from photography, to EDM recording to interpretative drawing on plastic film. Many of the sites (Taċ-Ċawla, In Nuffara, Ggantija and Santa Verna) had already been investigated by different styles of excavation, or recorded in different eras of artistic or photographic record. The digital framework will provide a key resource onto which these different eras of investigation can be draped to produce an intriguing biography of the sites under investigation.

Acknowledgements

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Barratt, R., Bennett, J. and Malone, C. 2014. Photogrammetric recording – new approaches to reconstructing archaeological features at the site of Taċ-Ċawla, Gozo. PAST 78: 14-16.

Stoddart, S. 2014. FRAGSUS. Fragility and sustainability in prehistoric Malta. European Archaeologist 41: 20-24.

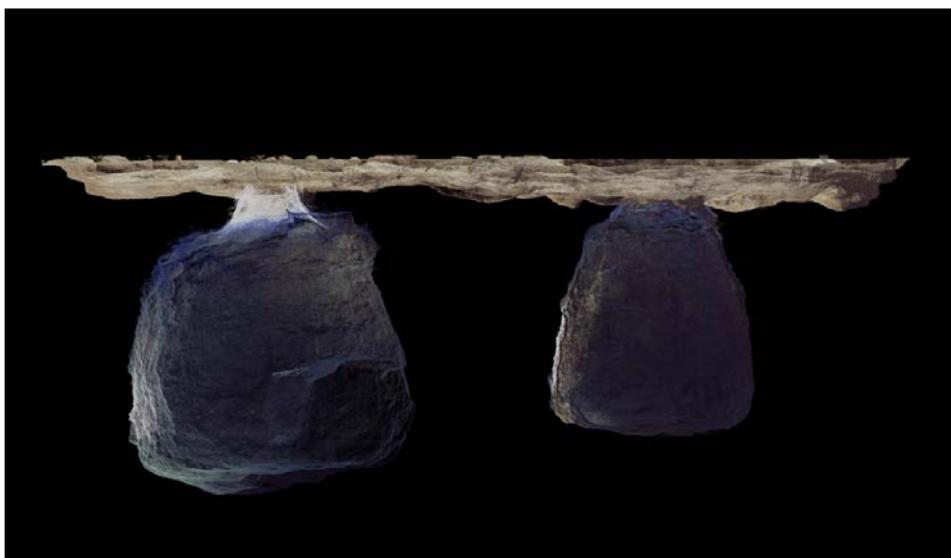


Figure 1. 3D Laser scan of the Bronze Age silos from In Nuffara (John Meneely).

Further details of the project can be found in the following internet locations:

<https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/FRAGSUS/>

<https://www.facebook.com/FRAGSUS>

<https://www.facebook.com/1manscan>

<http://www.arch.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/gozo-project>

<https://fragsusuom.weebly.com/>

