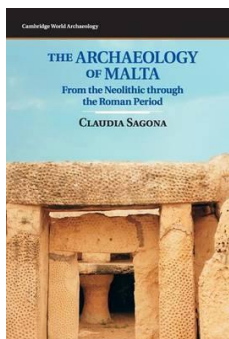


Review articles and reviews



C. Sagona 2015. *The Archaeology of Malta: from the Neolithic through the Roman period*. (xix +449pp.), illustrated. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-1-107-006699-0 (hardback £84.99, US\$135)

This book is the product of an ambitious project, one that has not been attempted before, that of covering the whole of Maltese archaeology

from prehistory down to the Roman age, in a scholarly, fully annotated volume. The author dedicates a fair portion of attention to each period of the islands' history, except to the Roman period which she considers as an extension of the Punic one, amply revealing where her sympathies, and her forte, lie. It is presented as somewhat of an anticlimax, the local population's Punic culture being only affected by 'Roman influence' after centuries of Roman occupation. Although the publication data on p. vi suggest that the historical account is taken down to AD 870, in actual fact the end of the Roman period, and the preceding centuries, are not even discussed and the Late Roman period, which archaeologically merges into the Byzantine, and its rich archaeological record are completely ignored. She steers clear of the sensitive controversy regarding the timing of Christianization, apart from a fleeting reference to St Paul's shipwreck.

The text is fully supported throughout with citations, including page numbers when required, showing that the author is entirely au courant with the latest publications down to the very year of publication (2015) and with current research projects. She constantly places these developments against the general Mediterranean backdrop. She is very complimentary towards this country and its people, a sentiment encapsulated in the dedication of the book on page vii, and her mood about Maltese archaeology is throughout very optimistic both for the present and for the future. In her narrative she often

weaves the islands' political and cultural texture into the development of the discipline.

In such a mandatorily short review it is impossible to do justice to such an ambitious work. For this reason I shall dwell only on some of the salient controversial issues raised by it.

Chapter 1 ('Malta's Archaeological Past') provides a brief account of the geology and geomorphology of the islands, followed by an equally brief literature review from the 16th century to the present, including a list of radiocarbon dates from cultural and environmental contexts on which Malta's prehistoric chronological sequence is based. In chapter 2, dedicated to 'The first Settlers and Farmers', a fair assessment is made of the attempts made in the 1980s to establish evidence for a pre-Neolithic human presence, including 'possible cave art' inside Għar Hasan. The rest of the chapter is a pretty standard overview of Malta's Neolithic.

As expected, the lion's share of the book, almost 100 pages, is taken up by the megalithic cultural development, spread over the next two chapters. For her own good reasons she desists from adopting the designation 'Temple' for both the period ('Late Neolithic') and its characteristic structures ('megaliths'). She makes the 'buildings with large apse-shaped rooms' emerge 'towards the end of the fifth millennium' (p. 74), half a millennium earlier than the standard dating (correctly dated on p. 76). It should be noted, also, that the outlying structures to the northeast at Kordin III (Fig. 3.4A: 4-5), identified as 'domestic structures', have now been found to form part of a typical five-apse 'temple' unit. In her assessment of the belief systems of the temple builders Sagona takes a cautious stand regarding shamanism (p. 93-96) in ritual practice,

especially after the discovery of the six plank-like figurines from the Xagħra Circle hypogeum, as well as the diffused 'mother goddess' interpretation of the predominant sexually ambiguous statuary. She concedes, however, that some of the non-figurative artistic expressions may possibly be the effect of altered states of consciousness (pp. 96-103).

Sagona makes one of her most daring statements on the demise of the megalith building culture in Chapter 4, intriguingly titled 'Pushing boundaries at the end of the megalithic building period'. It is with this phenomenon that she ties up the enigmatic Maltese cart ruts. She considers the cart ruts as a means of pushing the boundaries of a diminishing agricultural production into marginal zones. I do not think she is correct in seeing the quarries at Misraħ Għar il-Kbir 'clearly cut through pre-existing furrows in a number of places and hence post-date them' (p.119). If anything, the opposite is true. There are at least two areas where the cart ruts clearly cut into the ancient quarry beds. She also sees evidence of purposeful closure of the ritual practices associated with megaliths and, therefore, of continuity of human life into the Bronze Age.

Chapter 5, 'New directions: the appearance of the axe-bearers', expresses abundant optimistic expectations from the current unfolding of the understanding of archaeological research to explain the fundamental changes that brought about the end of the Neolithic and the establishment of the Bronze Age cultures (p. 135). She sees the 'new cultural horizon linked to an influx of people' from outside, but this 'wave of immigration' is only seen as a possible influence on the largely indigenous population for a change in economic strategies (p. 134). For reasons known to her alone, she assigns the silo pits typical of Borġ in-Nadur phase settlements to the Early Bronze Age (i.e. the Tarxien Cemetery phase) and, again gratuitously, associates those on the water's edge at St George's Bay with the production of murex shell dye (pp. 149-51). Her hypothesis would make Malta the earliest purple dye producer in the Mediterranean.

The period of occupation by the Phoenicians and their Punic descendants takes up Chapters 6 and 7. Sagona persists in her insistence on a much earlier date for a Phoenician presence on Malta than generally agreed. She bases this on perceived evidence of interaction between these early mariners and the local prehistoric inhabitants, and on the presumed evolution of Phoenician pottery wares preceding the Ghajn Qajjet tomb and other contemporary tombs containing datable Greek pottery. Regarding this point and other aspects of this period, Sagona provides a clear summation of the contents of her other voluminous publications. The 'Summary' at the end of Chapter 7 is no summary at all, but a preview of what will happen to the Phoenician-Punic cultural legacy in the following Roman period (Chapter 8) on which I have already dwelt at the beginning.

As for the cult of Mithras for which she sees abundant evidence in the archaeological record (collected together in Fig. 8.5), I limit myself to a few telegraphic rebuttals. I cannot understand how she insists on seeing a Mithraic initiation rite on the Mdina marble slab which clearly depicts two Greek soldiers (Odysseus and Diomedes) in heroic nudity, one actually pointing a sword at the Trojan captive (Dolon) dressed appropriately in oriental fashion. Figures of young men or boys dressed in this fashion could represent other oriental characters in the Greco-Roman world, such as Attis (the object of another oriental mystery cult). This applies also to the few terracotta figurines of young boys with Phrygian caps on horseback deriving from some rock-cut tombs. Similarly, terracotta cockerels are often found in Punic, pre-Roman funerary contexts, such as at Kerkouane. The graphic reconstruction of the rock-cut sanctuary of Ras il-Wardiya as a 'possible mithraeum' remains a very remote possibility, as are the imagined figures carved on a wall in the Salina catacomb and the arched niche at Misraħ Għar il-Kbir.

In this brief review I have focused on a number of controversial points that are unlikely to withstand the test of scholarly scrutiny, namely: the dating and purpose of the cart ruts, the dye pits, the early date for the Phoenician

colonization, the presence of a Mithras cult in Roman Malta. Notwithstanding all these caveats, this book constitutes a very useful tool in the hands of the researcher of Maltese archaeology.

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