

5. The post-prehistoric pottery

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Abstract. Twelve fragments of pottery, clearly not prehistoric in date, have been found in the stores of the National Museum of Archaeology amidst prehistoric pottery recovered from Borġ in-Nadur. This short piece presents a detailed catalogue of these sherds, and considers other material published by Murray and Trump from their excavations at the same site. The significance of this pottery at a prehistoric site is also considered.

Keywords: Pottery, Punic, Roman.

5.1. Introduction

During an exercise aimed at re-evaluating the prehistoric pottery excavated from the site of Borġ in-Nadur¹, a small number of post-prehistoric potsherds were found in storage. Little is known of these sherds' precise context of discovery; however, it is clear that they were not associated with any direct and long-term activities relating to the occupation or use of the megalithic structures after the end of the Bronze Age².

This short contribution is intended to present a catalogue of this pottery and to discuss the significance of such pottery for the site of Borġ in-Nadur.

¹ See Tanasi, this volume (chapter 4).

² Murray 1929: 3.

5.2. Catalogue of pottery

Inv. no. BN/P/1

Wall sherds (x4); amphora.

Undecorated.

Hard-fired, yellowish-brown (10YR 5/4-6) fabric with hackled breaks. Contains an abundance of angular volcanic black sand inclusions. The exterior surface is unslipped, however, a light brown patina (7.5YR 6/4) a shade lighter than the fabric is evident; the black glassy inclusions are visible on the surface.

Wheelmade; plain ware.

Wall thickness: 1.2 – 2 cm; interior body Ø: c. 37 cm.

Comments: Campanian black-sand amphora; c. 3rd-1st centuries BC³.

Inv. no. BN/P/2

Wall sherd; amphora.

Two red lines painted on the exterior surface

Reddish-yellow (5YR 6/6) fabric with irregular yellow lime inclusions and occasional red (iron?) grains. The surface appears unslipped, however, there are faint traces of a pale pink patina (7.5YR 8/3), possibly the remnants of a light wash or scum. Two thin pale red (10R 6/3-4) bands, 2.5 mm in thickness, were painted on the exterior surface.

Wheelmade; plain ware.

Wall thickness: 0.9 cm.

Comments: Local Punic amphora similar to Sagona's amphora form IV:1; c. 3rd-1st centuries BC⁴.

Inv. no. BN/P/3

Wall sherd; large closed vessel displaying clear rills on the interior surface of the sherd.

Undecorated.

Hard-fired fabric with a thin greyish-brown core (2.5YR 5/2) and thicker pale red edges (10R 6/6). Frequent small to medium paste voids are visible in the fabric, as well as a mixture of white and yellow lime inclusions and irregular large red grains. The exterior surface is heavily eroded, however, traces of a very pale brown slip are visible (10YR 8/3-4).

Wheelmade; plain ware.

Wall thickness: 1 cm.

Comments: Local coarse fabric; Late Punic to Roman period.

Inv. no. BN/P/4

Wall sherd; large closed vessel displaying clear rills on the interior surface.

Undecorated.

³ Bechtold 2008: 107-108.

⁴ Sagona 2002: 90-91, fig. 346.

Hard-fired, thin dark grey core (2.5YR 4/1) and reddish-yellow edges (5YR 6/6) with occasional white lime, foraminifera and fine glauconite inclusions. The exterior surface is coated with a thick and evenly applied pale yellow slip (2.5YR 8/3).

Wall thickness: 0.8 cm

Comments: Local coarse fabric; Late Punic to Roman period.

Inv. no. BN/P/5

Neck; flask or narrow-necked jug/jar.

Undecorated.

Hard-fired, reddish-yellow (5YR 6/6) fabric with fine yellow lime inclusions and fine paste voids. The exterior surface is covered in a very pale brown (10YR 8/3) wash, possibly the patina resulting from excess salts in the clay that collected at the surface during firing.

Wheelmade; plain ware.

Wall thickness: 0.5 – 1 cm

Comments: Local coarse fabric; Punic to Roman period.

Inv. no. BN/P/6

Rim; wide-mouthed basin, everted and collared triangular rim.

Incised groove on exterior of rim collar.

Thick light brown core (10YR 6/2) with thin reddish-yellow edges (5YR 6/6), containing yellow lime and occasional black angular glass-like specks. The surface appears to have been coated with a very pale brown slip (10YR 7/3).

Wheelmade; plain ware.

Rim Ø 40 cm

Comments: Local coarse fabric?; Roman period.

Inv. no. BN/PX/7

Handle; circular-sectioned handle belonging to a cooking pot.

Undecorated.

Fine chalky reddish-yellow fabric (5YR 6/8) with abundant fine white lime and foraminifera inclusions. The surface is highly eroded.

Handle cross-section Ø: 1.3 cm

Comments: Fine local cooking fabric; handle probably belongs to a pot similar to Quercia's B and C forms; c. 4th-2nd centuries BC⁵.

Inv. no. BN/P193

Disc base; possibly belonging to a thin-walled closed vessel, as there are traces of rills on the interior wall of the sherd.

Undecorated.

Reddish-yellow (5YR 6/8) fabric with a mixture of black glass-like specks and white lime inclusions. The surfaces are coated in a brownish-yellow scum (10YR 6/6) which could be the result of an encrustation build-up induced by a lengthy burial period.

⁵ Quercia 2002: 410-414.

Wheelmade; plain ware.

Base Ø: 5.4 cm

Comments: North African fabric?; Roman period.

Inv. no. BN/PX/8

Fragment of a decorated plaque/tile or ornamental object.

Relief decoration of a floral motif.

Thick grey (10YR 5/1) fabric with thin pink outer edges (7.5YR 7/4). Irregular grey-coloured quartz inclusions fill the fabric. The surfaces are unslipped and retain the same colour as the pink fabric.

Mouldmade; plain ware.

Max. wall thickness: 2.2 cm

Comments: Local?; Late Punic/Roman to Early Modern period?

5.3. Ceramic discussion

Despite the number of pottery sherds discovered in storage, many of which retain no diagnostic features, some general observations can be made. Of particular interest are the four fragments of an imported Graeco-Italic wine amphora (BN/P/1). The black volcanic inclusions that characterise this fabric are typical of, but not restricted to, the Campanian region of southern Italy⁶. These amphorae were mass-produced at several workshops for the purpose of forming strong and sturdy containers for the storage and transport of wine to the Roman provinces and beyond. Such amphorae are common on all Hellenistic and Roman sites throughout the Maltese Islands from the end of the third century BC⁷. The three wheelmade wall sherds belong to large closed vessels (BN/P/2, BN/P/3, BN/P/4), most probably local amphorae or storage jars. The painted fragment (BN/P/2, Fig. 5.1) can clearly be identified as a part of the lower body of a round-based Punic amphora common to the repertoire of Maltese Punic amphorae⁸.

⁶ Bechtold 2008: 107-108.

⁷ Bruno 2009: 173.

⁸ This type of amphora shape is considered local because of the discovery of a deformed complete vessel in a local Punic tomb. The vessel in question displays severe blistering on the body that would render the container useless for storing and transporting contents (Bruno 2009: 100, fig. 15).

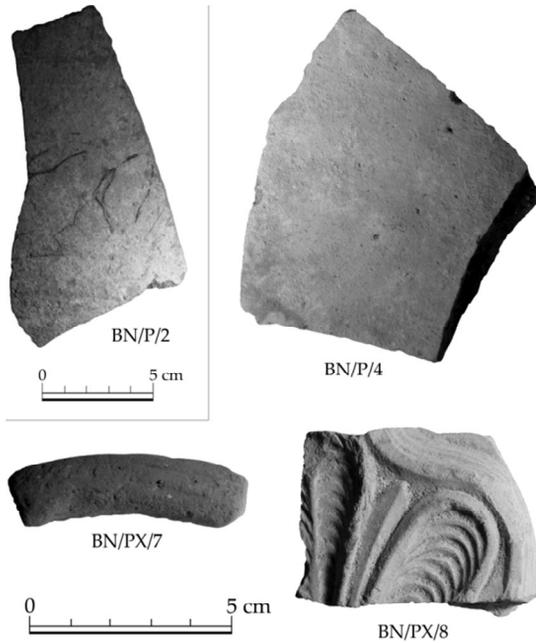


Figure 5.1. Selected pottery sherds from Borg in-Nadur.

The faint traces of two red painted bands, that would typically amount to several more thin concentric bands painted around the body of the amphora, would date the amphora to the third to first century BC; many examples of this type are common finds in Punic-period tombs and archaeological sites across the islands⁹. A few Maltese examples have been traced outside the islands suggesting that these amphorae had a predominantly domestic circulation¹⁰; however, the discovery of a shipwreck off the coast of Gozo, containing about 90 local Punic amphorae, has cast some doubt on the degree to which these Maltese products were exported, and also provides evidence that these amphorae formed part of cargoes on sea vessels¹¹. As for their contents, wine is believed to be the primary content, although other contents such as oil, fish

⁹ Sagona 2002: 90-91, fig. 346.

¹⁰ Ciasca 1985: 18-19

¹¹ Bruno 2009: 101.

sauce and fruit might also have been stored and transported in such containers¹².

Besides storage vessels and amphorae, a selection of utilitarian and kitchen vessels can be identified. These include a possible flask or jug (BN/P/5, Fig. 5.2) most likely used to store and pour some sort of drink or liquid sauce at the table; a large open bowl (BN/P/6, Fig. 5.2) probably used to grind and mix ingredients; and a cooking pot (BN/P/7, Fig. 5.1) used for boiling or stewing meals. A study has shown that these three forms were common in divergent contexts and that each attained a specific and unique function according to context¹³. For instance, cooking pots at Tas-Silġ are imbued with ritual meaning having been inscribed with pre-fired Punic letters to the goddess Astarte. The associations between these standard inscribed cooking vessels and the discovery of heaps of ash and animal bones led scholars to believe that worshippers at the sanctuary of Tas-Silġ prepared and cooked ritual meals in honour of the resident deity¹⁴. On the other hand, cooking pots of this type recovered from local rock-cut tombs containing burials of the first century AD, were often, though not exclusively, used as cinerary urns for the disposal of burnt infant remains¹⁵.

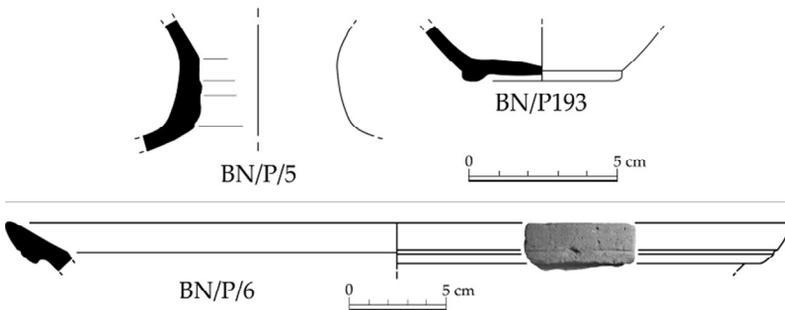


Figure 5.2. Reconstruction drawings of sherds from Borg in-Nadur.

¹² Azzopardi 2006: 45, 51; Bruno 2009: 101.

¹³ Anastasi 2010: 226.

¹⁴ Quercia 2002; Corrado *et al.* 2004.

¹⁵ Zammit 1909-1912, NB III: 99-100; Sagona 2002: 962, fig. 131.6; Anastasi 2010: 210.

The basin rim (BN/P/6, Fig. 5.2) belongs to a form commonly found on Roman-period sites across the Maltese Islands; however, a reliable date for this form has yet to be established. A basin rim sharing a similar form and fabric was recorded at Ħal Millieri and was dated to the fifth/sixth centuries AD on the basis of its similarity to an African Red Slip ware form¹⁶. Another example was discovered at the Żejtun villa¹⁷ and two more in the area of Bidnija, to the north of Malta¹⁸.

5.4. Prehistoric sites after prehistory

This selection of post-prehistoric ceramic fragments has not only shed some additional light on the discovery of Punic and Roman forms on the island, but begs the question why this pottery ended up at Borġ in-Nadur. However, in reviewing how such pottery found its way onto a predominantly prehistoric site with no known Classical-period occupation (and hence, structures), caution should be maintained because certain modern depositional processes are known to cause soil disturbances, thereby skewing our interpretations of the archaeological record.

Firstly, in view of the geological make-up of the island, shallow soil depths have always been of concern to farmers; restricted tracts of arable land consisting of predominantly wind-swept rock and a rapid rate of unchecked soil erosion has forced farmers to construct artificial terraced fields and import displaced soil from other locations¹⁹. Therefore, pottery mixed in with imported soil could mislead one into believing that an ancient activity took place.

Secondly, the deep-rooted local tradition of systematically gathering and collecting ancient pottery from the countryside to be

¹⁶ Blagg *et al.* 1990: 59-60, fig. 14.42.

¹⁷ Anastasi 2010: fig. 136.4, no. 424.

¹⁸ The pieces (MSP2008/1/A57/P4/1 and MSP2008/1/B122/P2/1) will be published in a preliminary report currently in preparation. On the Malta Survey Project see Vella *et al.* forthcoming.

¹⁹ In 1935 the 'Ordinance for the Preservation of Fertile Soil' was passed to ensure that no soil could be buried beneath any construction. This enforced the removal and relocation of soils in order to safeguard this precious resource (Azzopardi 1995: 51).

crushed and pounded with lime for the waterproofing of roofs can dramatically affect the interpretation of locating new archaeological sites during field-walking surveys²⁰.

Regardless, the proximity of the Ta' Kaççatura Roman villa²¹, might explain the appearance of Punic and Roman sherds at this prehistoric site. Besides the sherds presented above, two other sherds were reported by Murray and published in her final excavation report. One is described as a 'fine hard ware, lines painted. This piece suggests Greek influence, and may be dated by its style to about B.C. 600'²². The original sherd identified by Murray was not re-located, however, a close look at the illustration she provides (Fig. 5.3a) does indicate that the sherd may have belonged to an early local *kylix*. The short note annotating Murray's figure ('pale buff, red lines'), and the depiction of an odd carination close to the rim as seen from the profile of the drawing, help place the type of *kylix* to one commonly found in Phoenician tombs in the Maltese Islands, which are dated to about the seventh and sixth centuries BC²³. The second sherd is a ribbed wall fragment most likely Late Roman in date (Figs 5.3b)²⁴. Regarding the latter sherd, Murray states that 'ribbed sherds, similar in material and form, were found in the ruins of the Roman villa in the Wied Dalam, not half a mile away,' thus admitting that Roman sherds could have found their way to the prehistoric site²⁵. However, the considerable lack of evidence for wide-scale Punic- and Roman-period activity at Borġ in-Nadur led Murray to conclude that:

[...] the use of the [megalithic] buildings came to an end in the Bronze Age, perhaps because of the ruinous condition, perhaps because of a change in religion. The proximity of the Roman villa in the Wied Dalam makes it probable that Roman pottery and coins would have been found on the site had the temple or chapels been in use at that period. Though not conclusive proof as to the date of

²⁰ Dudley Buxton and Hort 1921: 131; Luttrell 1975: 13; Vella *et al.* forthcoming.

²¹ The Roman villa was excavated by Thomas Ashby in 1915 (Ashby 1915: 52-66).

²² Murray 1923: 37, pl. 12, no. 95.

²³ The form closely resembles Sagona *kylix* form II: 1 which has concentric red lines painted throughout the interior of the vessel (Sagona 2002: 197, fig. 343).

²⁴ Murray 1929: 18, pl. 27, no. 287.

²⁵ Murray 1929: 18.

the abandonment of these megalithic buildings, the absence of either Punic or Roman remains points to the fact that the buildings were disused before those dates²⁶.

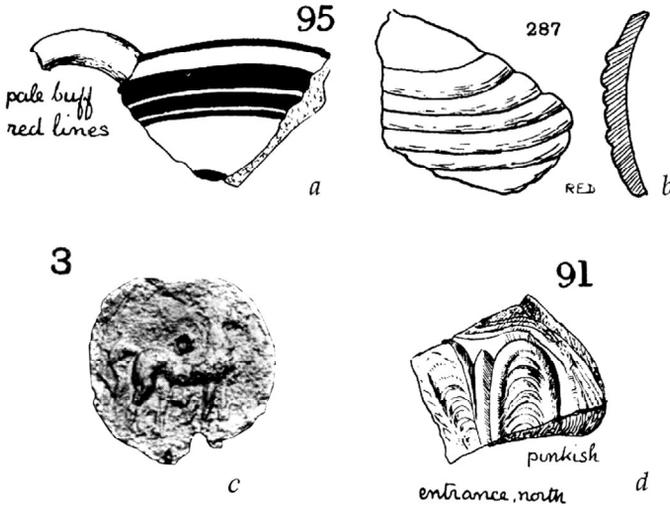


Figure 5.3. The illustrations recorded by Murray of the few post-prehistoric objects excavated at Borg in-Nadur (a, d Murray 1923: pl. 12; b Murray 1929: pl. 27; c Murray 1929: pl. 17).

Apart from potsherds, a Carthaginian coin assigned a 3rd-century BC date (Fig. 5.3c)²⁷ and a ceramic fragment of a mould-made relief-decorated tile or plaque (Fig. 5.3d) of unknown date are also specifically mentioned by Murray; however, the moulded fragment escapes any written mention in her report, but is only illustrated²⁸. Fortunately, this same fragment has been relocated in the stores of the National Museum of Archaeology, Valletta, and is described above (BN/PX/8; Fig. 5.1).

David Trump's 1959 excavations at Borg in-Nadur also yielded several post-prehistoric potsherds. Trump assigns their presence to

²⁶ Murray 1929: 3.

²⁷ Murray 1929: 3, 15, pl. 17.3. Going by the evidence available, Dr Suzanne Frey-Kupper (pers. comm.) is willing to accept this date and provenance for the coin.

²⁸ Murray 1923: pl. 12, no. 91.

the building and continual cultivation of a field directly above the Bronze Age hut remains²⁹.

The remains of the Ta' Kaċċatura villa, however, are not the only Punic/Roman period remains within the vicinity of the Borġ in-Nadur site. At least two Punic rock-cut shaft tombs and a Late Roman catacomb have been recorded in the past; however, the position of only one tomb, located north-west of the villa, is currently known³⁰. No archaeological material was recovered from any of the tombs, making them difficult to date³¹. In the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century both the prehistoric remains of Borġ in-Nadur and the Ta' Kaċċatura villa were mistaken for the location of the Temple of Melkart/Hercules mentioned by the ancient geographer Ptolemy³². Numerous rock-cut tombs of Phoenician/Punic association are noted to have surrounded this presumed temple³³. Therefore, a reference to rifled tombs made by Caruana, and the fact that the only tomb re-located to date is devoid of any contents, might point towards the discard of broken tomb furniture close to the prehistoric site. Consequentially, the *kylix* fragment recovered by Murray (no. 95) and the amphora sherd (BN/P/2) belong to vessels that are very often found in Phoenician and Punic tomb contexts; the *kylix* more so than the amphora³⁴.

It is not uncommon for Punic and Roman pottery to be found in the latest stratified deposits of prehistoric sites. Late-dated pottery very often signals the re-occupation of prominent megalithic structures visible in the open landscape, or else activities related to the removal of easily accessible stone for use elsewhere³⁵. The Punic and Roman sanctuary of Tas-Silġ is by far the most significant and well-documented case of this conscious reutilisation of prehistoric

²⁹ Trump 1961: 256.

³⁰ Caruana 1898: 45, pl. 1, figs 2-3; Ashby 1915: 66; Buhagiar 1986: 237-239, fig. 72.

³¹ Caruana 1898: 45; Buhagiar 1986: 237.

³² Ptolemy *Geography* IV, 3, 13.

³³ Caruana 1898: 45; Wignacourt 1914: 107.

³⁴ *Kylikes* of this sort have to date only been recovered from tomb and sanctuary (Tas-Silġ) contexts within the Maltese islands (Sagona 2000: 89, fig. 10.7; 2002: 195-200).

³⁵ Bonanno 2007: 109.

monuments. A series of Phoenician, Punic and Roman temple structures, each following the earlier defined axis set by the prehistoric occupiers, were all superimposed one above the other, over the original Tarxien-phase megalithic temple³⁶. On a lesser scale, evidence of Punic and Roman activity at the megalithic temples of Tarxien³⁷, Kordin³⁸, Hal Far³⁹ and others have also been reported. The presence of a few potsherds at Borġ in-Nadur and the evidence of Roman-period field-ploughing from Trump's excavation, suggest that re-occupation or re-use was low key here. Instead, other sites, such as Tas-Silġ and Tarxien, appear to have been favoured by later settlers for setting up their enduring structures.

In view of the restricted number of strategic places surrounded by fertile valleys and serviced with water springs on the islands of Malta and Gozo, it is no wonder that the reutilisation of certain sites may have been favoured. It is also possible to imagine that the visible megaliths may have drawn later settlers to these monuments; however, other considerations could have dictated the range and intensity of Punic and Roman re-occupation⁴⁰.

To conclude, although devoid of a specific findspot and limited in quantity, the post-prehistoric pottery fragments presented here are useful bits of material culture that can tell us something about the history of Borġ in-Nadur. As stated elsewhere⁴¹, more consideration into post-prehistoric material culture on predominantly prehistoric sites can reveal considerably more information about past attitudes towards abandoned monuments in a revisited landscape.

³⁶ Ciasca 1993: 226; Ciasca and Rossignani 2000: 52; Recchia 2004-2005: 239-240; Rossignani 2004-2005: 356.

³⁷ Evans 1971: 117, 135.

³⁸ Ashby *et al.* 1913: 37; Evans 1971: 72.

³⁹ MAR 1922: 4; Evans 1971: 22.

⁴⁰ For further discussion of this point see Grima and Mallia, this volume (chapter 8).

⁴¹ Bonanno 2007: 111.

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