

MALTA DURING PHOENICIAN, ROMAN AND BYZANTINE TIMES:  
OUTSIDE INFLUENCE AND ORIGINAL TRAITS

### **The Geography**

Malta occupies a distinctive place in the geo-scape<sup>1</sup> of the central Mediterranean, right in the centre of that sea, almost at equal distances from the sea's east and west boundaries, and its north and south continents. That is a reality that humans have not been able to change. Whether Malta's geographical identity is African or European - or neither, or both - depends on its geological formation, its position on the map, and on its climate; all of which determine the bio-environment (including the flora and fauna) of a place. The African geological identity of Malta has been firmly established by the geologists.<sup>2</sup> Malta forms part of the African tectonic plate that incorporates the southern tip of the Sicilian triangle, up to the southern fringes of Etna. Malta's position on the map makes it closer to Europe (only 90 km from the southern tip of Sicily) than to any point on the African littoral (300 km or more), though it should be kept in mind that Malta lies on a more southerly latitude than parts of the north African countries of Tunisia and Algeria. The present climate, which has probably changed to some degree over the millennia, is neither European nor African; it is, we are told by geographers, typically Mediterranean; and so is its bio-environment, characterised as it is by its semi-arid, typically Mediterranean maquis. Comprehensively, Malta's geographical identity is fundamentally Mediterranean. No human can change that.

What humans have been able to change, and have in fact moulded, is the geopolitical-scape of the archipelago and, as a result of that, they also shaped its geocultural-scape. As we shall see, the Phoenicians introduced the Oriental Semitic cultural element as from the second half of the eighth century BC and incorporated the islands into a predominantly western Mediterranean political sphere from the

fifth century BC. This was interrupted in 218 BC by Malta's incorporation within the Roman Empire, which gravitated on Rome as its centre of power but in time incorporating all the lands washed by the Mediterranean and extending deeply into the European continent at its western end and, at times, deeply into southwest Asia (that area we are now accustomed to refer to as the Middle East) on the east end. This situation lasted for almost eight centuries, until Malta was annexed to the Eastern Roman Empire, better known as the Byzantine Empire, in AD 535. An important cultural factor, which must have started in the last two centuries of Roman rule - at the latest - but reached its zenith in the Byzantine period, is the Christianization of the islands. All this was brought to an abrupt end with the Arab invasion of AD 870.

### **The Ancients' Perception**

It is hard to tell whether ancient geographers were influenced by the political vicissitudes of the archipelago, and if so to what degree, when they classified them geographically. Diodorus Siculus most certainly was (Diod. v, 12, 1-4). Writing in the first century BC, when Malta had already been integrated into the Roman empire for two whole centuries, this Sicilian historian was still referring to Gozo and Malta as 'Phoenician colonies' (*apoikoi*). We can consider Diodorus' statement as a historical anachronism, but it must surely reflect an ingrained, long-lasting perception among certain quarters of Republican Roman society of the archipelago's role in Rome's wars of conquest.<sup>3</sup> Diodorus' predecessor, Skylax of Caryanda, better known as Pseudo-Skylax, writing in the fourth century BC, was much more correct when he placed the islands in the political sphere of the western Phoenician colony of Carthage. Skylax is the first ancient writer to associate Malta and Gozo with Africa since he mentions them in the last section of his work, the section dedicated to Libya (i.e. North Africa), precisely under the subsection dedicated to Carthage. He gives the geographical position of the two small islands, 'to the east of Cape Bon' (Skylax 111).

A later Greek geographer, Strabo (64 BC - after AD 24), shifts his perception somewhat and gives the distance (500 stadia) between Malta and Cossura (Pantelleria) (*Geog.* XVII, 3. 16), and the distance that separates Malta and Gozo (88 miles) from Cape Pachynus (*Geog.* VI, 2.11). His points of departure are, in fact, Africa in the first instance, and Sicily in the second one. In the author's words, his geography was intended for political leaders and to impart practical wisdom, such as distances between landfalls for the sake of navigators. From this we may assume that there were frequent connections between Malta and these two destinations.

Ptolemy, the best known ancient geographer, writing his *Geography* in the second century AD, lists five landmarks concerning the Maltese islands and gives their latitudes and longitudes (Ptol. *Geogr.* 4.3.13). These were: two cities, Melite for

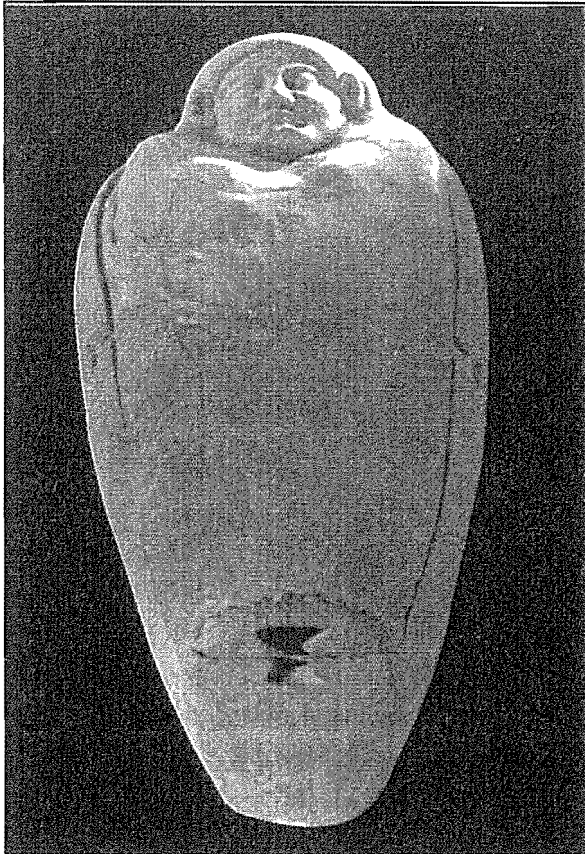
Malta and Gaulos for Gozo; two sanctuaries, one dedicated to Herakles and the other to Juno; and a place called 'Chersonesos' meaning 'headland', to which some editions add, in my view erroneously, the word 'polis', implying that there was a third city by that name. But what interests us in this context is Ptolemy's treatment of the Maltese islands in his section dedicated to Africa, as Skylax had done before him. Contemporary with Ptolemy is the *Itinerarium Antoninianum* (or *Antonini Augusti*). It only mentions Malta as a station for ships plying from Italy to Africa.<sup>4</sup> So does Lucian of Samosata who in his *The Ship* suggests that Malta was a port of call for heavy cargo vessels carrying corn from Egypt to Pozzuoli in Italy.<sup>5</sup>

### The Historical and Archaeological Records

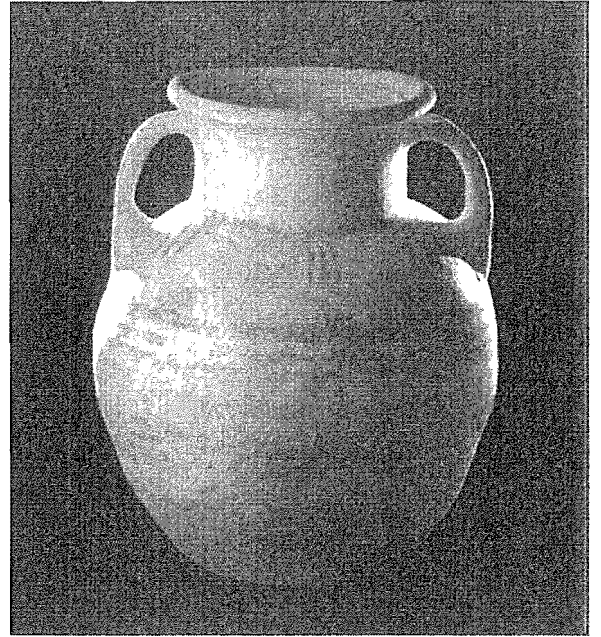
Had Malta been colonised by the Greeks the whole course of history of the archipelago would have been different.<sup>6</sup> Why the Greeks failed to do so is difficult to tell: probably because they were preceded there by the Phoenicians; possibly because the topography of the islands, lacking the extensive fertile plains they preferred for the cultivation of grain, did not attract them sufficiently. Whatever the reason, there is no evidence of a Greek colony here. Had it been so, the archaeological heritage of the first five centuries of Malta's ancient history would have been very different. The artistic and artisanal repertory would have been to a great extent identical to that found in neighbouring Sicily and southern Italy to our north and in Cyrenaica, Libya, to our southeast. With the strongly Classical bias of my professional formation, I find that I deeply miss the refined and elegant products of Greek art of the Archaic and Classical age. Can you imagine the beauty of typical Greek temples, in typical Malta stone, standing against the silhouetted heights of Rabat, or on the side of one of the hills against the typical Maltese landscape, green in winter and glaring white in summer?

On the other hand, you might say, this would have made us merely a part of Sicily, a micro-insular cultural extension of that largest island of the Mediterranean. What in fact happened, you might add, is even more significant because, as had already happened 3000 years earlier, Malta underwent a cultural development which distinguished it from the cultural destiny of neighbouring Sicily. The way things turned out, Malta was given, once more, the opportunity of asserting a different cultural identity from that of its immediate neighbours to the north. This cultural identity is marked by its Semitic Phoenician character, a cultural legacy that, we should not forget, is shared by Sicily,<sup>7</sup> by today's Italy itself,<sup>8</sup> and, further afield, Spain,<sup>9</sup> not to mention the western half of our north African neighbour to our south, namely, Libyan Tripolitania.<sup>10</sup>

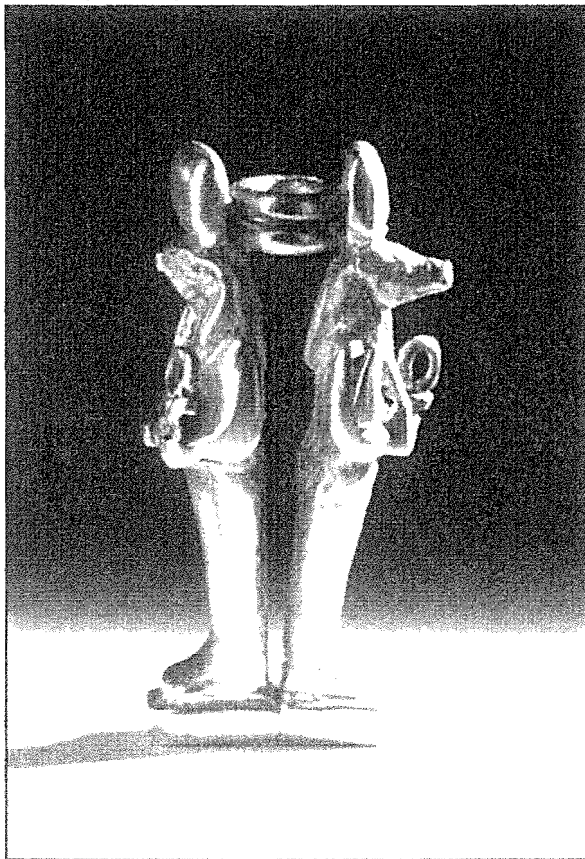
Malta's Phoenician legacy, apart from the language which survived well into the Roman rule, consists of a whole array of underground rock-cut tombs that are scattered throughout the landscape of the two islands, with a concentration in the collective cemeteries just outside their two urban centres. These tombs have yielded



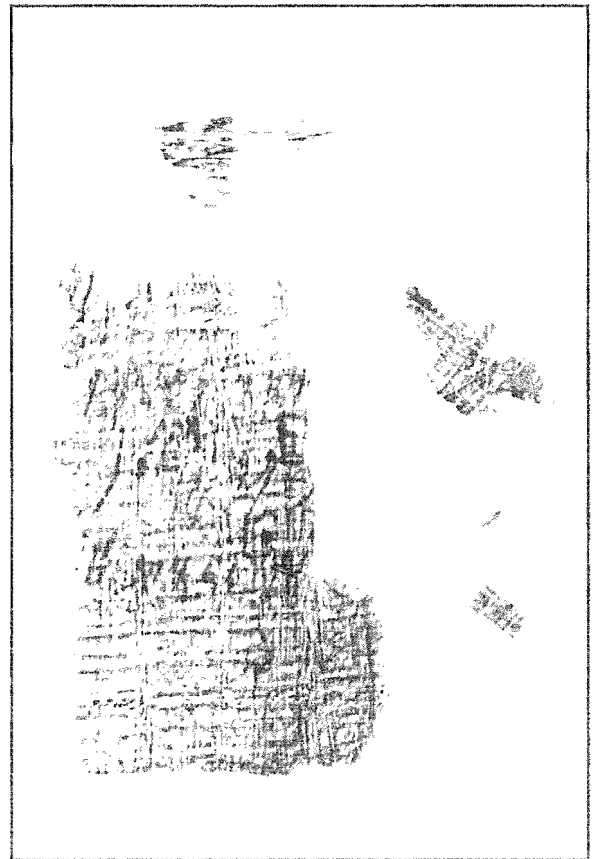
*Clay anthropomorphic sarcophagus (fifth century BC) from Ghar Barka, Rabat*



*Clay amphora of the seventh century BC*



*Gold amulet of Horus and Anubis (seventh-sixth century BC) from Ghajn Klieb, Rabat*



*Phoenician papyrus from Tal-Virtù, Rabat*

a rich repertory of ceramic furniture, obviously buried with the deceased for some purpose in the afterlife. Occasionally, this characteristically Phoenician (or Punic) ceramic repertoire included the odd Greek import, certainly treasured for its fine quality and painted decoration. The best known are the proto-Corinthian kotyle and eastern Greek 'bird bowl' found in a tomb at Ġhajj Qajjet. Unmistakable are also the occasional pieces of personal jewellery, the golden ones being rare but of immensely high aesthetic and religious symbolic value. Foremost among these is the solid gold pendant from a tomb at Ġhajj Klieb, representing two Egyptian gods (Horus and Anubis) soldered together back to back. This jewel, together with another pendant from a tomb at Tal-Virtù, this time of bronze but containing a small sheet of papyrus with a prayer written over a drawn figure of the goddess Isis, represent an early introduction of the Egyptian cultural component into Maltese Phoenician art and religious thought.<sup>11</sup>

Although virtually no structures have come to light belonging to the two Phoenician urban centres of the islands,<sup>12</sup> their existence is corroborated by the ancient writers (mainly Pseudo-Skylax). Their location, corresponding to Mdina and part of Rabat for Malta and to part of modern Victoria/Rabat and its Citadel for Gozo, is indicated by the distribution of tombs. These urban centres were the precursors of the two cities that were attributed by later writers to the two islands in the following, Roman period.

Undoubtedly, the two urban settlements had their own religious establishments to cater for the spiritual needs of the community, but no trace of them has yet come to light, except perhaps the reported find of a large number of pots containing bones of animals and birds (one version states 'of children and small animals'), made inside a cavity in the vicinity of Mdina in 1819. This find seems to have resuscitated the possibility of the existence of a tophet in this area, near the Dominican monastery of Rabat, the same area from which two inscriptions mentioning a sacrifice to Baal Hammon originate.<sup>13</sup> But a more prominent sanctuary was set up by the Phoenicians away from the town, on top of a small hill on one side of Marsaxlokk harbour. The Tas-Silġ sanctuary was dedicated to the goddess Ashtart and must have been frequented by mariners visiting this harbour, as well as by the local inhabitants. The archaeological contents of this period, unearthed by excavations conducted in the 1960s and the ongoing ones, show three major cultural components, which are representative of the prevailing culture of the island, namely, the dominating Phoenician-Punic one, mixed with a sprinkling of Egyptian (or Egyptianising) imports, as well as the Hellenic and, later, Hellenistic one.

The Romans took the islands in 218 BC, the first year of the Second Punic War, the long war the Romans sustained against Carthage, the latter championed by her greatest general, Hannibal. The Roman navy had visited Malta at least once during the First Punic War, but on that occasion they limited themselves to pillaging and burning whatever they could. For the second time, they met no resistance, even though a Punic garrison of 2000 soldiers was stationed there. This

time, the Roman invaders realised the strategic value of the islands, even if a negative one, and annexed them, incorporating them in their first overseas province, that of Sicily. This attachment to Sicily accounts for a much more intensive commercial and cultural intercourse with the larger neighbouring island throughout Roman and the Byzantine rule, including the use of the Greek language in the coin legends and in inscriptions.

With notable exceptions, when they meted out harsh punishments for stubborn resistance, the Romans were quite liberal in their treatment of conquered peoples. They were not interested in eradicating local customs, religious beliefs and cultures, as long as their subjects behaved themselves, paid taxes and respected the laws of Rome. Their treatment of Malta was no exception; they gave it the same treatment as to most Sicilian cities. They even allowed it to mint coins, albeit only of bronze, of small denomination and for internal circulation, for the first two centuries of their domination, practically throughout the late-Republican age. What is strange, but not entirely surprising, is the fact that the figurative motifs on the earlier coins were Orientalising (in fact, mostly Egyptianising) and the legends in Punic.<sup>14</sup> This is only symptomatic of the general survival of Punic culture in the first two centuries of Roman rule. Such continuity can be traced also in the religious worship, the burial customs, the use of the native language, and in the pottery production.

According to the orator Cicero, where taxes were concerned, the cities of Sicily, including Malta, were accorded a special treatment: instead of becoming *stipendiarii*, they were allowed to continue to pay taxes under the tithe system they had been accustomed to before the Roman conquest. The Maltese islands were administered by the governor of Sicily, who represented Rome and was assisted by other officials. One such governor, Verres, made a name for himself for the corrupt style of his administration and caused Malta to be mentioned repeatedly by the lawyer Cicero in the prosecution speeches against him in Rome. Through them we know that Malta produced fine draperies that found an appreciative market abroad. We also learn of the international fame, veneration and respect enjoyed by its sanctuary of Juno, comparable to that of the same divinity on Samos; and of its rich treasure, most of which was pillaged by Verres during his term of office in 73-71 BC. It is possible that the inhabitants of Malta, along with those of the other cities of Sicily were given full Roman citizenship, soon after 44 BC, by the triumvir Antony who was, in the immediate aftermath of Caesar's assassination, the most powerful man in Rome. But this privilege was short-lived because Octavian, the future first emperor, rescinded that privilege in 26 BC.<sup>15</sup>

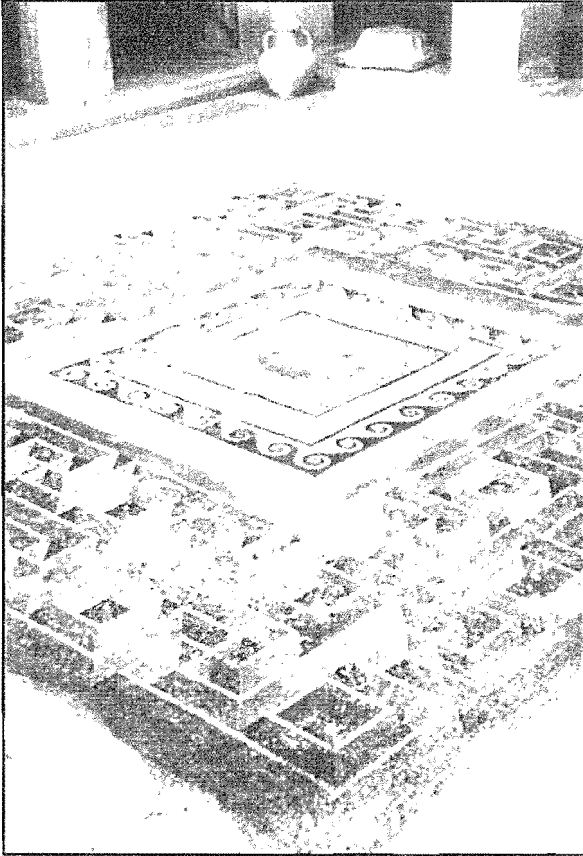
Things started to change after the fundamental constitutional reform in Rome in 27 BC when the Republic was replaced by a monarchic regime. The metropolis and, consequently the whole empire, started to be ruled by one man, the Emperor. This change is reflected in the Maltese epigraphic and archaeological documentation from the first century AD onwards. The Maltese continued to pay taxes to their Roman masters but seem to have lived in relative prosperity brought about by the *pax romana*. A scatter of villas, often enjoying beautiful scenery in the

Maltese countryside, may have belonged to wealthy locals or foreign, probably Italian, settlers.<sup>16</sup> Most of them had olive groves attached to them, whose product was processed for the production of olive oil in a specially designated part of the villas. The most spectacular of such agriculturally-oriented villas is the one of San Pawl Milqi. That at Ramla Bay, on the other hand, located only a few metres from the sea shore, seems to have been of a purely residential type.

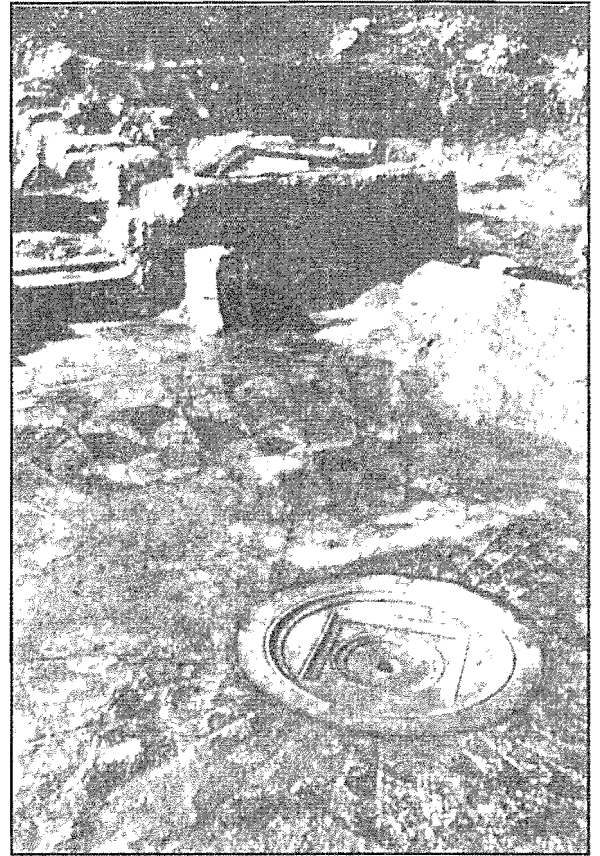
The town house of Rabat, built to high specifications around 100 BC, with floors covered by a rich cycle of mosaics of the highest quality, continued to be inhabited by prominent members of the community.<sup>17</sup> Around AD 50, the last occupier of the house had enough means and sufficiently strong motivation to furnish it with a cycle of imperial portrait statues representing the reigning emperor Claudius and some members of his family. At about the same time, ten years later in fact, the chief man of Malta (the *protos*) offered hospitality to St Paul when the latter was shipwrecked on the island, according to tradition an episode of tremendous importance in the islands' history.<sup>18</sup> As there is no specific mention of conversions to Christianity in the account of Paul's three-months' stay on the island, and as the earliest archaeological evidence of widespread Christian cult dates only to the fourth century AD, the claim of an early, apostolic Christianisation of Malta can only base itself on the strong personality of Paul and his proselytising track record.

It is in imperial times that the central power at Rome judged certain religious sects, especially the Christian one, as a threatening force to the stability of the imperial authority. Christianity was banned and subjected to extended episodes of organised, cruel persecution. It is difficult to tell whether these persecutions affected the Maltese population in any way, simply because we have no idea how strong the Christian following was, if any, before the emperor Constantine embraced Christianity and encouraged its proliferation throughout the empire by the Edict of Milan (AD 313).

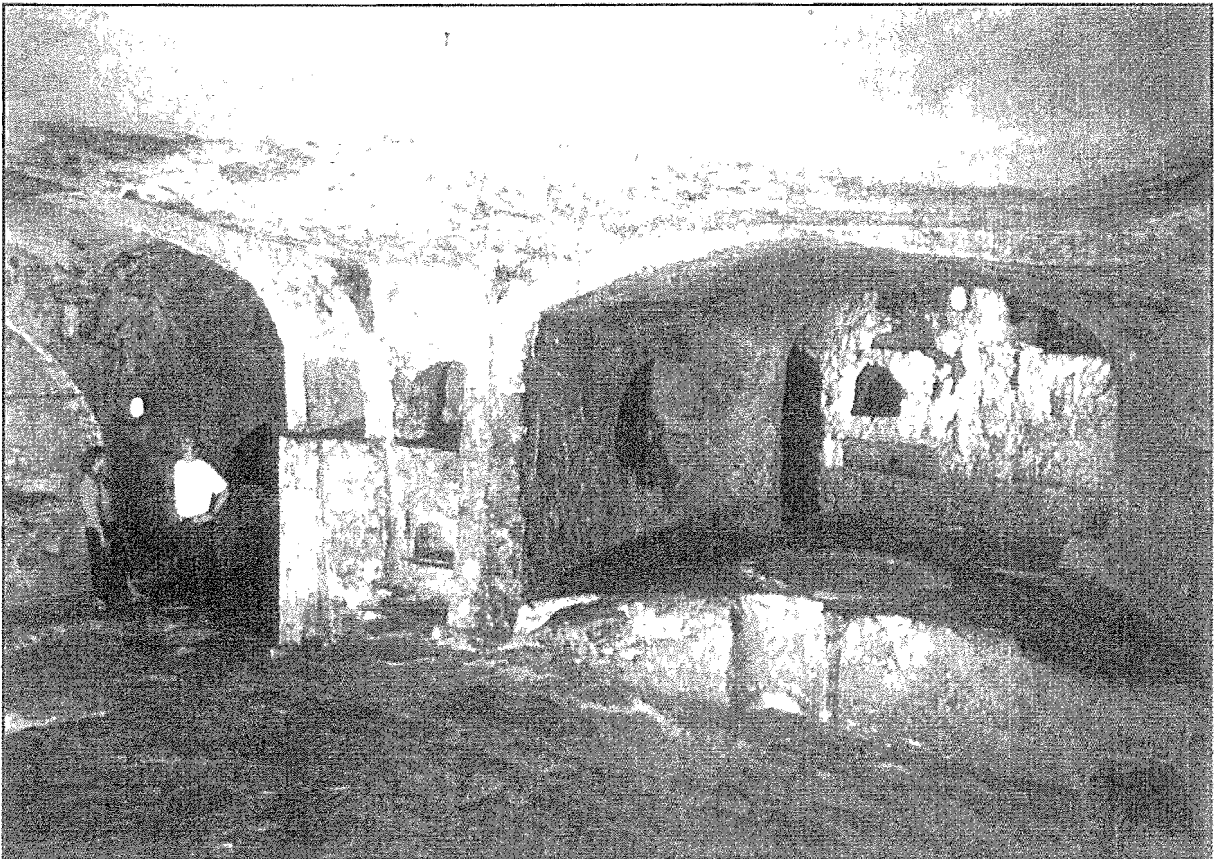
Malta is thought to have been absorbed by the Byzantine empire in AD 535 when Sicily and its islands were conquered by Justinian's general Belisarius. In the period spanning the second half of the fifth century and the Byzantine conquest, Malta might have been occupied by barbarians, Vandals from North Africa and Ostrogoths from Italy.<sup>19</sup> All the early Christian tombs and catacombs date to the period that spans from late Antiquity (fourth-fifth centuries) to Byzantine times. Among them were a few family hypogea which were used by a sizeable Jewish community. A few inscriptions, in Greek, refer to members of this community, including the head of the council of elders (*gerousiarch*) and his wife (Eulogia) who held the office of elder (*presbytera*) in the Jewish synagogue.<sup>20</sup> Associated archaeological material originates in North Africa (Tunisia and Tripolitania), Italy and the eastern Mediterranean. A Christian basilica was built over the courtyard of the preceding pagan sanctuary of Juno at Tas-Silġ sometime in the fifth century. Its baptistery had a drain hole at the bottom through which a group of coins of several Byzantine emperors found their way. One of them, with the effigy of emperor Constantine IV (AD 654-668), was of gold.



*The central mosaic of the Roman domus at Rabat (first century BC)*



*The tepidarium mosaic at the Roman Baths in Ghajn Tuffieha*



*General view of St Paul's catacombs at Rabat (Photo: MTA)*



The Arab invasion of 870 brought about the end of a millennium, during which the Maltese islands formed part of the Greco-Roman world, and the beginning of another era, characterised by a different civilisation based on another religion of the Book, Islam.

## Notes

- 1 I request the reader's indulgence on the adoption of this and two other neologisms - I believe they are so. The words geo-scape, geopolitical-scape and geocultural-scape have been adopted to express the respective extension of the concept of 'landscape' in the English sense, the lay of the land.
- 2 M. Pedley, M. Hughes Clarke and P. Galea, *Limestone Isles in a Crystal Sea* (Malta, 2002), 23-34.
- 3 A. Bonanno, *Roman Malta: the Archaeological Heritage of the Maltese islands - Malta Romana: il Patrimonio Archeologico delle isole Maltesi* (Rome, 1992), 13, n. 2. This anachronism may also be attributed to the historian's uncritical, sometimes confused use of his sources.
- 4 O. Cunta, *Itinerarium Antonini Augusti* (Leipzig, 1929), 518.
- 5 J. Busuttill, 'Maltese harbours in Antiquity', *Melita Historica* V, 4 (1971), 305-07.
- 6 This statement is correct, but to a limited extent, in the sense that Roman domination would have been inevitable, whether Malta was previously Greek or Phoenician. What would have changed was the ethnic composition of the islands and their culture, both of which endured long beyond the Roman conquest.
- 7 Albeit limited to its north-western tip (consisting of Palermo, Motya and Solunto) which was Phoenician to all intents and purposes.
- 8 Italy's western island of Sardinia (the second largest island of the Mediterranean Sea), was also colonised and acculturated by the Phoenicians.
- 9 Most of south and southeast Spain, up to the Ebro river, was in the Phoenician political, *ergo* cultural, sphere.
- 10 Even today Libya is geographically and culturally divided into distinct parts, Tripolitania in the west, marked by three Phoenician colonies (Leptis Magna, Sabratha and Oea), and Cyrenaica in the east, named after the main city (Cyrene) of a group of Greek colonies.
- 11 See T. C. Gouder and B. Rocco, 'Un talismano bronzeo da Malta contenente un nastro di papiro con iscrizione fenicia', *StMagreb*, VII (1975), 1-18, and N. Cutajar, 'Recent discoveries and the archaeology of Mdina', *Treasures of Malta*, VIII, 1 (Christmas 2001), 79-85.
- 12 Recent investigations under the Xara Palace Hotel have reportedly uncovered a Phoenician wall (Cutajar, 'Recent discoveries').
- 13 Shortland Jones, 'The Phoenician connection', *Treasures of Malta*, V, 1 (Christmas 1998), 92. See A. Frendo and N. Vella, 'Les îles phéniciennes du milieu de la mer', *Dossiers d'Archéologie* 267 (October 2001), 55.
- 14 Not surprising, because other cities like Palermo and Pantelleria did the same.
- 15 A. Bonanno, (forthcoming). *Phoenician, Punic and Roman Malta* (Malta).
- 16 For an account of these villas and their contribution to the Maltese economy in the Roman period, see A. Bonanno, 'Distribution of villas and some aspects of the Maltese economy in the Roman period', *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, VI, 4 (1977), 73-81.
- 17 On the architecture, mosaic decoration and sculpture of this house see Bonanno, *Roman Malta*, 21-24.
- 18 *Acts* xxvii, 37-44; xxxviii, 1-11. The controversy over the Christianisation of Malta is discussed in M. Buhagiar, 'The St Paul shipwreck controversy: an assessment of the source material', in K. Sciberras (ed.), *Proceedings of History Week 1993* (Malta, 1997), 181-213.
- 19 The most comprehensive account on this period remains T. S. Brown, 'Byzantine Malta: A Discussion of the Sources', in A. T. Luttrell (ed.) *Medieval Malta* (London, 1975), 71-86. See also

- C. Dalli, *Iż-Żmien Nofsani Malti* (Malta, 2002), 9-24.
- 20 R. S. Kraemer, 'A new inscription from Malta and the question of women elders in the Diaspora Jewish communities', *Harvard Theological Review* 3-4 (1980), 431-38.