

HISTORICAL SOCIETY

PROCEEDINGS OF HISTORY WEEK 1984



edited by
STANLEY FIORINI

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MALTA

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EDITORIAL PREFACE

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THE MALTESE ARTISTIC HERITAGE OF THE ROMAN PERIOD

ANTHONY BONANNO

Studies on Roman Art in Malta

As for many other fields of the Maltese cultural heritage the study of Roman art in Malta starts with the monumental work of the 17th century of which the Maltese nation is justifiably proud: the *Descrittione* by Giovanni Francesco Abela.⁽¹⁾ More than a century before the German scholar J.J. Winckelmann laid the foundations for a history of ancient art,⁽²⁾ Abela was already publishing in that work a series of ancient artistic objects some of which he had acquired for his own personal collection while others were scattered in different parts of the islands.⁽³⁾ Abela hardly ever attempted a stylistic appreciation of the works of art he published whereas he was sometimes far too rash in his historical judgements, although his identifications were generally correct.⁽⁴⁾ The art objects described and illustrated by Abela were also included in the enlarged edition of his work by Giovanni Antonio Ciantar in the 18th century,⁽⁵⁾ and in other descriptions of the Maltese islands written by both Maltese and foreign writers in that same century and in the following one.⁽⁶⁾

Certainly the most precious treasure of Roman art in the possession of the Maltese nation was unearthed all together in 1881 during the excavation of the well-known Roman town villa (or house) at Rabat, just outside the fortifications of Mdina. It consisted of a rich collection of polychrome mosaics, both geometric and figurative, and a group of sculptures of a very fine quality. However, the gentleman who conducted the excavation and published their report, A.A. Caruana, made only a brief mention of the mosaics and sculptures and illustrated them with drawings and a photograph without attempting an identification.⁽⁷⁾ Albert Mayr, just after the

1. G.F. Abela, *Della Descrittione di Malta, Isola del Mare Siciliano con le sue Antichità ed altre Notizie*, Malta (1647).
2. J.J. Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, Dresden (1764); id. *Monumenti Antichi Inediti*, Rome (1767).
3. Abela *Descrittione*, pp.36,153-4,156-7,172-83,192-3,204,207,210-1,216-20,248. For the circumstances in which Abela bequeathed his collection to the Jesuits see A. Bonanno, Giovanni Francesco Abela's legacy to the Jesuit College, *Proceedings of History Week 1983* (ed. M. Buhagiar), Malta (1984) pp.27-37.
4. In the case of the statue of Hercules, which is now generally accepted as a modern copy, Abela (*Descrittione*, pp.156-7) betrays his ingenuity and inability to distinguish ancient from modern. Cfr. A. Bonanno, Quintinus and the location of the Temple of Hercules at Marsaxlokk, *Melita Historica* VIII.3 (1982) pp.197-9.
5. G.F. Abela - G.A. Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata*, Malta (1772-80).
6. E.G., J. Houel, *Voyage Pittoresque des Iles de Sicile, de Malte et de Lipari*, IV, Paris (1787); I. de Boisgelin, *Ancient and Modern Malta*, London (1805); V. Denon, *Voyage en Sicile*, Paris (1788); O. Bres, *Malta Antica Illustrata co' Monumenti e coll'Istoria*, Rome (1816); C. Vassallo, *Dei Monumenti Antichi del Gruppo di Malta*, Valletta (1851); A.A. Caruana, *Report on the Phoenician and Roman Antiquities in the Group of the Islands of Malta*, Malta (1882).
7. *Id.*, *Recent Discoveries at Notabile*, Malta (1881).

turn of the century, dealt with both the mosaics and the sculptures but did not provide illustrations.⁽⁸⁾ He identified the subject of one of the small square mosaics vaguely as "a mythological representation", whereas he was more specific in his identification of the sculptures, in particular that of the male head which he attributed to Claudius.

In his long article on 'Roman Malta' of 1915 Thomas Ashby compiled a catalogue of all the pieces of Greek and Roman sculpture then existing in the state collection. His descriptions are, however, disappointingly brief albeit more detailed than those of Caruana and Mayr. Ashby treated the mosaics from the Rabat house much more generously than his predecessors and described them with greater detail and some comparisons.⁽⁹⁾ An appendix to his article, signed by G. Mc Rushforth, deals at some length with the iconography of one of the *emblemata* found in the same house.⁽¹⁰⁾ This subject was later taken up by the German Ernst Pfuhl.⁽¹¹⁾ In his monumental publication on Pompeian mosaics another German scholar, Erich Pernice, presented a comprehensive appreciation of the Rabat mosaics and classed them amongst the finest mosaics of the Roman world.⁽¹²⁾

Five articles published by the Italian P.C. Sestieri in the 1930s are concerned with Maltese sculpture of the Classical age. The most extensive one is about the theme of the *Doloneia*, that is, the episode in the *Iliad* involving Odysseus and Diomedes who ambush the Trojan Dolon, which is represented on a marble slab said to have been found in the same house of Rabat.⁽¹³⁾ Another article is inspired by the small draped torso of Artemis reputedly found in Malta.⁽¹⁴⁾ The author makes a critical exposition of this particular type of Artemis the Huntress and makes it derive from a prototype of the third century B.C. In the third article Sestieri produced a valid stylistic and iconographic appraisal of two Roman portraits, one of Antoninus and the other of an unknown individual of the third century A.D.⁽¹⁵⁾ Also in the field of portraiture is a study of four busts with common iconographic elements which the same writer wrongly identifies as the product of Maltese Punic art under the influence of Roman art.⁽¹⁶⁾ Lastly in 1940 Sestieri returns to a theme from female mythological iconography and discusses the Amazon attributed to the Greek artist Phradmon taking his point of departure from a mutilated torso of an Amazon found in the harbour at Marsa in 1865.⁽¹⁷⁾

8. A. Mayr, *Die Insel Malta im Altertum*, Munich (1909) pp. 144 – 147. fig. 35.

9. T. Ashby, Roman Malta, *Journal of Roman Studies* 5 (1915) pp.35 – 8.

10. *Ibid.*, pp.79 – 80. The same one vaguely identified by Mayr (note 8).

11. E. Pfuhl, Zum Satyrmosaik in Malta, *Römische Mitteilungen* 52 (1937) p.275, with previous bibliography.

12. E. Pernice, *Die Hellenistische Kunst in Pompeji*, vol. IV: *Pavimente und figürliche Mosaiken*, Berlin (1938) pp.6 – 7, 9 – 12, 125 – 8, 137, 141, 160, 165.

13. P.C. Sestieri, Un rilievo di Malta con la rappresentazione della Doloneia, *Atti dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Rendiconti* 13 (1938) pp.21 – 43.

14. *Id.*, Sculture Maltesi I. L'Artemide di Malta, *Archivio Storico di Malta* 10 (1938 – 9) pp.153 – 63; *id.*, Diana. Venatrix, *Rivista dell'Istituto Nazionale di Archeologia e Storia dell'Arte* 8 (1941) pp.107 – 28; H. Marwitz, Antiken der Sammlung Hermann Bunemann, München, *Antike Plastik* 6, Berlin (1967) pp.50 – 4.

15. P.C. Sestieri, Due teste del Museo della Valletta, *Bullettino del Museo dell'Impero Romano* 7 (1936) pp.67 – 74.

16. *Id.*, Sculture Maltesi II, *Archivio Storico di Malta* 10 (1938 – 9) pp.231 – 238.

17. *Id.*, Scultura Maltesi III. L'Amazzone, *Archivio Storico di Malta* 11 (1940) pp.65 – 79.

In the pre-War years another Italian scholar, Luigi Maria Ugolini, directed his interest to Maltese Classical sculpture. In the Maltese context Ugolini is much better known for his extensive and partially published study on Maltese prehistory,⁽¹⁸⁾ and his contribution in the field of Roman sculpture is not entirely a happy one because he made the wrong identification which is still repeated at the present time. In his article on the beautiful head of a Julio-Claudian Emperor discovered in the 1881 excavations at Rabat, Ugolini identifies it with Tiberius rather than with Claudius.⁽¹⁹⁾ In another short article he publishes five pieces of sculpture which must have been imported into Malta from the Greek East in modern times, as the author rightly guesses.⁽²⁰⁾ At that time the sculptures were kept in a private villa in Malta. Today their whereabouts are unknown, except for one which has been traced by pure coincidence by the present writer early in 1984 in a private garden in Gozo.

For a couple of decades after the war the attention of students of Maltese antiquities was directed almost exclusively to the Island's prehistory, and the archaeology of the Roman period was totally neglected. A revival of the studies of Roman antiquities took place in the 1960s with the inauguration of the *Missione Archeologica Italiana* from the University of Rome which conducted yearly excavation campaigns between 1963 and 1970 on three major sites.⁽²¹⁾ Of these, the Tas-Silġ site turned out to be identifiable with an important sanctuary referred to in Classical literature – the *fanum Iunonis* of Cicero – but revealed also a Phoenico-Punic *facies* of unprecedented importance for Malta's ancient history, as well as a prehistoric temple which must have played a determining role in the choice of the site for subsequent religious establishments. Lastly, the Palaeochristian church, equipped with an external baptistry, planted over the remains of the Roman temple, opened up a new chapter for the history of late-Roman to Byzantine Maltese architecture which had so far been represented only by underground collective graves. The second site investigated by the *Missione*, the Roman villa at San Pawl Milqi, was found to have Punic remains underneath it and later assumed religious significance connected with an early Pauline tradition. The third site, the sanctuary at Ras il-Wardija in Gozo, seems to have been in operation in the mid- to late-Punic period.

As part of his course leading to the *Laurea in Lettere Classiche/Archeologia* at the University of Palermo, the present writer compiled, in 1970–71, a catalogue of Greek and Roman sculpture housed in Maltese collections, both national and private.⁽²²⁾ For various reasons, mostly because attention had to be directed to other

18. L.M. Ugolini, *Malta, Origini della Civiltà Mediterranea*, Rome (1934).

19. *Id.*, Ritratto di Tiberio trovato nella Villa Romana di Malta, *Bullettino del Museo dell'Impero Romano* 2 (1931) pp.21–9.

20. *Id.*, Di alcune sculture esistenti nella Villa Apap a Malta, *Archivio Storico di Malta* 7 (1935–6) pp.463–7, figs.1–5.

21. *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta, Rapporto Preliminare della Campagna 1963–1970*, Rome (1964–1971).

22. A. Bonanno, *Sculture Greche e Romane dei Musei e delle Collezioni di Malta*, unpublished doctoral thesis, Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, Università degli Studi di Palermo (1969–70).

problems affecting Maltese archaeology, this catalogue has still not been published. Two homogeneous groups of Maltese sculpture have, however, been published in learned journals abroad: a group of six funerary portraits whose origins have been traced in Cyrenaica, Libya,⁽²³⁾ and a group of small decorative herms.⁽²⁴⁾

A Historical Outline

No problems present themselves for fixing the date of the beginning of the Roman period in Malta. It is fixed for us at 218 B.C. by the Latin historian Titus Livius in his account of the military operations at the very outset of the second Punic war. The passage in question recounts how Malta was taken over by the Romans in that year when the consul Ti. Sempronius Longus sailed from Lilybaeum to these islands in search of the Carthaginian fleet. The island, Livy tells us, was surrendered to him together with the city and the garrison of a little less than 2000 soldiers under the command of Hamilcar, son of Gisco.⁽²⁵⁾

Livy's information implies that Malta had been till that fateful date enemy territory in spite of the fact that during the first Punic war, probably in 255 B.C., the island had been attacked by the Roman fleet on its way back from a naval expedition in Africa, as we learn from the early Latin poet Naevius in his epic account of the first long-drawn conflict between Rome and Carthage.⁽²⁶⁾ It appears that after that lightning raid, in which the land was devastated, the crops burnt and possessions plundered, Malta re-entered immediately in the political and military sphere of Carthage. It also appears that that experience had served as an eye-opener to the Carthaginians as to the importance of safeguarding Malta against enemy action. This transpires from the fact that the island, or its main town – the historian does not specify – was defended by a sizeable garrison.

The size of that contingent, however, did not deter the Roman army from landing and, in actual fact, capturing the islands the second time round. The verb '*traditur*' used by Livy with reference to the episode of 218 B.C. has given rise to several hypotheses of favours awarded by the Roman conqueror to the islands, such as, a privileged political status within the Roman commonwealth and a relatively autonomous internal administration.⁽²⁷⁾ Although the element of treason cannot be excluded from that episode there are no solid arguments in its favour. The verb

23. *Id.*, Cyrenaican funerary portraits in Malta, *Journal of Roman Studies* 66 (1976) pp.39–44, pls.II–III.
24. *Id.*, Un gruppo di ermette decorative a Malta, *Archeologia Classica* XXIX, 2 (1977) pp.399–410, pls.CXII–CXVI.
25. Livy XXI, 51.
26. Naevius, *Bellum Punicum* IV, 37; supplemented by the fifth century A.D. Christian writer Paulus Orosius, IV, 8.5, who names Atilius as the consul at the head of the fleet in that operation. For a discussion of the sources referring to this event see F.P. Rizzo, Malta e la Sicilia in età romana: aspetti di storia politica e costituzionale, *Kokalos* 22–23 (1976–77) pp.183–9. Rizzo reaches the conclusion that the only occasion Malta was en route for the Roman fleet was on the latter's return after a victory conducted in Africa by consuls Servius Fulvius Petinus and Marcus Aemilius Paulus.
27. Ph. Cluver, *Sicilia antiqua, cum minoribus insulis ei adjacentibus, item Sardinia et Corsica*, Leiden (1619) pp.433–4; Abela, *Descrittione*, pp.169,204–5; O. Bres, *Malta Antica*, pp.306–8; A. Bartolo, History of the Maltese Islands, *Malta and Gibraltar*, (ed. A. Macmillan) London (1915), pp.37–8; Rizzo, *Malta e la Sicilia*, p.191. Cfr. Mayr, *Insel Malta*, pp.95–7; A. Vella, *Storja ta' Malta*, Malta (1974) p.40.

'*traditur*' as used by the Roman historian implies only a surrender and not necessarily a betrayal. It is, on the other hand, fairly certain that after the second Punic war Malta and Gozo came to form part of the province of Sicily. From then on the archipelago was destined to share for centuries the same fate with the larger island. *Romanorum enim esse incepit quum et Sicilia; semper eodem post iure iisdemque praetoribus usa.* With these words, fashioned according to his typical florid Ciceronian style, the Frenchman Jean Quintin expressed in 1534 the common destiny of the two islands: "Malta passed under the Romans at the same time as Sicily; after which it had the same laws and the same government".⁽²⁸⁾

Before 218 B.C. no cultural influence can be said to have reached the islands from the Roman direction; this is confirmed, by the way, by the archaeological record. The Romans then were still strictly on the receiving end in the cultural field, even more so in the artistic field. On the other hand, the Semitic dominators of the islands, the Carthaginians, did not only trade in and appreciate the aesthetic qualities of products of Greek art and craftsmanship,⁽²⁹⁾ but had also succumbed, during the whole of the third century, to the overwhelming process of hellenization of the eastern and central Mediterranean; a cultural process to which the Romans themselves were subjected as a direct consequence of their conquests.⁽³⁰⁾

This is practically all that the written sources reveal on the historical vicissitudes of the first two, if not three, centuries of Roman domination. The long silence is interrupted by the Latin orator Cicero who, in his prosecution speeches against the notorious Caius Verres, provides us with precious pieces of information on various aspects of the life of the Maltese inhabitants in the first century B.C.: their textile industry the products of which were held in high esteem in the international market;⁽³¹⁾ the use of Maltese harbours by pirates for wintering;⁽³²⁾ the international veneration of the Maltese temple dedicated to Juno which was despoiled by Verres of precious works of art among which two statuettes of Victory (*Nike*) in ivory – historically part of the ancient artistic treasure of Malta.⁽³³⁾ Cicero relates also of a certain Diodorus Melitensis who had a residence also in Lilybaeum, in western Sicily, and who in his house in Malta had a collection of silverware including two silver cups, known as 'Thericia', the work of Mentor, a well-known Greek silversmith. These too attracted the uncontrollable greed of the rapacious Verres.⁽³⁴⁾ They too form part of the artistic – albeit lost – heritage of Malta.

28. J. Quintin, *Insulae Melitae Descriptio*, Lyon 1536, f.A3; H.C.R. Vella, *The Earliest Description of Malta (Lyons 1536)*, Malta (1980) pp.18–9.

29. The archaeological record of the Phoenico-Punic period in Malta (725–218 B.C.) is in fact marked by the presence of numerous objects produced in the Greek world. See A. Bonanno, The tradition of an ancient Greek colony in Malta, *Hyphen* IV, 1 (1983) pp.1–17.

30. S. Moscati, *The World of the Phoenicians*, London 1968, pp.145–74; P. Grimal, *Hellenism and the Rise of Rome*, London (1968) *passim*; R. Bianchi Bandinelli, *Rome the Centre of Power, Roman Art to A.D. 200*, London (1970) pp.1–50.

31. Cicero, *Verr.* II, 2, 176; II, 2, 183; II, 4, 103–4; II, 5, 27. See also Hesychius 1027; Diod. Sic. V, 12; Varro, *Sat. Men.* 433; Silius Italicus, *Punic.* XIV, 274; Novius (*apud Non.*) 540, 11. 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) pp.76–7; J. Busuttil, The Maltese textile industry, *Melita Historica* IV, 3 (1966) pp.215–9.

32. Cicero, *Verr.* II, 4, 103. See J. Busuttil, Pirates in Malta, *Melita Historica* V, 4 (1971) 308–10.

33. Cicero, *Verr.* II, 4, 103–4.

34. *Ibid.* IV, 18–20. See J. Busuttil, Diodorus Melitensis, *Melita Historica* V, 1 (1968) pp.32–5.

Another first century B.C. writer, Diodorus Siculus, mentions weaving among the many crafts Malta's inhabitants excelled in. But he also praises their houses adorned as they were with stucco and cornices.⁽³⁵⁾ In midst of this long silence of the written sources the archaeological sources come to our rescue and fill in many gaps in the reconstructed picture of our past, in particular the cultural background. They reveal, for example, a syncretism, the encounter and resultant fusion of three diverse cultures that determined the artistic and artisan production of the succeeding centuries. For a couple of centuries the Punic substratum continues to survive in the forms and production technique of the ceramic utensils.⁽³⁶⁾ The survival of the Punic religious cults is documented by several inscriptions.⁽³⁷⁾ The Punic language seems to have survived even longer, at least for a further century, till the coming of Saint Paul to the island in A.D. 60. On that occasion Luke, the writer of the *Acts*, describing the Maltese as '*barbaroi*' clearly shows the extraneousness of their language to Greek and Latin with which he was familiar.⁽³⁸⁾ Above the Punic substratum the Roman component superimposes itself as a matter of course, as a result of the new political reality. The new culture manifests itself in the introduction of new forms in the ceramic kit, in the architecture, both religious and domestic, and in the internal decoration. The more intense and more frequent relations with neighbouring Sicily resulting from the new political status reinforces the presence of the third artistico-cultural influence, the Greco-Hellenistic one, which was already present in the two other cultures.

The most evident testimony of this syncretism is provided by the locally struck coinage of the second and first centuries B.C. in which Greek legends coincide with iconographic motifs from the Punic repertory, having substituted Punic legends; at a second stage Hellenistic iconographic motifs appear together with Latin legends.⁽³⁹⁾ Another evidence of the symbiosis between the Punic and Greek components is found in the well-known pair of identical candelabra, of Hellenistic sculptural tradition but carrying dedications inscribed in Punic and Greek.⁽⁴⁰⁾

An event of great importance for the history of the Maltese archipelago which is recorded in a written source – the only one for the first century A.D. and for the following four centuries – concerns the shipwreck of the Apostle Paul on the coast of Malta.⁽⁴¹⁾ It is an event of such importance because it has given birth to a whole series of 'historical' traditions – traditions that are documented in Maltese historiography from the 16th century onwards and which claim support from the writings of Saint Jerome and the Venerable Bede – relating to the conversion to Christianity of the whole Maltese population and to the consecration of Publius, the first citizen of Malta, as the first bishop of the island by the Apostle of the Gentiles,

35. Diod. Sic. V, 12, 2.

36. See, in particular, the pottery recovered from tombs dating between the second and first centuries B.C. The pottery of this period on exhibition in the National Museum of Archaeology has, in fact, been classified by W. Culican and T. Gouder as 'Punico-Roman'.

37. M. Guzzo Amadasi, *Le Iscrizioni Fenicie e Puniche delle Colonie in Occidente*, Rome (1967) pp.23 – 52.

38. *Acts* XXVIII, 1 – 11.

39. E. Coleiro, *Ricerche numismatiche, Missione . . . 1964*, pp.117 – 27; *id.*, Maltese coins of the Roman period, *Numus. Chron.* 7th series, 11 (1971) pp. 67 – 91.

40. Bonanno, *Quintinus . . .*, pp.200 – 3; *id.*, *Tradition*, fig.1.

41. See note 38, above.

as well as to the uninterrupted continuity of Christianity on these islands.⁽⁴²⁾ One must admit, however, that for the first four centuries of our era there is no evidence, not even archaeological evidence, of the practice of the Christian religion. Such evidence emerges for the first time in the fifth century, perhaps even later, and consists of a group of incised stones unearthed during the excavations conducted by the *Missione Archeologica Italiana* mentioned above on the site of a Roman villa at San Pawl Milqi.⁽⁴³⁾ One of these stones seems to represent a very sketchy and primitive portrait of Saint Paul, another is said to reproduce his name. They are held to testify the presence of a Pauline devotion on the site on which a church was later constructed. The other testimonies of Christianity, much more tangible and monumental, are the catacombs the Christian identity of which can be considered to be solidly established. These catacombs have preserved for us precious gems of palaeochristian art.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The end of the Roman period in Malta is placed by some at the end of the fourth century (A.D. 395), that is the Theodosian division of the Empire,⁽⁴⁵⁾ by others – in our view more appropriately – at the beginning of the sixth century (A.D. 535) when the islands would have passed, together with Sicily, to form part of the Byzantine Empire.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Architecture

The almost total absence of relics of Roman public and religious buildings in the Maltese islands is, to say the least, surprising, the more so when one realizes that they lie in the very midst of a geographic zone littered with cities which during the Roman domination experienced the erection of numerous and magnificent public and religious buildings of which ample relics survive. One need only mention the cities of Syracuse, Catane and Tauromenion to the immediate north of the islands, and Sabratha and Lepcis Magna to the south. No traces of temples, basilicas or porticoes, not even of a single triumphal arch, however, survive in the ancient city of Melite, nor in that of Gaudos. It is possible that both towns were subjected to the same fate of devastating urban development as that experienced by another ancient town in neighbouring Libya, Oea, the third city of Tripolitania, which has been engulfed by the present Tripoli. Even so, in Tripoli one can still see the standing triumphal arch of Marcus Aurelius.

42. Quintin, ff.C2v – C2v; Vella, *Earliest Description*, pp.40 – 7; Abela, *Descrittione*, pp.221 – 40; A.A. Caruana, *Frammento della Storia Fenicio-Cartaginese, Greco-Romana e Bisantina, Musulmana e Normanno-Aragonese delle Isole di Malta*, Malta (1899), pp.242 – 56. See also references in J. Cassar Pullicino, Pauline tradition in Malta, *Scientia* [Malta] 10 (1944) pp.19 – 31; A.T. Luttrell, Girolamo Manduca and Gian Francesco Abela: tradition and invention in Maltese historiography, *Melita Historica* VII, 2 (1977) pp.114 – 32.
43. See section on 'San Pawl Milqi' in *Missione . . . 1963 – 68*; M. Cagiano de Azevedo, *Testimonianze Archeologiche della Tradizione Paolina a Malta*, Rome (1966) pp.21 – 71.
44. E. Becker, *Malta Sotterranea*, Strassburg (1913); A. Ferrua, *Antichità cristiane; le catacombe di Malta*, *Civiltà Cattolica* III, 2381 (1949) pp.505 – 15; V. Borg, Une île et ses hypogées de l'ère des premiers chrétiens, *Les Dossiers de l'Archéologie* 19 (Nov. – Dec. 1976) pp.52 – 67; V. Camilleri, *Saint Agatha*, Malta (1979); M. Buhagiar, *Late Roman and Byzantine Catacombs*, Oxford (1986).
45. A.A. Caruana, *Frammento Critico*, pp.305 – 83; T. Zammit, *The Maltese Islands and their History*, Malta (1952) p. 72.
46. T.S. Brown, Byzantine Malta: a discussion of the sources, *Medieval Malta* (ed. A. Luttrell) London (1975) p.73.

Nevertheless, the existence of such buildings in the city of Melite, and in its vicinity, are attested by a few inscriptions and by several architectural elements and fragments now preserved in the Museum of Roman Antiquities in Rabat, and in the Cathedral Museum inside Mdina: bases, shafts and capitals of columns, parts of architraves, cornices and soffits. In some cases these fragments betray the monumental size of the buildings to which they once belonged, as well as the richness of their architectonic ornamentation. According to the manuscript and printed documents of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries these surviving fragments should be much more numerous than they are at present.

Of the more significant inscriptions that testify the existence of public and religious buildings one can mention the Latin one, very fragmentary, recording the restoration of a temple to Proserpina. Another inscription in Latin, discovered in 1774 inside the city of Mdina, gives a list of the structural parts of a tetrastyle temple to Apollo erected or restored by a rich benefactor. A building of a public nature, a theatre – or a makeshift one to serve the same purpose – is suggested by another inscription, in Greek, commemorating the untimely death of a young Pergamene comic actor and lyre-player.

Referring to religious buildings outside the ancient city one cannot forget to mention the religious complex of tas-Silġ, about nine kilometres away from the same city and overlooking the Marsaxlokk harbour. The Roman period is represented there by the third, fourth and fifth phases in the succession of building phases established by the preliminary report of the last excavation campaign conducted by the University of Rome in 1970. In brief, during the Hellenistic period (in actual fact already by the end of the fourth century B.C.) the sanctuary undergoes a vast programme of reconstruction with the addition of courtyards, porticoes, monumental gateways and pavings in stone slabs or *opus signinum*. To the north of the central area a rectangular enclosure, datable to the first century B.C., must have served as a sacrificial altar.

On the basis of the vast number of votive inscriptions dedicated to Astarte/Hera/Juno found inside it, the sanctuary at Tas-Silġ is identifiable with the *janum lunonis* referred to by Cicero and Valerius, as well as by Ptolemy, which before these excavations used to be located in the Grand Harbour.

Numerous private buildings, on the other hand, have been uncovered, in particular the many villas scattered around the Maltese countryside; but very few betray artistic aspirations. Amongst the buildings situated outside the city one should single out the villa at Ramla Bay, in Gozo, whose architecture was adorned with marble veneerings and limestone telamons, and the small thermal complex at Għajn Tuffieħa which was decorated with carved benches and mosaics in varied geometric designs.

Within the city Melite itself, then, a house with peristyle was discovered in 1881 which, given its rich ornamentation of polychrome mosaics and its very fine collection of sculptures, must have belonged to an important Roman official, or a

native one with refined and Romanized tastes. The peristyle had an epistyle in the Doric order carved from Maltese limestone and covered with stucco and was very elegant in appearance. Both the architecture and the mosaics seem to be datable to the first century B.C., more precisely to the time of Sulla, that is the first twenty years of that century.

This luxurious house was surrounded, probably at a later stage, by a series of houses with very irregular plan and greatly inferior workmanship.

Painting and Mosaic

Before introducing the two-dimensional artistic media it is considered suitable to make the following premise even though it might appear commonplace. Malta shares with the coastal zones of most Mediterranean countries the climatic conditions that are considered to be extremely unfavourable to the preservation of such a fragile art as painting. One should not expect, therefore, to find in Malta at the present time traces of paintings on organic materials, such as one would find them in almost perfect state of preservation in the Fayum depression of Egypt, with its stable, dry climate. On the other hand, one would not be expecting too much if one hoped to come across remains of mural paintings as are commonly found in the surrounding countries like Italy, Greece, Libya and Tunisia. Fragments of murals are, however, disappointingly few. The Punic funerary tradition and its Roman successor in Malta seem to have excluded any sort of painted decoration in their underground tombs. Painted stucco with linear and figurative motifs appear only in the Christian catacombs, that is during the fifth century A.D. or later. The most attractive ones, mostly of the figurative type, are found in the St Agatha complex, but a canopied grave decorated with figures of birds can also be seen in a recently cleared, small catacomb underneath the church of St Catald at Rabat. Traces of linear decoration are more common in the St Paul complex which preserves also a picture of a seated figure with the name EVTYXION painted in red beside it.

Wall paintings decorating the Maltese houses of the Roman period are documented by finds of traces of painted plaster reported during the archaeological investigations of several of such buildings, but these end up almost always by disappearing either because of difficulties of conservation or, more often, out of neglect. The present writer remembers seeing remains of painted plaster only at the Museum of Roman Antiquities in Rabat (coming from the town villa underneath), at the Roman villa of San Pawl Milqi (some still in situ) and that of Zejtun. In the majority of cases the fragments represent paintings of the so-called First Pompeian Style, that is imitations of marble incrustations, while a few fragments in the Rabat Museum suggest one or two figurative motifs.

The next to total absence of ancient paintings is compensated for by two groups of floor mosaics of very fine quality. The first group decorated the dignitary's house of Rabat mentioned above and consists of geometric patterns (some with complicated optical effects) which surrounded centrally placed *emblemata* (small square scenes in

opus vermiculatum). The subject of the *emblema* at the centre of the peristyle, two pigeons perched on the edge of a large metallic bowl was a very widely diffused motif whose prototype has been traced back to the *asaraton* ('unswept floor') by Sosos of Pergamon (Pliny, *N.H.* 36, 60). Another, much better known, derivation from the same prototype is the *emblema* with four pigeons from Hadrian's villa at Tivoli. A second *emblema* represents an exquisite scene of a putto holding various types of fruits and surrounded by birds. The picture is generally interpreted as an allegory of Autumn. A third *emblema* figures a scene which has been variously interpreted: Hercules and Omphale according to one interpretation; the Biblical episode of Samson and Delilah according to another. In our view, however, the theme is that suggested by G. Mc Rushforth, namely the story related by Philostratos (*Eik.* 2, 11, 828) of the satyr surprised in his sleep by two maenads who, having tied his hands behind his back, punish him for his misdoings by shaving his beard. The clearly pointed ear and a small horn on the visible side of the male figure's head confirms the latter's identity.

Nevertheless, even the large geometric floors of the Rabat house are high quality specimens of mosaic art, in particular the intricate borders: volutes, double guilloche, spirals and meanders in perspective, as well as garlands of leaves, flowers and fruits carrying theatrical masks and bearded heads of old men in *opus vermiculatum*. This group of mosaics is easily classifiable among the oldest and most beautiful mosaic compositions of the western Mediterranean.

The second group of mosaics was uncovered in 1929 inside the thermal complex of Ġhajn Tuffieħa. It stands out for its variety of geometric designs and testifies, along with the Rabat series, to the presence on the island, during the first four centuries of Roman domination, of first class mosaic workshops inasmuch as the *emblemata* could be easily imported in the prefabricated state from well known centres of production.

Besides the extant mosaics reviewed above, the existence of others, now lost, is documented by manuscript literature of the 17th – 19th centuries preserved in the National Library of Malta. The most curious specimen is the one that used to decorate a small 'bath' (*bagno*) discovered in 1729 in the Grand Harbour in the process of enlarging the quay beneath the Capuchin bastion of the Floriana fortifications: Baron de Stadl and Count Ciantar wrote about it. It is hard to make out the class, artistic qualities and date of the mosaics as they were destroyed soon after they came to light. Among the figures represented a serpent, a fish and a dragon are mentioned, figures that the contemporary writers interpret as 'hieroglyphics'.

Sculpture

It is thanks to the major durability of the material involved that we can consider ourselves much luckier for the quantity of sculptural pieces preserved, as opposed to the amount of painting. Even in quality the sculpture tends to be, at least in a number of cases, of the highest order.

In the study of Roman sculpture in Maltese collections one must face several problems. The first problem is that of identifying the modern, pseudo-antique pieces; which is not always an easy task, especially when the style and technique of the ancient original is faithfully copied. The national collection includes a few pieces, such as the head of a veiled old man and the statue of Hercules, which should not be pronounced modern too rashly. The former has been tacitly accepted as ancient by Ashby who included it in his catalogue of Roman sculpture. The second has been considered ancient for almost three centuries, that is, from the time it started to form part of the famous collection of antiquities of Gian Francesco Abela (who published it in his work of 1647) until it was declared modern by Thomas Ashby in 1915. Abela went so far as to identify it with the cult statue of the Maltese temple of Hercules mentioned by Ptolemy.

Another task to be undertaken by the student of Maltese ancient sculpture is the distinction between pieces of certain local provenance and those imported from abroad in modern times. This also is not always easy, especially when the piece in question is owned by a private collector who, presumably not to detract its value, declares it categorically of local provenance which very often cannot be verified. The present writer has already identified as Cyrenaican a group of six funerary portraits that were previously proposed as specimens of Maltese art of the Roman period. These portraits were imported into Malta during the last century or the first few decades of the present one. Besides these, however, there are other examples.

Once the local provenance is ascertained, an effort should be made to identify, if at all present, those pieces which are likely to be of local production. If the existence of such a local production can be established, with an acceptable degree of probability, one can go a step forward and try to identify its individual characteristics. Of the Maltese collection only six pieces could be considered, with a fair degree of probability, of local production: the head of a satyr in local limestone kept in the Gozo Museum of Archaeology; a limestone telamon from the Ramla Bay Roman villa, now lost; a sandaled foot also in the same museum; the funerary inscribed limestone block with a few motifs carved in low relief, now in the Rabat Museum of Roman Antiquities; and the two so-called garden ornaments, also in limestone and in the same museum, representing amazons. The last mentioned are rather uninspiring, probably produced in series, but the Gozo satyr and, possibly, the Gozo telamon reveal a vein of fresh inspiration and spontaneous execution. It is hoped that other examples of the same local current will come to light in order to permit us to give more consistency to this reconstruction.

All the other known Roman sculptures in Malta are in marble and do not show any stylistic or technical characteristic that can be explained in terms of local production. Such characteristics are also absent in the marble architectural fragments of the islands. For this reason it seems that the existence of marble workshops in Malta of the Roman period should, *prima facie*, be ruled out.

The majority of our marble sculptures are Roman copies. There are those,

generally of reduced size, that can be traced back to Greek originals, mostly Hellenistic: a head of Aphrodite; Aphrodite tying – or untying – her sandal; Artemis as Huntress; an Archaistic female statuette; a torso of a satyr and one of an Amazon. Others are copies, of varying artistic merit, of Roman originals, especially of Roman imperial portraiture. One can count among these the headless togate statues: the ones of greatest artistic quality are the statue of colossal dimensions, and that of a boy carrying the 'bulla' round his neck, both from the Roman house of Rabat. Portraits were also, most probably, carried by the headless female statue from Gozo which is derived from a type called 'kore of Praxiteles' – judging from the inscription which supported it, it represented Julia Augusta – and the one from the same Rabat house represented in the type called 'Pudicitia'. Of another iconic female statue of the 'kore' type we have only the lower half emanating a very naturalistic plastic sensibility in the rendering of the drapery.

Imperial portrait heads are not lacking. They provide evidence that certain members of the upper echelons of the Maltese society kept themselves well up to date with contemporary artistic currents in the Roman metropolis. At the head of this group is the portrait of Claudius, so rich in colourism, plastic modelling and pathos that emanates from the face. More academic and cold, and less realistic is the portrait of Antonia the Younger, mother of the same Emperor, which was discovered together with his portrait in the same house. The head of Antoninus Pius, of unknown provenance, is of a much inferior workmanship. The head of an unknown individual of the first quarter of the third century A.D., on the other hand, is not a work of indifferent aesthetic value. In view of the absence of adequate iconographic *comparanda* it is to be considered a priceless original of Roman portraiture.

Conclusion

In this brief and rapid survey of the three principal sectors of art in Malta in the Roman period one observes the all but total lack of elements suggesting the existence of a local, indigenous artistic vein in the period in question. This local strain is only just perceptible in one or two pieces of sculpture. It is considered appropriate in this context to recall the words of praise devoted to Maltese craftsmanship by the first century B.C. writer Diodorus Siculus, with particular reference to the beautiful buildings decorated with stucco and cornices.

Such a reference would make us hypothesize the existence of a proper indigenous vein of artistic expression in Maltese architecture of the Roman age. This vein has, however, not yet been identified in a concrete way, most probably because no one has made a serious research in this field. Having opened and closed this parenthesis, one is left with no other option but to conclude that one should really be speaking not of "Maltese art in the Roman period" but of "Roman art in Malta". This conclusion, it should be kept in mind, is valid – naturally in varying degrees – for the artistic heritage of numerous other Mediterranean countries that were incorporated in the Roman Empire.