

Malta in Phoenician and Punic times

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Malta's role in the period previous to the first Phoenician presence was of limited prominence, with the existence of two cultures of the Late Bronze age, Borg in-Nadur and Bahrija.

These cultures were not outstanding for their economic development nor for the number of trade relations outside the island. The only contacts documented are with the nearby Sicilian eastern coast (Bernabò Brea, 1976-77). It is through these contacts that the very limited Mycenaean materials found would have got to Malta (a fragment in Borg in-Nadur and another in Tas-Silg) (Missione, 1965: 50)

This shortage of Mycenaean materials contrasts with the abundant presence of contacts of the Mycenaean world with Sicily, especially with the eastern coast, in the same way as with Sardinia. This shows us that the Mycenaean trade on its journey from the East to the Sicilian coasts and, crossing the Sicilian strait to Sardinia, had no need whatsoever to reach port in the island of Malta, which was relegated to secondary status at this time.

There is no element which allows us to talk about a Phoenician presence in Malta when the first great Phoenician expansion occurred from the East to the Spanish coasts, in the eighth century BC.

We can see, therefore, that the island of Malta did not have, at the time, a strategical position of privilege in navigation from East to West, but rather that of a far away and isolated place, so to speak. The most favourable navigational route was from the island of Cyprus, to the Sicilian coast, reaching port in Syracuse, which was taken by the Mycenaean and later by the Greeks, so as to head from there to the West - skirting along the Sicilian southern coast (Derrotero, 1849: 158)

This was done to avoid the presence of prevailing winds - the north western mistral as well as the West winds, also the existence of a marine current which, in west east direction would go through the Sicilian channel by the centre, from Pantelleria to Malta.

This marginal situation of the great sea route changes from the eighth to the seventh century. It is at this time that we can confirm the first presence of the Phoenicians on the island. But how can one explain this change in the strategical situation of the island? To find an answer we have to look again at the eastern Sicilian coast, where contacts had already started between Greeks and natives in Siracuse in the mid eighth century. That concluded with the presence of the first Greek constructions with the settlement of Lindios, preceding the foundation of Gela towards the year 690, and later Camarina and Agrigento. This strategy of colonization and control of the territory on the part of the new Greek cities is not inconsistent with the aim, among others, of preventing the Phoenicians contact with the interior of the island, rich in resources. We cannot talk about a confrontation between Greeks and Phoenicians at this time, but about a "friendly" rivalry that would make the real control of the territory south of the island impossible.

It is in this context of strategical and trade pressure that we can explain the occupation of the island of Malta, making it a port of call which was secured in Phoenician territory after the long journey from Crete. It is in searching for a secure place, removed from the threat of the Greeks, in which the words of Diodorus (V. 12. 1-4) must be interpreted: "the Phoenicians, as they extended their trade to the western ocean, found in it a place of safe retreat, since it was well supplied with harbours and lay out in the open sea". It is at this moment that we can confirm a second flow of settlers in the western foundations, and the creation of new settlements, of new support places which strengthen and improve the initial route (Aubert, 1994: 301).

This first occupation of the island on the part of the Phoenicians is made in two ways: on the one hand, by dedicating the temple to Astarte, thus legitimising, according to the eastern traditions, the property of the territory. On the other hand, settling in the island's most strategical place, the Mdina-Rabat hill, not only due to its central

position and height, but also for its closeness to the small springs of drinking water, which made them acquire an extraordinary strategical importance (Vidal González and Groenewoud, 1995).

A controversial discussion point is the possible relation of these semite settlers with the native population of the Late Bronze age (Vidal González, 1998).

As is well known, the data that Ward Perkins (1938-39: 12) provided in his time about the already famous silo of Mtarfa, as well as the first results of the excavation of Tas Silg carried out by an Italian group, lead the researchers to confirm that the relations between both worlds, the native and colonial, were intense and smooth. Nevertheless, a more detailed analysis of the archaeological sources is reconsidering this relationship (Brusasco, 1993 and Frenco, 1995: 117).

The rapid occupation of the most strategical points, the absence of sure data about the relationship between a theoretical great native population (which has not left any trace), as well as the obvious eastern Phoenician character of the tombs, of their ritual and of their pottery leads us to state that the island would have been abandoned by the previous settlers. This could have been at a previous time, and the Phoenicians might have found the island uninhabited, or with such a small population that no trace was left in the archaeological records.

This occupation phenomenon, on the part of the Phoenicians, on an island as a navigational support point repeats itself on the island of Ibiza. There the withdrawal in a previous phase of the native population led the Phoenicians to occupy a strategical uninhabited place, allowing them to secure the control of routes which, from Sardinia, headed as much to the south of the Iberian peninsula as to the Catalanian coasts and southern France (Gómez Bellard, 1990: 18).

Thus, the first Phoenicians who started the cult of Astarte in the temple of Tas-Silg reused the previous Megalithic temple, located in a control position over the bay, which had been in use in the phase of the temples (until 2500) and remained abandoned throughout all the Tarxien

cemetery phase (from 2500 to 1500) (Stoddart et alii, 1993: 9). This was reused in the Borg in-Nadur phase for completely different purposes to those for which it was created initially.

No continuity exists in the use of the temple, nor assimilation between the adoration of the Mother Goddess, peculiar to the native world, and the cult to the goddess Astarte.

The Phoenicians again took advantage of the megalithic elements of this privileged position for a different purpose from the one of the previous phase, that of walled bastion. So they restored the function of worship which, it is important to emphasize, had ceased in this place at least during a thousand years before.

The re-introduction, in this initial phase of the Phoenician use of the sanctuary, of a female figure of the Tarxien period, shows the precariousness of the semite construction in the first moments, as is also shown by the lack of reforms in the architectural structure. The Phoenicians seem, in this first stage of the seventh century, to be more interested in securing a place of worship than in carrying out a great work to honour the goddess. That concern would try to justify, as we have already mentioned, the control of the island on the part of the newly arrived. This objective was realized by dedicating to the goddess a place of worship so that the new lands would become an extension of their native land.

A variation was made of the routes that they took from the East to the Spanish coasts, once they left the island of Crete, and after a voyage of fifteen days on the high seas, they reached port in Malta so that from there, and once inside the 'mare phoenicum' headed for Mozia, on the western extreme of Sicily, avoiding the Greek trade routes and reaching port on Eastern Sicilian coasts.

This new strategical function would explain at the same time the location of the inhabited settlement in a high place, easily defended, securing the limited water resources of the island. The privileged position of the headland actually occupied by Mdina-Rabat made the Phoenicians choose this place in which to live from the first moment. A different pattern is created with the

existence of an inhabited settlement, separated from the port area, controlled and protected by the influence of the Astarte sanctuary on the outskirts.

The foundation of a sanctuary involved setting-up a series of links between the mother country and the new settlement, among which the guardianship of the Temple of Tiro was one of the most important (Aubet, 1994: 141). This link of Malta with the East became one of the principal characteristics of the island (Bonanno, 1988: 420). This is indicated as much by the architectural and decorative elements of Tas-Silg, as by Phoenician pottery, or the Egyptian amulets (Hölbl, 1989), to name some of the most outstanding.

Some of the pottery shapes we find in the Phoenician tombs of the eighth century show us this direct relationship with the East. Among them the oil-bottles, of ancient eastern tradition, stand out. This pottery type is characteristic of the Phoenician factories in the south of the Iberian Peninsula. They are not prominent in Carthage or Sardinia, pointing to a link between East and West but without North African influence.

Another example is a decorated jar of Cyprus origin, which also shows parallels in other examples of the western factories of the Mediterranean, bearing witness to the route followed by the navigators from the East, Cyprus in this case, to the colonies in the Spanish south.

Other elements would be the cinerary urns, the dippers, the mushroom jars or the tripods, showing the presence in Malta of materials typical of the initial phase - all of them dating from the seventh century.

A new phase opens for Malta with the sudden interruption of the commercial currents from the East and the replacement by Carthage of Tyre, which had played a prominent role in the mid sixth century.

Malta, which had occupied a central strategical position throughout the seventh century and the first half of the sixth, suffered an important setback. Its function ceased to make any sense, and it became a territory lacking in any value

for the growing colonial interest of Carthage. This substantial change turns the island into a 'cul de sac', into a place outside trade routes. Malta withdrew within itself, removed from the influence of Carthage which does not need it as it is far removed from its interests, and is disconnected from the great sea route from the East. This sudden isolation was why it retained its specific eastern character: Phoenician, at its full Punic height.

Logically, the economy of the island started a changing process to adapt to the new circumstances. By the second half of the sixth century the occupation of the rural areas began, setting in motion the first agricultural farms which allowed the sustenance of an island which found itself withdrawn, starting a period of economic self-sufficiency, which led Malta into one of its worst crisis periods. This lasted until the end of the fifth century, coinciding with the greatest clashes between the Punic and Greek world for control of Sicily - a dispute to which Malta would not be alien as it was a naval operations base.

It was not until the end of the fifth century BC that an awakening in the activity of the island was shown - more obvious in the Tas-Silg sanctuary. New adjustments and reforms started at that time, which gave way to the peak period of the sanctuary, and, in addition, to that of the whole island, between the fourth and first centuries BC (Ciasca, 1970: 102).

It was now that the role of the temple as a neutral meeting and exchange place acquired all its prominence. If for the first phase of the use of the Phoenician temple, this served as a stopping place and protecting sanctuary of navigators, it was now that it acquired the rank of international sanctuary, of a crossroads. The abundance of non-Punic pottery, especially Greek, from Sicily and Magna Graecia, must be put in relation to the establishment on the island of a meeting place, of an exhaust valve between two areas which at this time ignored one another. Malta, located at the end of two worlds, the Punic and the Greek, acquired new prominence as a back water, as a necessary stream for the upkeep of trade activity which did not understand periods of conflict.

The island presented at that time Greek cultural influence (Ciasca, 1999: 77), as can be seen from the pottery shapes, which present a white slip treatment and a decoration of red lines, of which we find plenty in the numerous tombs of this period, in shapes such as the late oinokoe, the double-handed jars, the imitation kylikes or the Punic-Maltese amphoras.

It is in this fourth century BC that we can confirm the presence of new pottery shapes of local origin, which show us the vitality of the economic life of the island at this period, as well as the high levels of creativity and independence, outside the possible cultural influence of Carthage. The appearance of native work, like the Punic-Maltese egg-shaped amphora, the late cinerary urns, perhaps copied from Egyptian models, the late oinokoes, the profusion of imitation kylikes, as well as the double handle jars, together with the presence of their own decorative motifs, are the sign of the prosperity reached by the island around that time (Vidal González, 1996: 105 and Sagona, 1996-97: 35 and 36).

Parallel to this development of commercial activity throughout the Tas-Silg sanctuary, we see a period of great rural development, especially in the fourth and third centuries, as is confirmed by the finding of a great number of tombs on the whole island (Vidal González, 1996: 34). These tombs must be placed in the unmistakable relation to the establishment of small agricultural and stock farms, which allowed for taking advantage of the island's resources, as well as for investing the undoubted benefits that the commercial activity would have left in the inhabitants of the island.

Nevertheless, the third century involved the island in the first Punic war. A text by Nevio (*Bellum Poenicum*, Iv, 37) tells us of a raid carried out by Roman troops on the island, as an example of the prevailing insecurity and instability of which we have received some evidence, like the existence of a defensive wall in the S. Pawl Milqi farm (Missione, 1968), the protective wall of the Tas-Silg sanctuary, the creation of towers for defensive purposes and as points of communication and warning. All this created a network which presumably linked not only Marsaxlokk Bay, but all the rural area of

Malta with the defensive position of Mdina-Rabat fortress, which would have been walled in accordance with the written evidence.

The island of Malta remained in Carthage's power sphere after the first Punic war, pointing to the upkeep of at least some political and strategic links of Malta to Carthage, and not towards nearby Sicily - annexed in the first war.

Malta joined the Roman world in the second Punic war, after which Rome started to control all the Mediterranean. In this context Malta performed a second rate role, as a small island lacking in strategical value, where only ships in distress reached port.

Nevertheless, the political annexation to the Roman sphere did not suppose the immediate elimination of the Punic identity of its inhabitants. Thus, the funeral practices were in the Punic ritual, as is shown in the continuity of some of their most characteristic elements, such as the bilicnic oil-lamp, together with Roman pottery (Vidal González, 1995). Carrying out burials in rock-cut tombs - a practice, with variations, which remains in the Paleo-Christian era - was a custom held by the majority.

This continuity of religious elements was also seen in the Tas-Silg sanctuary, which remained a place of worship in the Roman era. That this lasted at least until the change of era was confirmed by inscriptions of a Punic character. Inside the enclosure of the temple we found pottery shapes of Punic tradition until the first century AD, revealing the vitality in the late Roman era, of this temple to Astarte (Ciasca, 1970: 104 and 106). Then -very holy and ancient- it was dedicated to Juno. According to Cicero only the treacherous Verres was capable of sacking it.

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