

# Ognina – a puzzling prehistoric site in Sicily

David Trump

In 1965, Prof. Bernabò Brea of Syracuse excavated a site on the small island of Ognina, off the east coast of Sicily 12 km south of Syracuse, (Plate 1). He found two levels of prehistoric occupation, a lower one of the Early Neolithic Stentinello Culture, and an upper one dating to the Early Bronze Age. At these periods, however, it may not have been an island but rather a small promontory beside a sheltered inlet, making an ideal small port.<sup>1</sup>

The Bronze Age material contained none of the Castelluccio Culture, widespread in South-east Sicily at the time, but pottery which Brea recognised as being closely similar to some which John Evans had found in Tarxien Cemetery contexts in Malta.<sup>2</sup> He therefore

suggested that the site had been refounded at this period, after standing empty since the Early Neolithic, by emigrants from Malta, who had probably established it as a trading post for their commercial interchanges with the Sicilians. This was adopted as the orthodox view by Italian prehistorians down to the present day.<sup>3</sup> However, some uneasiness was felt among those studying Maltese prehistory, on the grounds that there was very little evidence for a sea-faring tradition in that early period, and though there were undoubtedly some raw materials imported into the islands, this was on a comparatively small scale.<sup>4</sup>

In April 2002, I had the opportunity to visit the Museo Regionale Archeologico 'P. Orsi'



*Plate 1. The Isola d'Ognina: Syracuse lies behind the Plemmirio peninsula in the distance*

in Syracuse, and other museums in Agrigento, Gela and Licata where similar pottery had been reported, to see it for myself. Also, by this time, thanks to excavations at Skorba<sup>5</sup> and the Xagħra Circle,<sup>6</sup> much more was now known about the Tarxien Cemetery ceramic repertoire, particularly in its domestic aspect, than had been available to Evans back in 1956.

The large quantity of pottery from Ognina displayed in the Syracuse Museum is characterised by tronco-conic bowls with a flat base, straight out-sloping walls and a rim with broad internal bevel, often decorated with triangles, (Plate 2 and Fig. 2). The Maltese examples of the type, (Fig. 3 a, b and c), are referred to as Thermi bowls, perhaps better 'Thermi' bowls since, while Evans<sup>7</sup> had noticed how similar they are to examples from Thermi, a site on the island of Lesbos,<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 3 e), and Troy I,<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 3 f), those sites in the northern Aegean are a long way from Sicily and Malta. A safer name, since it begs no questions, would be thickened lip bowls.

Leaving for later consideration any possible connection with that distant area, there is no reason to doubt a cultural link between Ognina and Malta in the Early Bronze Age, separated as they are by less than 150 km of sea, a third of that distance being along the Sicilian coast. The only question is over interpretation: what the nature and direction of that link were.

Two things struck me immediately on examining the showcase of Ognina material in the museum in Syracuse. One was that the shape of these vessels was nearly identical to the Tarxien Cemetery thickened lip bowls, cf. Figs. 2-3, though there were some differences in the decoration. The second was the total absence of vessels with a sharply everted lip, even more characteristic of Tarxien Cemetery pottery on Maltese domestic sites and virtually universal in the type site cemetery. Twice as many sherds of this form were found in the Xagħra Circle as there were of the thickened lip bowls. Despite sharing the latter, in the absence of the former, in no way could Ognina be regarded as a typical Tarxien Cemetery site. Similarly, reports of 'Maltese' pottery from other Sicilian sites all referred only to these same thickened lip bowls, as at Castelluccio SR,<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 3 d) or even just pottery decorated with dot-filled bands at Casalicchio-Agnone

AG,<sup>11</sup> Manfria AG,<sup>12</sup> and Contrada Paolina RG.<sup>13</sup> The two sherds from Castelluccio are certainly relevant here. Two from Casalicchio in the Licata museum have incised hatched pendant triangles, but on the exterior of vessels of a different shape. As the finds from the other two sites are not on public display, I have not been able to see them, so cannot comment. Tiné also quotes and illustrates a Tarxien Cemetery 'vasetto' from the Grotta Chiusazza SR<sup>14</sup> It has a design of dotted chequers resembling Tarxien Cemetery examples, but the vessel itself is unlike any Maltese one and is most unlikely to have come from those islands.

If this looks like a simple demolition job on the widely held belief that Ognina was in a real sense a Maltese site, if not on Maltese soil, something can be done towards constructing an alternative explanation. The first question, though, is what was Ognina if not a Maltese trading post?

For a start, although ideally situated for such, there is little in the excavated evidence to support the interpretation. If Ognina was providing commercial contacts between cultural areas, one would expect to find a mixture of cultural material, some from either side. As an example, on the site of Thapsos, on the same coast 10km north of Syracuse, plentiful pottery of the local Thapsos-Milazzese wares of a slightly later date were found in close association with Greek Mycenaean and Maltese Borg in-Nadur vessels, as well as personal ornaments from a wide variety of sources. At Ognina, by contrast, there is plenty of what, to avoid begging questions, let us call Ognina ware, but virtually none of the distinctive Castelluccio fabrics being produced in all contemporary sites in this part of Sicily, nor, indeed, any other wares. If the Bronze Age inhabitants of Ognina were traders, with whom were they trading?

Again, as already mentioned, the decoration on Ognina thickened lip bowls, while including all the designs on Maltese ones, has a number of others not found in Malta. For example, one of the first sherds of this ware found in Sicily, at Castelluccio long before Ognina itself was discovered, has pendant dotted triangles (Fig. 3 d) on the bevelled lip, but these are not bounded by enclosing lines as is invariably the case in Malta, (Fig. 3 a). More commonly, various oblique incised lines are found at Ognina,

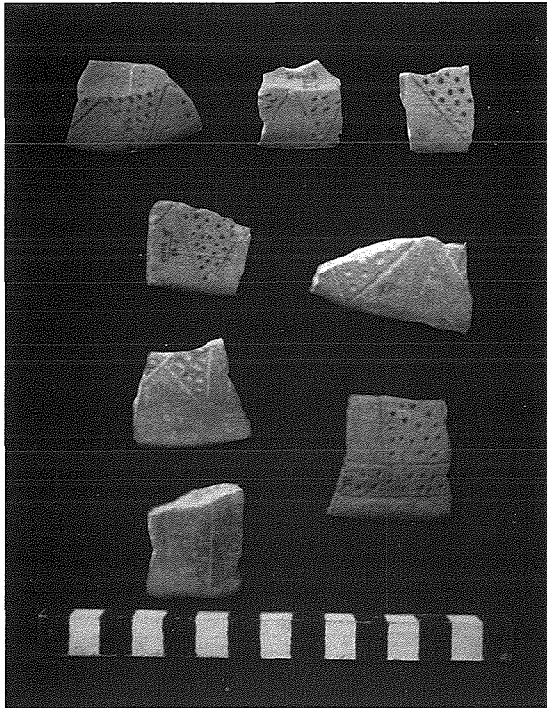


Plate 2. Thickened lip bowl and other sherds from Ognina

frequently in the Aegean, but never in Malta. What this is suggesting is that the origins of Ognina do indeed lie back in Thermi, or at least somewhere in the Aegean (remember the material from Troy I nearby), but that only part of the repertoire passed on to Malta, particularly the dotted triangles especially characteristic of Ognina. This decoration occurred only as a rare element in Thermi.<sup>15</sup>

Malta is at last coming into the picture, but in a rather different role, as recipient, not source. The next question is, when did this take place?

The thickened lip bowls with triangle decoration on the lip are widely regarded as belonging to the Tarxien Cemetery phase, and indeed the vast majority of them do. The Xagħra Circle provides a good example, with 115 rim sherds being recovered from the Tarxien Cemetery levels which overlay part of the site. However, three were found within the underground cave system which, in the absence of any single Tarxien Cemetery sherd of the characteristic everted lip form, was clearly abandoned and sealed off not later than the end of the Tarxien Temple phase. Similarly, five sherds of this type were found at Skorba in pure Temple Period levels, one indeed in a layer yielding nothing later than the preceding Ġgantija phase.<sup>16</sup> The best example of all is the one intact vessel of this form, differing only in having been given a pedestal, the famous bowl found when the decorated shrine and altar

block were removed from the South Temple at Tarxien to the National Museum in 1956, (Plate 3 and Fig. 1 a).<sup>17</sup> This too was sealed within a Temple Period context.

What this is indicating is that a handful of sherds, presumably coming in as complete vessels, were reaching Malta in the Temple Period, along with the trade in flint, hard stone for amulets, red ochre and other materials which the islands lacked. This is not the place to document every sherd of exotic pottery found in Malta, the earliest going back to the Grey Skorba phase 2000 years earlier. Sufficient to say that there are remarkably few of these, even when the Temple Period thickened lip bowls are included.

In the other direction, I have many times repeated, with others, that no sherd of certain Maltese make had ever been found outside Malta, at least until the time of the Ognina finds or, if they are now to be disallowed, the Borg in-Nadur ones from Thapsos and other contemporary sites,<sup>18</sup> including one from Ognina itself. However, amongst the thickened lip bowls in the Syracuse Museum is a single completely different sherd. It is from the vertical concave neck of a carinated bowl, dark in colour and of a thinner and finer ware, (Fig. 1 b). Though not highly polished, if found in Malta it would without question have been classed as a Tarxien Phase offering bowl, Evans shape 41, (Fig. 1 c).<sup>19</sup> There is nothing like it in the Sicilian repertoire. On closer examination in June 2003 (I could see it only through the glass of its showcase on the earlier visit), its fabric and surface treatment are quite unlike the Maltese ones, however closely it resembles them in shape. The best explanation of this is that it is a local copy of the Maltese form. Analysis of its clay would be useful. Again there is a good parallel for

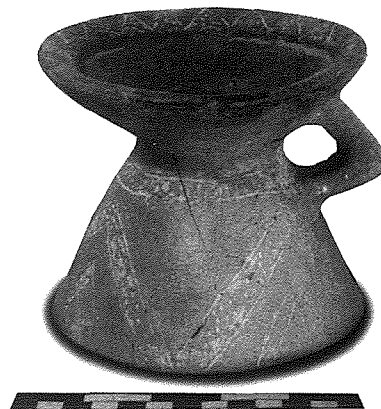
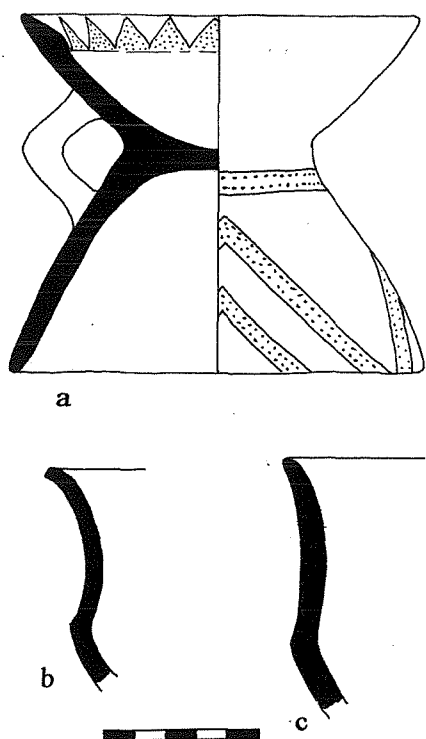


Plate 3. The complete pedestalled bowl from Tarxien

Fig. 1. a) Tarxien: pedestalled bowl with thickened lip; b) Ognina: the Tarxien-like carinated bowl; c) Xaghra Circle, Tarxien phase offering bowl



this in a later level at Ognina, which contains a few sherds of rough Borg in-Nadur imitations as well as one undoubted import.

My interpretation of this evidence is as follows. For reasons we can probably never discover, a band of people sailed west from Lesbos or the adjacent mainland to the coast of Sicily, and settled at Ognina. They had some contacts with neighbouring peoples, both in Sicily and Malta, but these were only slight.

At a somewhat later date, a second group of settlers also sailed west, though their original homeland is as yet less clear. Evans thought it might have been in western Greece, either the Peloponnese or more likely further north.<sup>20</sup> I do not propose to go over this argument again, having no new evidence to add. They did not stop in Sicily but moved on to Malta where, for whatever reason - and these newcomers may even have been at least part of that reason - the remarkably advanced culture of the temple builders had recently collapsed, leaving a power and/or population vacuum.

In Malta the new settlers became what we now call the Tarxien Cemetery people. They almost certainly maintained trading contacts with Ognina, particularly for the copper they had by now come to depend upon. However, these links did not carry their typical pottery, the everted lip vessels, back to Sicily. Since they must have come via that island, probably calling in at Ognina itself, they may even have added a contingent from that site to their numbers before making the last sea crossing to their landfall in Malta and Gozo. The shared thickened lip bowl tradition on this interpretation would be explained by a common origin, particularly if some of the Tarxien Cemetery population had come from Ognina rather than direct from Greece. This would now seem more likely than that it was

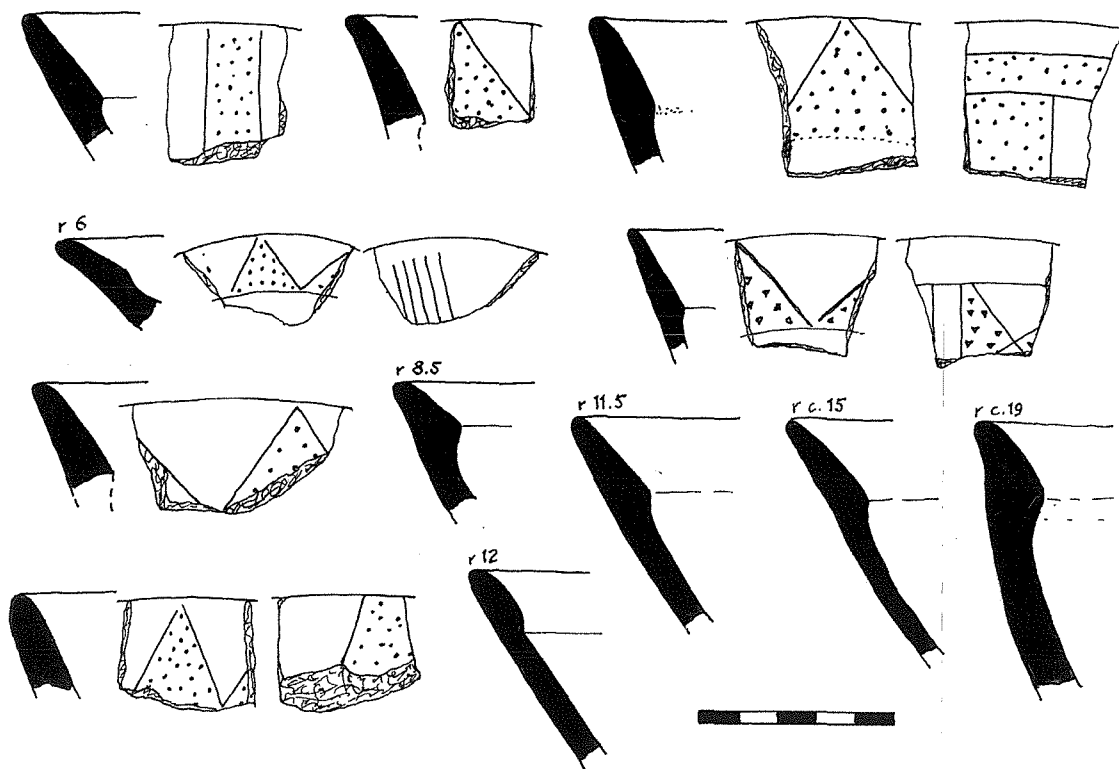


Fig. 2. Ognina: thickened lip bowl rims, plain or with dotted triangles

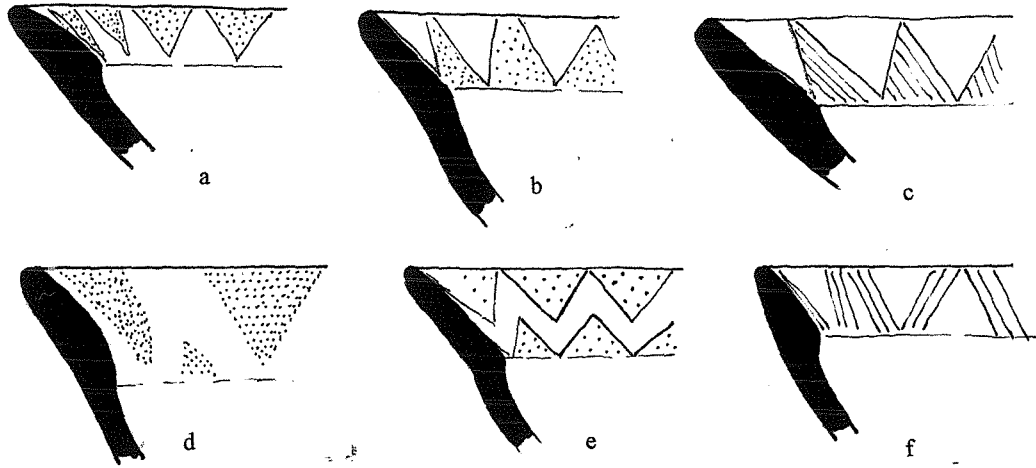


Fig.3. Decorated thickened lip bowls: a) Tarxien, b) Skorba, c) Xaghra Circle, all in Malta; d) Castelluccio, Sicily; e) Thermi, Lesbos; f) Troy

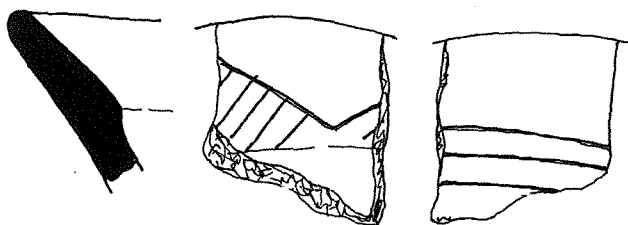
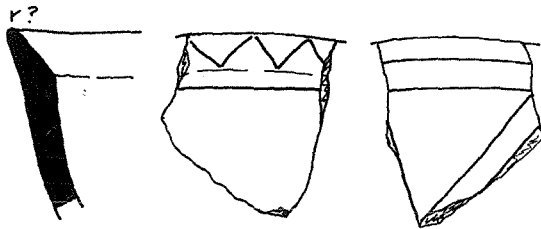
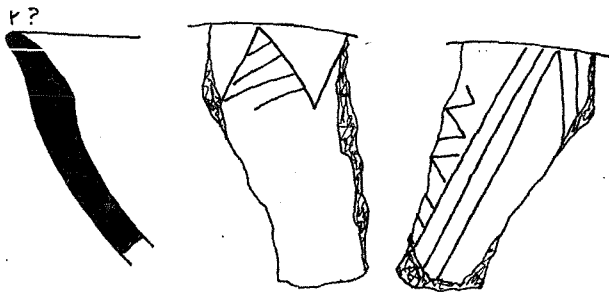
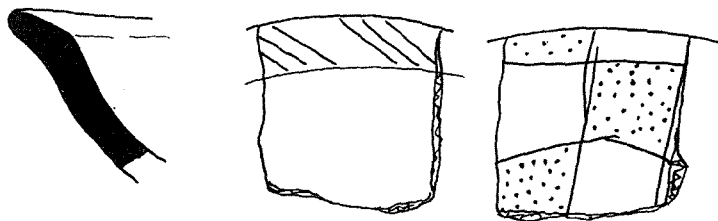


Fig.4. Ognina: thickened lip bowls with incised decoration only

due to copying from one area to another merely through trade contacts.

This all sounds very speculative, and indeed it is. There are, however, several lines of research which could throw further light on the issue, possibly even allow a firm decision between the alternatives in the not-too-distant future. For example, a re-examination of the Thermi material from Winifred Lamb's excavations on Lesbos back in the 1920s might well document more clearly the relationship of its pottery with that from Brea's at Ognina.

Although practically all the pottery discussed here would have been locally produced in the three areas under consideration, the Aegean, Sicily and Malta, a series of clay analyses might possibly reveal a few exotics, pointing back to their places of origin. The thickened lip bowls from the Temple Period in Malta, the most obviously foreign ones, would be the likeliest to yield information.

But if we have come closer to an answer for those first questions of whence and why, there are plenty more to follow. For example, when? What would be particularly valuable would be more accurate dates from radiocarbon, now that the Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) technique allows much greater precision, assuming that suitable samples for analysis could be found. If the Bronze Age occupation at Ognina could be shown to have started earlier than the Tarxien Cemetery phase in Malta, it would greatly strengthen the case presented here, but if later than Tarxien Cemetery, Brea would have to be declared the winner on points.

And finally, who? There is a much more exciting possibility here. DNA studies of modern, or decidedly better if possible, ancient, populations in Malta, Sicily, western Greece and the northern Aegean, could reveal the all-important relationship between the various peoples who produced the cultures we have documented archaeologically. Given that evidence, we might well be able to decide between them, or, of course, demonstrate that they are all wrong, and some quite different

story has to be put together to replace them.

I sincerely hope, and with some confidence, that by redefining this problem, we may soon be able to offer a more firmly based account of the Tarxien Cemetery Culture in Malta, Ognina in Sicily, and how they fitted into the picture of the Early Bronze Age in the Mediterranean.

#### Notes

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- 16 Trump (1966), 46.
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