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# Archaeology and archaeological discourse in pre-Independence Malta

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*This paper argues that the institution of the Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta in 1963 is the offspring of the archaeological policies endorsed by the Nationalist Party (PN) that guided Malta to Independence. By looking at the archaeological debate in 1950s – early 1960s Malta this paper suggests that the revival of post-prehistoric studies by the Italians suited the cultural aspirations of the PN government and provided an effective answer to the colonial control of the discipline set out earlier by the British with the Malta Ancient Monuments Survey.*

## Politics of archaeology in pre-Independence Malta

The use of archaeological narratives to promote or challenge political ideologies, interests and actions (e.g. Díaz-Andreu & Champion 1996; Kohl & Fawcett 1995; Meskell 1998) also in relations to colonial contexts (Gosden 2001; 2004) has a long history. The involvement of archaeology in processes of political legitimization has been studied in connection to European nationalisms (Díaz-Andreu & Champion 1996) and has been also explored on a global and contemporary perspective (amongst others, Kohl & Fawcett 1995; Meskell 1998). In addition to the scholarly appeal for the theme of the political manipulation of archaeology, there is also a recent general call for a less determinist and more cautious approach to the subject (Meskell 2012). Essentially, the role of archaeological materiality and narratives in shaping collective identities, often at the expense of others, is necessarily situated: the circumstances of every encounter are different and produce very different outcomes (Meskell 2012, 230-32; on Spanish archaeology see Díaz-Andreu 2010). In following this paradigm this paper seeks to unpack the 'micro-politics' (Meskell 2012, 236) of the archaeological debate in pre-Independence Malta.

Local and foreign political and cultural forces have framed the archaeological discourse in colonial Malta

(Grima 2005, 51; Vella & Gilkes 2001; Pessina & Vella 2009). In particular, British and Italian competing interests dominated the pre-Independence debate between the 1950s and the early 1960s (Vella & Gilkes 2001). Following the approach developed by Actor-Network-Theory researchers (Latour 1987; 2005), this paper explores the fundamental controversies and traces them in the words and the actions of the actors involved in the process. The format is a rich textured account that engages with institutional, group and individual associations (Latour 2005). Archival material from Malta and Italy constitutes the primary data source for developing this analysis.

In addressing the British-Italian dispute, the role of local political and intellectual elites is considered. This is because they did not simply provide the stage for the contest, but also actively engaged in the process and mediated in the relationship between Italy and Britain. This approach originates from the widely accepted awareness that colonialism is a fragmented and fluid encounter that does not necessarily fit into the dualist paradigm of oppressor/colonial and victim/colonized (Gosden 2001; 2004; 2012; van Dommelen 2006; 2011). The dynamics between colonizers and colonized are rather of an evolving nature and shaped by specific power relations, which are rarely plain and predictable in their development (Gosden 2012, 256).

A political scenario like the Maltese one, where this archaeological debate is embedded, appropriately reflects the complexity of colonial identities. In the 1950s Malta embarked on a short but intense journey towards political self-determination (Frendo 1991). The circumstances of being a British territory since 1813 and in geographical and cultural proximity to Italy had a crucial impact on the way Malta set the stage for the proclamation of political independence on the 21st September 1964 (Frendo 1991). Italy, in particular, had a pivotal role in nurturing Maltese anti-colonial nationalism since the Risorgimento, which is the political and social movement behind the creation of the Italian nation-state in the nineteenth century (Frendo 2000). The path that eventually led to Malta's political independence has its origins in the 1880s with the gradual rise of a polarized political scene and the creation in the 1920s of the pro-Italian Partito Nazionalista (PN – the 'Nationalist Party') and the pro-British Malta Labour Party (MLP) (Frendo 1992). In the 1950s the political debate focused on how to redefine the relationship between Malta and the United Kingdom. The options ranged between independence as advocated by the PN leader George Borg Olivier to full integration into the United Kingdom as supported by the leader of the MLP, Dom Mintoff (De Marco 2007, 60).

In the mid-1950s, under Mintoff's leadership, the integration proposal became subject of political debate both in Malta and in Westminster, but later eventually abandoned (Smith 2006, xl). In the aftermath of the failed attempt to integrate Malta with the UK, the colonial authority published a Defence White Paper that foresaw the drastic reduction of the local workforce employed in HM's Dockyard (Pirota 2001, 17-22). Against the backdrop of this gloomy economic and social scenario, the relationship between Mintoff and the British government significantly deteriorated up to the point of turning into violent political confrontation. Following Mintoff's resignation in April 1958 and the PN's failed attempt to form a new cabinet, the Colonial Office declared a state of emergency. The 1947 constitution was suspended and the archipelago became subject of the direct rule of HM Governor, Sir Robert Laycock (Pirota 2001, 30-37). The colonial administration exploited the tensions existing between the PN and the MLP and between the MLP and the Church. This lack of unity among Maltese political players delayed the return of legitimate government (Pirota 2001, 586; 650; De

Marco 2007, 61-65). These circumstances favoured the PN and the rise of its leader, Borg Olivier, who was perceived both in Malta and in the UK as the key player for a positive solution of the crisis (De Marco 2007, 61-65).

Under a new interim Constitution, enacted at the end of 1961, the PN led by Borg Olivier won the 1962 general elections and formed a new cabinet (Smith 2006, lv). Following the declaration of sovereignty in March 1962, the question of Malta's independence from colonial rule dominated the political agenda at home and abroad, not to mention some international political circumstances that exacerbated the debate (Smith 2006, l-lvi). The referendum on independence was held in May 1964, resulting in a slight victory for the pro-independence supporters (Smith 2006, lviii). Moreover, the role of the Church in the new constitutional arrangements and the terms of a new defence agreement proved to be controversial issues in Westminster. It was, however, primarily the risk of a return to power of Mintoff that prompted Westminster to quickly pass the Bill on Maltese independence. On 21st September 1964, once the British Cabinet ratified the proposed plan for Maltese political self-determination, independence became a reality (Smith 2006, lix).

### **Malta's Prehistoric Antiquities and...**

In the 1950s the British imprinted a clear direction to Maltese archaeology with the Malta Ancient Monuments Survey (hereafter, Survey). The ambitious project was a statement of power and was conceived by the colonial authority as a way to correct the drift taken by Maltese archaeology following the popular work of the Italian researcher Ugolini on the islands' prehistory (Vella & Gilkes 2001, 368-72; Pessina & Vella 2009, 410-3; Skeates 2010, 58-60).

One of the first executive acts of the Survey project was the appointment of the scientific Commission in charge of supervising the research progress. According to the plans, the Commission had to be formed of three experts: John Bryan Ward-Perkins, Director of the British School at Rome and chief advisor for the Survey, Stuart Piggott, Professor at the University of Edinburgh, and a third non-British scholar to conceive the 'Commission international in character' (BSR 470/2). Both Ward-Perkins and Piggott advocated the engagement of Luigi Bernabò

Brea, Superintendent of Antiquities in Eastern Sicily and director of the Archaeological Museum at Syracuse in Sicily. He was 'one of the foremost archaeologists in Europe in mental power, but his understanding of central Mediterranean prehistoric problems in particular, puts him for this job in a class by himself [...] better than another Englishman and all those who have worked in the Mediterranean' (BSR 470/2). Despite all the scientific arguments, Brea was not appointed. Political circumstances put a firm veto on the involvement of the Italian archaeologist. As Piggott claimed: '[...] I appreciate the political etc difficulties involved... do you want an English (non-Welsh, non-Irish, non-Scotch) member? If so I've no suggestions as I don't know the field' (BSR 470/2). To justify the exclusion, Ward-Perkins used the scientific argument based on a different approach to the research so that 'our third member should be a north-west European, who will see eye-to-eye with you about the way to approach the problem and to present the material [...] person who will collaborate easily' (BSR 470/2). The issue of the third expert was eventually 'circumvented' by limiting the Commission to just two members (BSR 470/3).

In September 1952, having resolved the question of the Commission, the Survey's activities effectively started. The principal investigator for the Survey was the late Director of the Institute of Archaeology at UCL, John Evans (Evans 1959, 28; Evans 1971, v). The project began well and was brought to the public attention in the summer of 1954 when BBC's third programme broadcast the interviews of Ward-Perkins, Piggott and Evans (Crawford 1954, 131; Daniel 1954, 204; Skeates 2010, 59). However, by 1956 the publication of the Survey was far from being concluded, although some efforts were made to complete it while 'Malta is (or isn't?) being integrated into Britain itself' (BSR 476b1). Little progress was made in the following years (BSR 479b2). Ward-Perkins, who considered himself responsible for the entire project, expressed all his disappointment in a letter to Glyn E. Daniel, Fellow of St John's College at Cambridge and editor of *Antiquity*. He held that Evans, then Professor of Prehistoric Archaeology at UCL, was the only person to be blamed for delaying the project: '(to say the least) Malta gave him an opportunity from which he has himself had great profit, both academically and materially' (BSR 479b2). Evans's volume *Malta* in Thames & Hudson's Ancient Peoples and Places series edited by Daniel, partially

responded to Ward-Perkins's concern (Evans 1959).

By 1963 the material was ready, but the lack of funding further delayed the conclusion of the project (BW 90/647). In 1971, the publication of *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands: a Survey* marked the end of the Survey's difficult journey. David Trump, in reviewing the volume noted: 'for many years now, the "Evans Corpus" has been spoken of in Malta in tones varying from eager anticipation to frank disbelief. It can now expect, and will surely receive, a very warm welcome' (Trump 1971, 237).

### ... the post-prehistoric studies

The approach to the study of Maltese archaeology promoted in the Survey had a fundamental impact on the development of a broader debate on the Islands' past. The strong emphasis placed on prehistory came at a very high price. Devoting all financial and human resources to the study of prehistory negatively affected a comprehensive development of the discipline in Malta. The Survey shaped Maltese archaeology by dictating how to do it and what was worth investigating. At first, the Survey's decision makers authoritatively precluded the study of Phoenician-Punic antiquities. However, this deficiency turned into a success when in the early 1960s the *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta* (hereafter, *Missione*) filled the disciplinary vacuum created by the Survey's unilateral policy. In 1963 the PN in government successfully entered into a research agreement with the newly created *Missione*. These crucial circumstances evolved and interplayed as follows.

While the Survey Committee was about to be appointed, the future Committee member Joseph G. Baldacchino, director of the Museum Department, secured funds to set up a research programme on Maltese Phoenician antiquities (Bugeja 2006, 36). To that purpose, he personally invited Donald Harden, keeper of the Department of Antiquities at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, to prepare a research proposal (BSR 470/1; Bugeja 2006, 36) and a detailed plan for the study of the islands' Phoenician tombs (BSR 470/1; Bugeja 2006, 36).

Ward-Perkins interpreted Harden's interest in Malta as a direct threat to the Survey, to which – he recommended – all available resources should have been directed. Ward-Perkins added that Harden's interference 'has already trailed a very juicy red-

herring in front of Maltese noses that love nothing better' (BSR 470/3). At the time Ward-Perkins successfully managed to make a case against the Baldacchino-Harden plan. There is evidence that Baldacchino reacted negatively to the forced interruption of his project. The Director of the British School at Rome warned Piggott on the eve of his first visit to Malta of Baldacchino's unsupportive attitude and of his Punicophilia, stressing the need for 'certain diplomatic skills in dealing with him' (BSR 470/3). During his visit, however, Piggott found the Museum Director to be an attentive and kind host (BSR 470/2). It is not surprising therefore, that the Museum Director's attitude towards the Survey project was unenthusiastic given the overwhelming show of power at the highest colonial level, directly in conflict with his research ambitions.

The circumstances of the Phoenician research promoted by Baldacchino show how colonial authority needed to maintain a strict hierarchy of power-relations to ensure the status quo. In blocking the development of this project Ward-Perkins exerted a power that went beyond Maltese shores. It mirrored from an archaeological perspective the extent to which British colonial power directly controlled overseas possessions.

It could be argued that Baldacchino himself used his connections with British academia to set up his own project. This however should probably not be surprising if appropriate reference is made to the fact that Malta, as the small colony, outsourced most of the archaeologists working there and that at that time it was logical to choose a British academic. Foreign influence was not the issue, but rather the fact that a local initiative did not comply with a plan set up at the highest colonial level. This was unacceptable as the local expert in question was Maltese, held a powerful position, and *de facto* was not also an enthusiastic supporter of the Survey. In Ward-Perkins's view dealing with Maltese people was *per se* a risky business because they were difficult to control. Italy played a crucial role in exacerbating this ambivalent relation of Malta with its ruler, traditionally threatening the balance of power set by the colonial authority, more so when the prospect of independence gained momentum and Italy offered an appealing alternative to British control over Maltese archaeology.

### Tas-Silġ: the point of attack

Notwithstanding the efforts to keep archaeological research strictly on the path set up by the colonial authorities, unexpected changes in post-prehistoric studies occurred in the following years.

The first person to warn of the imminent danger was David Trump, Curator of the archaeological section of the Museum Department between 1958 and 1963 (MUS 86/58; MUS 37/58). As a locally-based British archaeologist, Trump certainly had a clear understanding of the interplay between political and cultural stances on the Maltese archaeological stage, and of the fragile balance between local and overseas interests, in particular during the years of radical changes in Maltese history. In 1962 Richard David Barnett of the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities at the British Museum and Benedikt Isserlin from the Department of Semitic Languages and Literature at the University of Leeds made an inquiry to undertake research on Punic Malta. In replying to their inquiry, Trump shared his concerns on the state of Punic archaeology in Malta:

Something should have been done years ago [...] If excavation is to be the point of attack, and there is much to be said for this, the temple site at Tas-Silġ offers far better hopes [...]: there is a good depth of soil, part of a colonnade was still standing to the end of the 18th century, inscriptional material has been found [...] (MUS 'Letters').

And a few days later Trump remarked: 'If anyone wants a Punic site here [i.e. Ras ir-Raheb], we have a much better one, with several feet of soil, at the other end of the island [i.e. Tas-Silġ]' (MUS 'Letters').

The statements made by Trump are of great interest even if their interpretation is controversial. Firstly, he complained about the timing of the proposal: it came late. He had possibly learnt of the Government plan to approach Italy on heritage matters and he likely appreciated the risks of this plan. Further to the timing issue, Trump's remarks contain reference to a single-site strategy to be adopted in Tas-Silġ as a 'point of attack'. This was in direct opposition to the landscape approach used in the prehistoric Survey.

Isserlin did not visit Malta until a year later, in March 1963. This delay proved to be critical and on the 26th April Trump wrote to him the following lines full of dismay:



**Figure 1.** 'The Hon. Dr. A. Paris gives the first stroke of the pick to inaugurate excavations at Tas-Silġ by the Italian Archaeological Team.' Caption that accompanied this photograph in *The Times of Malta*, October 17, 1963.



**Figure 2.** The inauguration of the 1963 excavation campaign at Tas-Silġ. First from right is the Minister of Education Paris with the *Missione* general director Moscati next to him (Malta 1963 1 – Foglio 002 fig. 3. Reproduced courtesy of *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta*)

The Tas-Silġ business becomes more and more grotesque. Moscati has his permission to go ahead but if this is in writing no copy has reached the Museum Department. Certainly we were not consulted before and after. The Italians are being given a completely free hand with the Phoenician and Roman archaeology of Malta, with no conditions whatsoever. I gather that if I want to dig up anything Roman for the museum I would have to ask Moscati's permission. The whole business is political from first to last, no regard having been paid to archaeological consideration at all.

Frankly if you wish to do anything at Zurrieq [the site where substantial remains of a Punic building stood] the only course now is to ask Moscati direct. It would still have to go through the Minister of Education but without Moscati's blessing I very much doubt if it would stand a chance. As you can gather from the above, anything we did or said from here would count for nothing with the powers that be. Similarly I trust them so little that they would be the last people to whom I should announce your discovery. Any importance of Zurrieq should be played right down until we can get your permission to work there.

... Our only hope is that the Italians may show a bit more sense and fair-dealing than the Nationalist (so-called) Maltese. They could hardly show less' (MUS 'Letters').

Some of the themes in Trump's allegation are directly connected with the arrival of the *Missione*, namely: 1) the political nature of Italian involvement; 2) the *Missione's* overwhelming power over Maltese historical archaeology; and 3) the Museum Department's powerless position.

Trump found outrageous the way that the PN government and the *Missione* politically manoeuvred the whole 'Tas-Silġ business'. Over a period of only a few months the *Missione* gained full control over Phoenician and Roman archaeology in Malta to such an extent that any decisions in these fields needed the approval of both the Minister of Education and Sabatino Moscati, the Director of the *Missione*. To use Trump's words, under these 'grotesque' circumstances the study of archaeology was effectively overpowered by politics and the Museum Department was a hopeless spectator of its own business.

Trump's allegations were sharp and accurate in many respects. It is unquestionable that the *Missione* had the backing of the PN Government with the Minister of Education, Hon. Antonio Paris, at the forefront and it is also true that the *Missione* obtained unprecedented control over Maltese historical archaeology (Figs 1 and 2). Furthermore, the politicised Italian involvement put the Museum Department in an awkward and uncomfortable position. As Director of the Maltese institution in charge of archaeological matters, Charles G. Zammit also became involved



**Figure 3.** The inauguration of the 1963 excavation at Tas-Silġ. The *Missione* scientific director Cagiano de Azevedo (right) and the Minister of Education Paris (left) between two journalists (Malta 1963 1 – Foglio 002 fig. 2. Reproduced courtesy of *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta*)

in the process (NAM, ME 25/62; NAM, ME 35/63, 19). However, beyond institutional compliments and public proclamations of collaboration, at this stage Zammit had probably no real power of veto, but was simply following decisions taken at the highest political level.

Ward-Perkins shared Trump's feelings of consternation and the sense of frustrating impotence. He labelled the first Italian campaign at Tas-Silġ 'an attack on one of the few remaining excavable sites in Malta, accompanied by a barrage of publicity highly nationalistic in tone. Those who have seen the excavation will appreciate that the word "attack" is used advisedly [...]' (BSR 484b1). Ward-Perkins despised the Italians for their aggressive approach to the archaeological deposits at Tas-Silġ (Fig. 3) and was inclined to dismiss the first results from the fieldwork as 'tendentious and half-baked nonsense' in line with the politically distorted conclusions of Ugolini's *Malta e le origini della Civiltà Mediterranea* (Vella & Gilkes 2001, 372). The timely publication of the Survey was 'well calculated' to give 'the proper answer' (BSR 484b1) to the biased, unskilled approach to archaeology shown by generations of Italians (Pessina & Vella 2009, 410-3; Skeates 2010, 58-60).

In Ward-Perkins's and Trump's view the Italian excavations in Tas-Silġ offended the entire archaeological discipline. This rhetoric of the Italian attack shows all its power when considered from a

colonial perspective. This is because the Italian control over the Islands' historical archaeology introduces a crucial element of instability to an already weakened system of power. The inverse fortunes of the Survey and the *Missione* project mirror the shift in power relations between Britain and Italy over Maltese archaeology in a crucial moment of the Islands' history.

It has been noted that a negligible archaeological impact in Malta had always haunted British academia (Vella & Gilkes 2001, 361, 371-72). What is relevant to emphasize here is not the British contribution to Maltese archaeology, which was deep and valuable well beyond the Survey project (Peet 1910; Ashby *et al.* 1913; Potter & Stoddart 2001, 8-9; Skeates 2010, 58-62), but rather its political impact. The British tried and failed to use the discipline as an effective political tool for affirming their influence over the Islands. On the contrary the institution of the *Missione* operated as a powerful political tool to effectively reduce the colonial control over archaeological practice and research.

In 1962 the Minister of Education Paris officially invited Michelangelo Cagiano de Azevedo, Professor of Greek and Roman Archaeology and History of Art at the Catholic University in Milan to provide scientific advice to the government (MUS 62/62; NAM, ME 110/62, 3) and 'to review the position obtained in Malta with regard to Archaeology' (NAM, ME 110/62, 3). Cagiano de Azevedo summarized his findings in the Report on the Antiquities of Malta (NAM, ME 25/62, 2) that landed on Paris's desk in January 1963. In March 1963 the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially assigned the *Missione* in Malta to the Institute of Near Eastern Studies, under Moscati's directorship (Pos. IVO/B 11 Prot. 289). At the beginning of the following month, the *Missione* director offered to send an archaeological expedition '[...] in the frame of the fruitful cultural relationships between Malta and Italy [...]' (NAM, ME 25/62). The positive answer of the Maltese authorities was so rapid that the main points of the agreement between the *Missione* and Malta were defined in a few days.

In early April, while Moscati was in Malta for a short visit (NAM, ME 35/63), Paris formally submitted the proposal to authorize an Italian expedition to the Prime Minister, explicitly stressing the urgency of the matter. Borg Olivier gave his approval on the same day, promising 'full cooperation of the competent Maltese authorities' (NAM, ME 25/62). On April





**Figure 4.** The 1963 excavation campaign at Tas-Silġ (Malta 1963 2 – Foglio 005 fig. 95. Reproduced courtesy of *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta*). The use of the pick axe to go through layers of archaeological deposit was a common occurrence.

15th 1963 Cagiano de Azevedo, as newly appointed Director of the excavations, wrote to Zammit on the successful conclusion of the agreements: '*Come vede non abbiamo dormito e tutto ora è felicemente in porto*' (NAM, ME 25/62, 14).

## Conclusions

In this paper it has been argued that the archaeological debate in pre-Independence Malta was at first dominated by the research agenda imposed by a colonial authority, as a means to reaffirm British control over the study of prehistory. In this light, the twin perspective on landscape and prehistory of the Survey project, as advocated by the British School at Rome, can be seen to have reinstated this colonial power over the discipline. However, this colonial paradigm failed under the combined effects of internal and external factors. The Maltese colonial experience was coming to an end and the system of power relations at the foundations of the Survey was in disarray. As illustrated above, the PN government seized the opportunity to subvert the colonial archaeological construct by inviting the Italians to conduct excavations on Maltese soil. The nature of this plan highlights a pattern of transition from a colonial to a post-colonial status for Malta. However, it should be kept in mind that the *Missione* hailed from Italy, the country that traditionally was

considered the alternative to British archaeology in Malta (Grima 2005; Vella & Gilkes 2001) and that Malta is a polarized country. So as happened in other circumstances in the course of Maltese recent history (Frendo 1991; 2000) it was not Malta as a unified entity that led the change, but only a part of it. This part was the pro-Italian establishment that governed the country in those years (Frendo 1991; 1992) and supported the *Missione* operation. This finding goes beyond colonial/post-colonial arguments and highlights an existing local pattern of political and cultural division. On a specific archaeological level the *Missione* project countered piece by piece the colonial construct shaped around the Survey. History replaced prehistory as the principal research focus, intensive single-site excavations replaced the survey as an investigation strategy. Last but not least, a foreign team replaced individual British researchers that worked within local institutions controlled and supervised by the Colonial authority.

While this paper does not fully engage with the discussion on the shift from colonial archaeology to archaeology by foreigners, it suggests that the *Missione* was formally the product of post-colonial power structures and that it countered colonial archaeological paradigms. In controlling the discipline, however, the *Missione* reproduced asymmetries of power typically associated with colonialism and *de facto* replaced the colonial authority in dictating which past matters for Malta.

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