# Albert Mayr (1868-1924)

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# Examining the legacy of pioneer work in Maltese archaeology

The Bavarian philologist Albert Mayr visited Malta during the autumn and winter months of 1897/98 and a second time in spring 1907. He is considered to have been a pioneer in many ways. His scientific approach to archaeology, at a time when the discipline was just getting beyond the point of myths and fables, enabled him to lay down solid foundations for various parts of Malta's prehistory and history.

Albert Mayr belonged to a time when specialisation was not essential to erudition. It was quite possible for a single mind to dominate a multiplicity of fields of study. He was a philologist excelling in classical languages, this did not restrict him from going into history and archaeology. Being a nineteenth century mind, Mayr applied himself to the full range of Maltese prehistory and history, from the Neolithic to the Norman conquest.

Mayr's publications are well known to today's scholars of Maltese archaeology. However, there seems to be the perception that Mayr's works had been somewhat ignored. This impression is derived from various factors. He received very few official honours for his works, and he never acquired a position within the established academic circle of Munich, the university and the academy. The fact that he wrote in German about a Mediterranean island, which was a British colony, naturally did not make him prominent in Malta.

Mayr reached conclusions that were not in line with the views generally held by Maltese scholars of his time. He systematically dissected his subject, bringing in corroborating evidence for every point introduced. He did not shy away from controversy. Many of Mayr's conclusions, drawn one hundred years ago, were gradually confirmed through the work of later scholars.

Albert Mayr's lifelong relationship with Maltese archaeology started with research for his doctoral thesis. His dissertation consisted of three parts, examining the antiquity and history of the Maltese Islands and Pantelleria until the beginning of the Middle Ages. Mayr's tutor Eugen Oberhummer, whose field of specialisation was historic geography, drew the former's attention towards Malta and encouraged him to work on a historic geographic monograph about Malta. This project finally materialised in Mayr's 1909 book *Die Insel Malta im Altertum*.

Oberhummer's 1895 assessment of Mayr's doctoral thesis states that owing to the sparse written sources, Mayr was compelled to include archaeological evidence. Consequently, he dedicated a major part of his work to the study of numismatic material. In fact, Mayr's essay on Ancient Coins of Malta, Gozo and Pantelleria (1894), forms part of his doctoral thesis. It was singled out and considered suitable for printing and publication according to university requirements. Whereas other sections of his dissertation, foremost Mayr's preliminary desktop-research on the "peculiar monuments of Pre-Roman date in Malta", although being considered more than enough proof of his academic capabilities, were not deemed ready for publication unless an indepth investigation on site was carried out. This set the course for Mayr's first visit to Malta in 1897.

#### Albert Mayr's publications and study tours

Albert Mayr's works and his study tours are a witness to a lifelong commitment to Mediterranean archaeology with special focus on Malta. Between 1894 and 1926 he published ten essays on Maltese archaeology. His work shows a progressive development, which is collected in his book *Die Insel Malta im Altertum* (1909). He did not return to Malta after publishing his book. Nevertheless, he remained in touch with Maltese archaeology. This is evident in his 1920 publication and the 1926 posthumous publication.

Four of Mayr's early essays have been selected to demonstrate the varied fields of Maltese archaeology to which the scholar applied himself.

### 1894 - Ancient Coins of Malta, Gozo and Pantelleria

As part of his doctoral thesis Mayr examined a corpus of 23 coins from Malta, Gozo and Pantelleria, roughly datable within the last three centuries BC. His analysis was carried out within the context of classical written sources. The material available to Mayr consisted of the original coins found at the Munich Münzkabinett as well as coin impressions and descriptions from various European collections. A.A. Caruana, then Director of Education in Malta, made a description of the coin collection at the public library in Malta available to Mayr (Mayr 1894:5).

Mayr wrotc his first monograph before he ever set foot on Malta. It is striking to learn that from the study of numismatic material alone, he anticipated a good deal of the conclusions archaeology is able to draw today, having a much vaster corpus of archaeological evidence.

## A summary of Mayr's numismatic analysis

Contrary to the view held by Maltese historians (Bres 1816; Caruana 1882), Mayr could not conceive that the cities Melite and Goulos had an autonomous mint before the second Punic War. According to Bres, coins with the inscriptions MEAITAI $\Omega$ N belonged to Greek colonies existing in Malta and Gozo between the 8th and 6th century BC. Even Caruana (1882) still maintained such an early date for these coins. Likewise coins with Phoenician inscriptions, according to Bres, were struck by the Phoenicians who had settled in Malta before the Carthaginian rule (Mayr 1894:7).

Mayr argued that none of the coins under investigation could be securely dated back to the period when the islands were under Carthaginian rule. He reasoned that under the Carthaginians even the cities of Motya and Panormos in Sicily ceased to mint their own autonomous coins. Therefore, it seemed unlikely to Mayr that the Maltese cities struck autonomous coins; rather that they used a national Carthaginian coin.

In 218 BC the Maltese islands were handed over to the Romans and became part of the Province of Sicily. Similar to other Sicilian cities with restricted autonomy, the island communities of Malta received coining prerogative. Owing to constitutional relations with Rome these cities could only strike copper coins.

# Coins as a cultural reflection

Mayr concluded that the coins provide more of a cultural than a political reflection of the time. He identified a rather unified style which distinguishes Maltese from Sicilian coins. He recognised a strange Mischkultur -Phoenician, Egyptian, Greek and eventually Roman images are found and bear witness to a transition process which took place during the last centuries BC (Mayr 1894:38-40).

Mayr observed that the earlier coins from Melite show an entirely non-Greek character. The style is Egyptianising and the images come from an Egyptian-Phoenician pantheon. Whilst the coins from Pantelleria hardly show any traces of Hellenistic elements, in Malta Hellenistic influence gradually gained ground. However, until a very late stage, a part of the coins still retain Punic legends. The co-existence of a Phoenician and a Greek population is witnessed by the fact that the community simultaneously struck coins with Greek and Phoenician inscriptions. Mayr explained the persistence of Phoenician and Punic elements by ongoing contacts with the Punic cities of the North-African coast. At the same time, the Hellenistic elements received constant reinforcements from the close links with Sicily. Slowly, Roman elements started to infiltrate local culture. Mixed Latin and Greek legends indicate the beginning of a process of Romanisation. The latest coin of the corpus

shows the name of the city still having the Greek ending "Melitas" although written in Latin letters. Mayr read this as an indication for a changed political position and he argued that by then the island probably became a Roman Municipium (Mayr 1894:20-21).

# 1886 - "On the history of the Older Christian Church of Malta"

In 1886, one year before Mayr's first visit to Malta, he published his second essay: a critical examination of the history of Malta's older church. In a radical, yet scholarly manner, Mayr did away with a good deal of "myths and legends". Many of these traditions are part of Maltese folklore and legend and play a role in the process of maintaining a Maltese "national" consciousness (Luttrell 1975:30). The 28-year-old Mayr, not being conditioned by any of these factors, worked his way through centuries of Maltese church history inexorably dismantling salient pillars of Maltese tradition.

Thorough evaluation of primary sources and a critical approach to the work of contemporary and previous scholars, led Mayr to his own conclusions. In a very matter of fact way he stated that his examinations concerning various traditional Maltese beliefs have led to negative results. Contrary to the belief that St. Paul converted a large part of the population and even founded a Christian community, Mayr concluded that Christianity cannot be dated earlier than the 4th century AD.

Concerning the prevailing traditions that Malta had bishops starting from the early beginnings of Christianity, Mayr's investigations showed that Malta's bishopric was not founded earlier than during the Byzantine period. Regarding the conviction that Christianity survived in Muslim Malta, Mayr claimed that the Muslim conquest led to the complete destruction of the Maltese Church (Mayr 1886:496).

# "Catholic, strictly scientific and no apologetics"

Mayr's essay was published in *Historisches Jahrbuch der Görres-Gesellschaft*. It has to be understood within the parameters given by this society, whose stated canon was: "Catholic, strictly scientific and the exclusion of direct apologetics." (Gatz 1988:4)

The essay clearly reflects the objectives pursued by the *Görres Gesellschaft* as well as the society's emphasis on archival research. The year 1888 saw the society's foundation of its institute in Rome. This decision was prompted by Pope Leo XIII's opening of the Vatican archives for historical research in 1880. This event encouraged an enormous influx of scholars and historians from all over Europe. Mayr's 1896 essay on the Early Maltese Church as well as his 1901 essay on the Palaeochristian catacombs of Malta conform well

with the work carried out by contemporary German scholars in Rome.

Heinrich Gelzer (1896), a German Byzantine scholar, wrote a review of Mayr's essay. The critical spirit prevailing among German scholars contemporary with Mayr is perfectly well demonstrated in Gelzer's critique. Gelzer simply states that Mayr's results were to be expected. Not only Malta but many other countries have long lists of alleged early bishops. Gelzer, anticipating Luttrell by 80 years, defines these traditions as "either Medieval fabrications, or erudite but wrong conclusions formed between the 16th and 18th century" (Gelzer 1896:1402). Malta's distorted historiography, after all, might not be a phenomenon as unique as it is locally thought to be. It seems that the most varied political and historical realities can produce similar myths and seem to apply similar myth-making techniques.

#### 1901a: "Palaeochristian Burial Places in Malta"

In 1897, Albert Mayr received a Bavarian archaeological travel grant, and embarked on a study tour to Italy and Greece, including a three month visit to Malta from October 1897 to January 1898. Mayr's archaeological research of Palaeochristian burial places is unmistakably linked with some of the questions he raised in his 1896 essay on the Early Church. He felt the limitations of the written sources and realised that a thorough investigation of the Maltese Palaeochristian monuments might provide answers to some of his open questions. Mayr the "historian" turned to archaeology to aid his historical studies.

In 1898, one year after Mayr's visit to Malta, A.A. Caruana published his *Ancient pagan tombs and Christian cemeteries*. Mayr's own research related to this subject resulted in two papers: his essay on Palaeochristian tombs published in 1901, and his essay on the Phoenician tombs of Malta, presented to the academy in Munich in 1905.

Mayr calls Caruana's report the first serious, detailed account of the catacombs and burial sites. However, since he visited and studied the catacombs himself, just one year before Caruana's book was published, he feels to be in a position to supplement and correct some points. Moreover, he deems it necessary to re-evaluate Caruana's information regarding dating, development and influences from abroad. He takes his critique even further, remarking that the main value of Caruana's work lies in the drawings carried out by Filippo Vassallo; he considers Caruana's accompanying text too general and not providing any information (Mayr 1901a:216).

Mayr did not agree with the criteria Caruana (1898:4-5) applied in order to distinguish between pagan and Christian burials. Contrary to Caruana he concentrated

on identifying architectural patterns and common factors valid for various hypogea. Mayr argued that hypogea, which share close similarities in their layout and architecture, point to the same period of origin (Mayr 1901a:221). Therefore, also hypogea which cannot be identified as Christian through iconography or inscriptions are included in Mayr's categories, since they comply stylistically with those of presumed Christian origin. Since Mayr concentrated on layout and architecture, he distinguished between different tombtypes and identified distinct architectural features. These were mainly corridors and open spaces, providing connections and communication within the hypogea. He forms categories and classifies burial places and hypogea accordingly. In this regard, Mayr seems to be the German equivalent to the Victorian scholar who enjoys establishing categories and classification. One could also speculate that some influence of Darwinism is evident in Mayr's typologies. Mayr's categories follow a linear development or evolution, from relatively simple arrangements to more complex layout and grander scale.

#### Mayr's conclusions

According to Mayr the earliest form of Maltese Palaeochristian burial site is the small hypogeum with window-tombs. For him these hypogea suggest a specific local development originating from Phoenician burial sites. However, he proposed a relatively late date, the 4th century AD, bringing these small hypogea into close chronological context with the larger catacombs. He knew that it is not always possible to distinguish between Christian and Non-Christian burial sites. He seemed to limit this problem to small hypogea. He had no doubts about the Christian nature of the lesser cemeteries and the major catacombs. In fact, he failed to notice the Jewish Catacombs in the St. Paul and St. Agatha group.

Mayr concluded that the Maltese Palaeochristian burial places were not of great significance. The spatial extension of the single hypogea was very limited. The architecture did not show grand forms. Possible reasons for this could be that the hypogea, except for St. Paul's and Abbatia Tad-Dejr, were not the product of a community but of individual families or groups. Mayr further referred to the sparse use of decoration in the catacombs, whilst he stressed the great care which was undertaken by the masons to cut the tombs. He claimed to recognise the "Phoenician efforts" to create the "house of the dead" as comfortable as possible.

His study of the Palaeochristian burial sites was closely linked with his 1896 essay on the Early Church. Mayr hoped that a thorough investigation of the Maltese burial places might give answers to some of his questions. He asked from where did Christianity come to Malta. After having personally studied the burial places, Mayr concluded that the evidence points to Sicily. Mayr summarised that all features which did not have local character, betrayed links with Sicily. He added that this was supported by the geographical vicinity and the fact that from the moment reliable written sources pertaining to the Early Maltese church had existed, these sources provided evidence for close links with Sicily.

Since neither the Palacochristian burial places nor the inscriptions could be securely attributed to the pre-Constantinian period, Mayr reasoned that it was unlikely that there was a considerable spread of Christianity before the 4th century. Mayr could not help it. He had to remark that in the long term St. Paul's visit did not effect the process of Christianisation of the island. With his reference to St. Paul's visit to Malta he linked up again with the point of departure of his 1896 essay on the Early Church.

Contrasting Mayr's essay with Caruana's survey or the work of earlier historians, it is clear that with Mayr a more critical spirit made itself felt. At the same time it has to be emphasised that Mayr's study was only possible since he could base himself on Caruana's survey and Vassallo's drawings.

Mayr had no intention to prove an uninterrupted continuation of Christianity from St. Paul's visit onwards. However, he might have brought along his own bias. On the one hand, he concentrated mainly on finding archaeological proof for his essay on the history of the Early Maltese Church. On the other, he was also a product of his time. He viewed the development of Palaeochristian burial sites as a linear process from modest beginnings to more elaboration as time passed. He did not give much thought to concurrent or overlapping occurrence. Consequently, he did not identify alteration due to continuous use and adaptations prompted by changing needs and requirements.

#### 1901b "The Prehistoric Monuments of Malta"

His first study tour of 1897/98 provided Albert Mayr with the opportunity to personally investigate the ancient monuments of Malta and Gozo. The need for a detailed field study was already expressed by Mayr's tutor in 1895. Mayr's intention was to catalogue the prehistoric remains as completely as possible. He received much support in Malta, in particular from Father Manuel Magri, and Mrs Luisa Strickland, who helped him in conducting his prehistoric research (Mayr 1901b:721).

Within about three months he re-investigated the remains which had already been recorded and he surveyed sites which had not been investigated to date. He documented the sites, took photographs (fig.1) and when necessary made his own groundplans (fig.2). He considered his attempted documentation incomplete since he had to leave many gaps which were impossible to fill. He complained about the lack of protection and wilful destruction of monuments. He criticised the insufficient recording system of local museums, which made it impossible to trace the provenance of finds (Mayr 1901b:646).

Mayr's prehistoric survey was given considerable attention. His work was not only of interest to German speaking scholars (Lissauer 1901:211-212), but also

#### fig. 1

Il-Hagra l-Wieqfa, Qala, Gozo, photographed by Albert Mayr in 1897/98 (Mayr 1901b:685, pl. IX)



received international attention. Arthur J. Evans wrote a critique, published in the journal MAN (1902:41-44). The leading Italian prehistorian Colini (1902:204-233), published a detailed review of Mayr's essay. Princess Battenberg took care that Mayr's essay was translated into English and printed for private circulation in Malta in 1908.

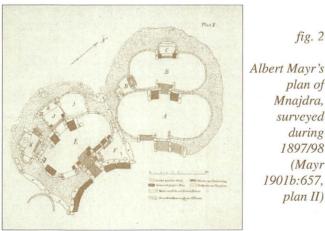
# The recognition of the prehistoric character of the Maltese monuments

Mayr entered the debate at a time when scholars still attributed the prehistoric monuments to "Malta's earliest inhabitants the Phoenician". Jean Houel and Alberto La Marmora had identified the Phoenicians as the builders of these monuments. Local historians Bres, Vassallo (1876) and Caruana (1898) shared this view which found acceptance in Perrot & Chipiez's Histoire de l'art (Mayr 1901b:705). Mayr convincingly argued against the Phoenician origin of the Maltese temples (Mayr 1901b:706-709). At the same time he did not take any credit for recognising their prehistoric character. He referred to Henry Rhind (1856:397-400), whom he called one of the first authors who questioned the Phoenician origins of the monuments (Mayr 1901b:705). Already in 1856 Rhind considered these unfounded Phoenician origins "a convenient mystification similar to that so stubbornly bound up in the common epithet Druidical". In prevailing 19th-century ideas everything not being historically classified, was Phoenician, Antediluvian or even Druidical (Daniel & Renfrew 1988:12-13).

Despite some pockets of "Phoenician resistance", represented locally by Lord Strickland, and the works of other scholars who also disputed the Phoenician origins of Malta's megalithic temples, it is still Mayr's essay which has entered the history of Maltese archaeology, marking the definite recognition of the prehistoric character of the temples.

#### Mayr's methodology

Mayr's first step was to group Malta's prehistoric remains into architectural monuments and artefacts. He further subdivided the architectural monuments into



#### fig. 2

plan of Mnajdra, surveyed during 1897/98 (Mayr 1901b:657. plan II)

sanctuaries, fortifications, dwellings and buildings of unclear destination and artificial rock caves. The artefacts were divided into sculpture and pottery. Again, Mayr approached the subject by forming categories and groups. Mayr's descriptions do not merely state what is physically present; they betray a deep understanding of the chronological sequences. He identifies structural changes within the temple development and is able to work out the architectural history of the sites (Evans 1971:95,88,172) and establishes a chronology of temple development (Mayr 1901b.680)

### The cultural placing of Malta's monuments according to Mayr

Mayr concluded that the Maltese monuments point to close relationships with the megalithic cultures of the Western Mediterranean. He spoke of an island culture, shared between Malta, Pantelleria, Sardinia, the Balearic Islands and Southeast Spain. On the other hand, by taking into account research on the Aegean and Mycenaean cultures, Mayr admitted that the earlier Aegean cultures exerted considerable influence on the cultures of the Western Mediterranean. He identified Aegean traits in some of the figurines, in the pottery, in the spiral motif and in architectural structures, in particular vaulting (Mayr 1901b:717).

#### Arthur J. Evans' influence on Mayr

Arthur J. Evans visited Malta in 1897. The Maltese megalithic temples provided him with material for comparison in particular with Mycenaean pillar shrines, baetylic worship and decorative motifs apparently from a Mycenaean source (Evans 1901:196- 200). Presumably, the authority of Evans led Mayr to overestimate the influences from the Minoan and Mycenaean world, moving him deeper into the theory of Diffusionism. Evans' 1901 publication prompted Mayr to reconsider some of his conclusions and to adjust his preliminary chronology. Mayr concluded that the beginnings of Malta's megalithic civilisation could be traced far back into Pre-Mycenaean times. However, traces of early Mycenaean civilisation seemed to appear together with the "stippling ornament", therefore the sanctuaries in their later period seemed to belong to the early Mycenaean age (Mayr 1908a:93).

# Mayr attacked by T.E. Peet and defeated by Carbon Dating

In an essay published in the Papers of the British School at Rome, T.E. Peet fiercely criticised Mayr. He attacked his overestimation of the strengths of Aegean influence without a single Mycenaean potsherd having been found on the island (Peet 1910:149). Peet systematically argued in favour of a local development of Malta's megalithic culture, anticipating many conclusions archaeology was only able to reach after carbon dating disrupted the whole pattern of diffusionistic explanation. Peet's voice, however, did not reflect the opinion generally held by archaeologists of his time. Up to the time of J. D. Evans' 1959 account of Maltese prehistory, there appeared to be little doubt that the Maltese Temple culture depended for its flowering on stimuli from the Bronze Age cultures of the Aegean, and Maltese archaeology could be explained in that chronological and diffusionistic framework (Bonanno 1993:222). Once radiocarbon analysis (Trump 1966) moved back the chronological parameters, it became evident that the Maltese Temple Culture could not depend on the Aegean Bronze Age chronology. The phenomenon of the temples would thus appear to have developed without any intervention from outside the islands (Renfrew 1976). Mayr, who remained faithful to Aegean influences up to his 1926 posthumous publication, has no place within Renfrew's theory.

#### Conclusion

Mayr's works and his study tours betray a lifelong dedication to Mediterranean archaeology with a special focus on Malta. Mayr's greatest contribution to Maltese archaeology lies in his objectivity and freshness. With little more than academic connections to Malta he could view things with an objective eye. His systematic way of working further contributed to the objectivity of his analysis.

It is unfortunate that due to various factors, not least publishing in German, Mayr was ignored by some of his contemporaries. Later scholars understood his merits. Today, Albert Mayr is considered to have laid solid foundations for Palaeochristian, Byzantine and Medieval Malta. His strong sense of observation is apparent in his detailed descriptions and surveys of prehistoric Malta. His excellent descriptions proved to be useful and have survived through the works of subsequent scholars.

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