

# Excavations at Tas-Silġ 1996

Anthony J. Frendo and Anthony Bonanno

For the first time ever, the Department of Classics and Archaeology of the University of Malta conducted its own excavations at the site of Tas-Silġ which is located at Marsaxlokk in the south-east of the island of Malta. These excavations were directed by the authors, who would like to thank Mr Simon Mason and Mr Nicholas Vella who were responsible for the field supervision. We would also like to thank the area supervisors, namely Mr Andrew Appleyard, Ms Carmen Michelle Buhagiar, Ms Aloisia de Trafford, Mr Joseph Magro Conti, Mr Paul C. Saliba as well as Mr André Corrado; the latter agreed to act as an area supervisor for a while when the need arose. Obviously, we do also appreciate very much all the hard work of the "diggers" who were in fact students from the aforementioned Department of Classics and Archaeology, the foreign and local students who formed part of the first Summer School in Archaeology which was organized by the International Office of the University of Malta, and some very eager and hard-working volunteers.

This excavation was sponsored by the University of Malta and by Din l-Art Helwa, whilst the Planning Authority prepared the surface survey of the site and the Museum of London generously made available the best kind of tracing paper used in the field. Simmonds Farson Cisk Ltd quenched our thirst by providing free table water, whilst the Carmelite Fathers of Tas-Silġ kindly let us use their sanitary facilities. We are very grateful to all these institutions. Last but not least we would also like to thank the Minister for Culture and the Museums Department for their moral support and for providing us with a storage space for our tools as well as for making sure that the overall security of the site was improved.

The site of Tas-Silġ lies on a hillock overlooking the bay of Marsaxlokk. Italian archaeologists had worked here from 1963 up to 1970 (Bonello et al. 1964, Bozzi et al. 1968, Busuttill et al. 1969, Cagiano de Azevedo et al. 1965, 1966, 1967, 1972, 1973). The modern road leading from Zejtun to Delimara splits this site into two sectors, namely the northern and the southern one. The Italian Mission had worked in both sectors, but it had mainly tackled the northern one. With this fact in mind, we thus decided to explore portions of those areas in the southern sector which we thought had been untouched by the trowel of the Italian archaeologists. Our basic aim was to provide a training ground for the students of archaeology in our department, whilst obviously at the same time conducting research into this complicated multi-period site. In fact, the southern sector of this site had already yielded evidence of human activity from the Tarxien Temple period in the



*Area supervisor drawing a measured plan in Area C, Tas-Silġ*

third millennium B.C. up to the Byzantine period (Caprino 1973: 56-57). We thought that such a site would provide an ideal training ground for our students who would be able to see for themselves the problems of a complicated sequence of layers of human occupation on a site which had been used for thousands of years.

A 10 by 10 m grid was laid over the whole southern sector of the site. From the topographic point of view, a steep elevation in the ground splits this southern sector into two zones: zone 1 and zone 2. The latter lies to the south of and at a lower level than the former. At the centre, this elevation projects over the southern zone like a semi-circular outcrop of high ground. We decided to concentrate on zone 1 without ignoring zone 2. Hence, we opened up three areas in zone 1: squares A1 and A2 in the western part, squares C1 and C2 in the centre of the zone right above the aforementioned central outcrop of high ground, and square B1 in the eastern part. The 10 m squares of the site grid were then divided into 5 m squares in those spots we decided

to excavate. In fact, this was the measurement of squares A1, A2, B1, C1 and C2. The cutting edge in each square was 0.50 m away from the grid lines, with the result that the actual excavation area in each of these squares measured 4 by 4 m. C2 lay to the north of C1, and the right-hand corner of this former square was extended northwards via a narrow trench (= C3). As far as zone 2 is concerned, a 1 m wide trial trench (= D1 + D2) was opened at its southern end. This trench ran practically from the eastern perimeter of zone 2 to the middle of the site. Later on in the excavation, another spot (= D3) was opened up in zone 2. It lay exactly below squares A1+A2.

We had made it clear from the beginning that this was a training dig and not a rescue excavation. There would be no question of cutting corners. We wanted to get on with the job, but we would not rush unduly. We were obviously flexible in our strategy, but on no account were we to allow any compromise on the basic method of excavation. Our method was that of following the principles of stratigraphic excavation, and therefore each different layer of soil had to be peeled off separately and the layers had to come off in exactly the reverse order to that in which they were laid down in antiquity. Each intrusion, such as pits and their fills, had to be detected, documented and removed separately. And above all, the exact relationship of the layers to each other and to any structures with which they were associated had to be worked out. Only in this manner would we ever hope to make sense of the complicated sequence of layers at Tas-Silġ and of the cultural development evidenced at this site.

Although our season was brief (the month of July), it seems that it holds important results in store. It is still premature to really say what seems to be going on in the areas we excavated. Yet a rough sketch can be made out, albeit tentatively. The first thing to note is of a negative nature but still very important: nowhere did we find any floors or domestic quarters. Besides, it seems that what we mainly encountered were dumps and fills; in fact, we could very well be dealing with rubbish dumps which contained material which people in antiquity could have brought over from the northern sector of the site. We hope that this evidence will give us good information on the dietary habits of the occupants at Tas-Silġ as well as an idea on what type of material culture was common amongst them. Thus, for example, we also hope to be able to find out which type of pottery vessels they preferred.

The second general thing to take note of is similarly of a negative nature but also important. No sign of structures whatsoever were detected in areas D1 and D2 that is to say in most of the area we excavated in zone 2. Now the Italian Mission had found Borg in-Nadur pottery lying directly above bedrock even in this

zone (Ciasca 1964: 66-67; see also Bonello et al. 1964: fig. 2), and given the topographic layout of the southern sector of Tas-Silġ which was mentioned above, the evidence just mentioned suggests that the high ground where our squares C1 and C2 are located might have been fortified during the Bronze Age. And yet we did not find this defensive system; however, as Nicholas Vella pointed out it could have been easily dismantled during the later Hellenistic or Byzantine periods. Such a state of affairs would have thus made it very easy for the Bronze Age material to be washed down into zone 2. This hypothesis is strengthened by the clear-cut topographic evidence of the southern sector of Tas-Silġ shown in slides taken from a helicopter by one of us, namely Anthony Bonanno. Moreover, it should be underscored that this evidence is authentic and that it had already been there before the Italian Mission started excavating the southern sector; indeed, when this Mission began its work in this area, the topography it found was exactly the same as that described above (Bonello et al. 1964: plate1).

The conclusions reached in the foregoing two paragraphs are tentative and hypothetical. And yet they are based on the juxtaposition of all the positive and negative evidence available thus far; indeed, the preponderance of evidence seems to point in the direction outlined above.

The various types of material remains we retrieved, other than those of a stratigraphic and topographic nature mentioned above, are also very interesting. A fill in square A2 yielded some fish bones and the remains of sea urchins, whereas whilst sieving material from the same square Mr Paul Micallef, one of the students of our department, detected a pendant of terracotta which was covered in gold foil and which had a hook of bronze or copper. This item is in fact a small-sized representation of a woman's head, and the style is Hellenistic. Murex shells were also found in squares B and D. They belong to a type of marine snail called murex, the shell of which can be heavy or elongated and is always spined or frilled. Some species of the genus murex are known for their purple dye and for the edible meat they provide. The purple dye is produced via a yellow fluid which the murex exudes, and which when left in the sunlight turns purple. The Phoenicians had been renowned for extracting this dye from the murex.

As expected we also found large amounts of pottery, mainly belonging to the Phoenician-Punic period. Amongst the many types of pottery vessels there were the typical bi-spouted lamps and trefoil-mouth jugs. We were also very happy to hit upon a substantial amount of brief Punic inscriptions incised on various pottery vessels. Most of the incisions seem to have been made before firing, and a cursory glance at the

inscriptions themselves shows that they are mainly dedicatory, with Astarte (the Phoenician-Punic goddess of fertility) as one of the important dedicatees. Some of these inscriptions consist of one letter on a complete pottery vessel, indicating that we could also be dealing with abbreviations of some weights and measures. There were also two stamped jar handles which had Greek inscriptions on them.

The observations and evidence adduced above should suffice to show that it is certainly worthwhile pursuing our training and research project at the site of Tas-Silġ, for quite some time to come. Through the excavation seasons which we hope to have there, we propose to provide a good training ground for archaeologists as well as to solve at least some of the many problems that beset this lovely but intriguing multi-period site.

#### References

Bonello, Vincenzo et al. 1964. *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta: Rapporto Preliminare della Campagna 1963*, Roma: Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente, Università  
 Bozzi, Clara et al. 1968. *Missione Archeologica Italiana a*

*Malta: Rapporto Preliminare della Campagna 1967*, Roma: Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente, Università  
 Busuttil, Giuseppe et al. 1969. *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta: Rapporto Preliminare della Campagna 1968*, Roma: Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche  
 Cagiano de Azevedo, Michelangelo et al. 1965. *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta: Rapporto Preliminare della Campagna 1964*, Roma: Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente, Università  
 \_\_\_ et al. 1966. *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta: Rapporto Preliminare della Campagna 1965*, Roma: Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente, Università  
 \_\_\_ et al. 1967. *Missione Archeologica a Malta: Rapporto Preliminare della Campagna 1966*, Roma: Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente, Università  
 \_\_\_ et al. 1972. *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta: Rapporto Preliminare della Campagna 1969*, Roma: Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche  
 \_\_\_ et al. 1973. *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta: Rapporto Preliminare della Campagna 1970*, Roma: Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche  
 Caprino, Caterina. 1973. Lo Scavo dell'Area Sud, in, Cagiano de Azevedo et al. 1973, 43-57  
 Ciasca, Antonia. 1964. Lo Scavo, in, Bonello et al. 1964, 53-77

*Excavation work in Area D, Tas-Silġ*

