Research Article

David Cardona*

Past, Present, Future: An Overview of Roman Malta

https://doi.org/10.1515/opar-2020-0122
received July 30, 2020; accepted November 10, 2020

Abstract: Roman Malta has been the subject of numerous historical and archaeological studies since the seventeenth century. However, the lack of documented excavations and the restricted number of sites – particularly those within the boundaries of the two main Roman towns – meant that numerous grey areas persist in our understanding of the islands under Roman rule, regardless of how many studies have been done so far. This article attempts to provide an overview of past works, studies and a discussion of the known consensus on knowledge of sites, populations and economies. This in an attempt to provide a clear picture of what we know (and what we do not) about Roman Malta. Finally, I will comment on current and new research and projects which are being carried out by various local entities and foreign institutions to enhance our knowledge of this very important historic era for the Maltese islands. This culminates into a proposal for the use of a predictive model that may help us identify new sites and, consequently, provide new data on this phase.

Keywords: Roman Melite, predictive modelling, villas, landscape, historiography

1 Introduction

Lying halfway between Sicily and North Africa, the small group of Islands of Malta has always been at a multi-cultural crossroads, resulting in a history often shaped and influenced by the people trading in and controlling the central Mediterranean. At the same time, the islanders were able to develop their own identities, as best seen in the famous megalithic temples constructed between the 4th and 3rd millennia BC – structures unique in their shape, size and (building) technique (Cardona, 2003). This is certainly also the case for the Roman culture.

Roman Malta has been a constant within Malta’s archaeological debates but how much do we know about it? Do we have a clear understanding of what/how ‘Roman’ Malta really was? Is there anything else apart the known main towns of Melite (on Malta) and Gaulos (on Gozo) and the villae sites scattered across the remaining landscape? This paper gives an overview of the data that archaeology and research work have contributed to the understanding of the cultural influences left on the Islands by the new political establishment. Most importantly, this work also provides a framework – or rather a suggestion for further research – through which this period and a particular group of sites connected to it can be identified and better understood.

* Corresponding author: David Cardona, Phoenician, Roman and Medieval Sites, Heritage Malta, St Paul’s Catacombs, Triq Sant’Agata, Rabat, RBT1020, Malta, e-mail: David.cardona@gov.mt

Article note: This article is a part of the Special Issue on At the Crossroads of the Mediterranean: Malta and the Central Mediterranean During the Roman Period, edited by Davide Tanasi, David Cardona, & Robert Brown.

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2 The ‘Accepted’ Consensus on Roman Malta – Textual and Archaeological Sources

According to the third century BC classical writer Naevius, the Maltese islands had their first taste of the Romans when an army stopped and ransacked Malta on its way to North Africa (Naevius, Bell. Poen. IV, 37) some time in first Punic War; possibly 255 BC (Bonanno, 1992, p. 13). Livy tells us that the islands became officially part of the Roman territory in 218 BC (Coleiro [1977, p. 381] prefers 219 BC) when Roman forces under the command of the consul Tiberius Sempronius Longus stopped off on Malta after leaving from Lilybaeum (Sicily) in search of the Carthaginian fleet. The Maltese Islands and their Carthaginian garrison commanded by Hamilcar, son of Gisco, surrendered to the Romans without a fight (Livy, 1957; XXI, 51; Ashby, 1915, p. 24; Bonanno, 2005, pp. 132–133).

Although Malta was included to the Sicilian province and controlled by its propraetor, archaeological evidence shows that the Islands remained essentially Punic in culture at least until the first century BC (Bonanno, 2004, p. 50; Coleiro, 1977, pp. 381–382; Rizzo, 1977, pp. 193–199; Sagona, 2015, p. 265). The ceramic repertoire sees an extremely slow change; coins continue being minted with Punic iconography (Coleiro, 1977, pp. 382–383); religious practices largely remain unchanged; and, judging from the inscriptions, people still communicated in the native Punic tongue or dialect for quite some time.

Precious information on Malta in this period comes from the first century BC orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero against Caius Verres, procurator of the Sicilian Province, who was accused of abuse of power, corruption and a multitude of other crimes (Cicero, Verr. ii, 2, pp. 176–183; 4, pp. 38–41, 103–104; 5, pp. 27, 184). Some of these crimes involved the Maltese Islands and included reputedly turning Melite into a textile factory (Verr. ii) and, most prominently, plundering the renowned temple of Juno (Tas-Silġ) (Verr. ii, 4, pp. 103–104). Cicero also mentions Malta in a number of letters in which a couple of friends, particularly a certain Aristoteles (Ad Fam. XIII, p. 52), are named; most importantly, Cicero himself had considered being exiled there in 58 and 49 BC (Ad Atticus III, p. 4; X, pp. 7–9, 18), showing that the Maltese Islands were well-known by people of Cicero’s status and had an emerging aristocracy with contacts high up in the Roman Senate (Coleiro, 1963, pp. 28–34).

Malta’s culture and political set-up saw change from the first century BC, when the islands, although probably still considered as mere civitates peregrinae, gained their own local decision-making bodies (Azzopardi, 1999; Bonanno, 2005, p. 133; Calcutt, 1993, p. 39; Zammit, 2011, pp. 20–21). Archaeologically, we see cultural influences from the Hellenistic and Italian worlds, perhaps best reflected in the noted, lavish Roman domus constructed at the main town of Melite in the first century BC (Caruana, 1881), whose mosaic assemblage and architectural styles indicate a shift from Punic to Roman cultural stimuli (Caselli, 2002) (Figure 1). It is, however, not clear how deep this cultural change ran within Maltese society: after all, the Maltese inhabitants were crudely described as barbaroi in St Luke’s recollection of St Paul’s shipwreck on the Island in AD 60 (Acts XXVII, 39, XXVIII, 14). The islanders’ traditionalism is best described by Amanda Claridge who writes:

...one comes constantly up against the fact that the firm basis and a large part of the structure of the organisation and administration, agriculture, industry and trade of Roman Malta and Gozo had evolved during an interrupted history of Phoenician and Carthaginian occupation since the early first millennium BC. (Claridge, 1971, p. 1).

The special political status which Malta apparently enjoyed in the first century BC was revoked in the early Empire when the Islands came to be administered by the emperor’s personal procurator (Azzopardi, 1999, pp. 96–97; Bonanno, 1992, p. 16; 2005, p.133; Bruno, 2009, pp. 49–50).1 Inscriptions found within and around the main town of Melite (particularly, CIL, X, 8313; CIL, X, 7495) reveal that the situation changed again in the second century AD, when both islands had a municipal set-up, possibly making them

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1 This is best shown in inscription CIL, X, 7494 which mentions Chrestion, freedman of Augustus and procurator of Malta and Gozo (Figure 2).

Evidence for Roman religious buildings in Melite comes mainly through epigraphs. A temple of Apollo was possibly located within the highest area of city (now occupied by Mdina) (CIL, X, 7495; CIL, X, 8318; Bres, 1816, p. 351; Caruana, 1882, p. 89), while the temple of Proserpina (CIL, X, 7494) is traditionally located on Mtarfa Hill overlooking the city (Bres, 1816, p. 351; Caruana, 1882, p. 88) (Figures 3 and 4). Dated to the second century AD, these inscriptions corroborate an apparently prolific society and correspond to a period in which most of the public buildings underwent construction or restoration, recorded also in numerous marble architectural remains. Prosperity is likewise shown by ceramic imports, which show a healthy economy with goods from all the main economic centres of the Mediterranean (Bruno, 2009, pp. 171–189). What Malta had to offer in return is not entirely clear. Some of the Roman villas, like those of San Pawl Milqi, Żejtun and Ta’ Kaċċatura, may have produced enough olive oil to export in a special type of local amphora identified by Bruno (2009, p. 200); wine may also have been exported, but known rock-cut wine presses are few and very difficult to date (Bonanno, 2011, pp. 64–65).

Based on archaeological and epigraphic data, it appears that the main settlements – Melite and Gaulos – remained essentially the same from the previous political occupation of the islands. These occupied two areas of high grounds practically commanded most of the two Islands. Related physical remains continue to be few for both the main towns and the satellite centres around the harbours. During the preceding Punic period, the general extents of most of the inhabited centres can be identified best through their burial grounds, as for example, the numerous burial areas of Ghajn Dwieli, Marsa and Tal-Liedna around the inner parts of the Grand Harbour. Beyond these urban centres, one also finds numerous villae agraria – scattered but occasionally fairly close to each other–dotted across the countryside (Cassia, 2008, p. 168). Most are located in rich agricultural land, although some are found in areas devoid of agricultural soil, showing the degree of soil erosion and land-use change that must have happened since (Bonanno, 1977, 1978). These villae seemingly bear testimony to a busy agricultural economy that had probably already started in the Punic period, but intensifies (and possibly drastically changes) under Rome. Most of the remains are, unfortunately, the result of chance finds and have only been mapped through small-scale research (see for example Bonanno, 1977).

If Malta’s political situation for the Republican and Imperial periods remains rather unclear, the situation is even worse after the third century AD. Textual sources are almost non-existent and the archaeological record offers little information. It has always been assumed that Malta passed to Vandal hands between AD 440 and 475/6, when they also occupied Sicily, and then to Odoacer, Barbarian King of Italy, in return for tribute in the 470 s (Brown, 1975, p. 71). It is also possible that Malta became an Ostrogothic

Figure 1: The lavish domvs at Mdina boasted a peristyle with a Doric colonnade and multiple rooms decorated with elaborate mosaic floors datable to the end of the first century BC and the first century AD.
possession together with Sicily around AD 493 (Bonanno, 2005, p. 258; Brown, 1975, pp. 71–72; Buhagiar, 1994, p. 99; Dalli, 2006, p. 13), but this cannot be proven archaeologically and the islands’ material culture, meagre as it is, remains essentially unchanged. Later, the historian Procopius records that the Byzantine fleet under the command of Justinian’s general Belisarius called on Malta en-route to Africa around AD 533 (Vand. I, 14, 15); this was part of Justinian’s ambitious plans to restore the Western Roman Empire, with the North African campaign the first step (Buhagiar, 1997, p. 118). However, Brown argues that Procopius’ account is not clear on whether Belisarius actually stopped in Malta; nor does it confirm that he took the islands back from the Vandals, but the fact that the Byzantines asked the Goths to use Sicilian harbours

Figure 2: This inscription was reputedly found on Mtarfa hill and commemorates Chrestion who restored the temple of Proserpina some time around the second century AD (Daniel Cilia).

Figure 3: The extension of the main Roman town on Malta, Melite, can be hypothetically made out through years of incidental finds and the remains of the town’s ditch. Seen here are the main known sites within and around ancient Melite (Base map by Google Earth).
rather than Malta perhaps indicates that the Maltese islands were not Byzantine at the time (1975, p. 73). Nonetheless, most Maltese scholars place the start of Byzantine rule in Malta to AD 535 when Sicily was annexed to the empire.

Of the restricted later sources, perhaps the most important written sources for this period are three letters by Pope Gregory the Great; written in AD 592, 598 and 599 about the wrongdoings of Malta’s bishop at the time. These show that the islands had close ties with the Ecclesia Africana, some of whose lands are the subject of these letters (Brown, 1975; Coleiro, 1966).

3 Early Explorations in the Archaeology of Roman Malta

Surprisingly, few Roman sites have in reality been excavated (and excavated well) on Malta, despite their first recognition since at least the seventeenth century, when the local nobleman and vice-chancellor of the Knights of St John, Gian Frangisk Abela, mentioned the sites and remains discovered in his lifetime (Abela, 1647). This work was revised in 1772 by Count Giovanni Antonio Ciantar, who continued to add to the sites listed by Abela. These included a detailed description of Roman warehouses (or tombs?) discovered in Marsa in 1768 and also documented by Count Barbaro in 1794, as well as the first description of the Salina catacombs, which had been just discovered after the discovery of gold coin of Emperor Phocas prompted treasure hunters to scour the area (Ciantar, 1772).

Subsequently, we have to wait more than a century for the next documented major discovery. In 1881, workers digging holes for trees in what would later be known as Howard Gardens encountered patches of mosaic. A. A. Caruana, the then director of the Biblioteca in Valletta and keeper of Malta’s antiquities, was entrusted with investigating the discovery, leading him to uncover the ruins of the most prestigious Roman domus to be discovered in the Maltese Islands (Caruana, 1881). It is probably the discovery of this house in 1881 that made scholars realise the importance that this culture must have had on the Islands (Figures 1 and 5). The effort put by the local authorities in the construction of the first purpose-built Museum (then called the Roman Villa Museum) above the ruins of this house just a year later is a clear example of the enthusiasm that this find must have generated within the local and political communities towards the Classical period.
This enthusiasm was somewhat short-lived, since, merely eight years after its discovery, a road connecting the new Museum Train Station with Mdina was cut through the northern side of this Roman house wreaking havoc to the remains that must have lain hidden in its path. The fact that no record whatsoever was kept of what was possibly found only adds insult to injury (Figure 6).

**Figure 5:** The discovery of the remains of the mosaics that adorned the rich domvs at Mdina caused quite a furore in 1881. Seen here is the discovery as seen by a newspaper artist, with both workers and visitors depicted around a set of mosaiced rooms (Heritage Malta).

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**Figure 6:** The road leading to the Museum Train Station between Rabat and Mtarfa was constructed in 1889. Although the remains of the domvs had been discovered in 1881, no documentation was kept of any archaeology discovered during the cutting of this road. The numerous walls seen in both sections along the road remind us of what has been lost.
In 1888, Caruana also documented the remains of a small agricultural villa with a very well-preserved *trapetum* (olive pipper) in the area known as Tad-Dawl, between Hal Luqa and Mqabba (Caruana, 1888). If Caruana’s notes and plan are correct, then this establishment must have had some unique features, including monolithic stone doors. Unfortunately, the site soon faded from existence and was forgotten to such an extent that it was completely obliterated by the numerous stone quarries dug in the area in the post-Second World War period. We are lucky that the *trapetum* was, at least, moved to the Roman Villa Museum by another pioneer of Maltese archaeology, Sir Themistocles Zammit, around 50 years after the site was first discovered. This and three photographs of the site taken before its removal are all that remained of a potentially important Roman agricultural establishment (Figure 7).

Active in the first third of the twentieth century, Zammit was extremely prolific in increasing the importance of local archaeology. He was the driving force behind the setting up of the National Museum of Archaeology, of which he was the first curator between 1903 and 1921 before becoming the Museums Department’s first director between 1922 and 1935. Zammit was working during a considerable building boom, which made it possible for him to excavate sites from all phases of Maltese archaeology. Among these, one must mention the hundreds of tombs dated to between the Phoenician and Late Roman period, his extensive excavations around the noted Roman *domus* excavated by Caruana in 1881, and the Roman baths at Ghajn Tuffieha (Zammit, 1923, 1930; Cardona and Sultana, 2015) (Figure 8). Unfortunately, though, when one compares the excavation reports and literature published by him on the Tarxien Prehistoric temples with those of the Roman sites he discovered, one realises that those of the earlier prehistoric phase are given much more attention and details. Could it be possible that, given the rising pro-Italian sentiment within the local political spheres and the fact that the Maltese Islands were an important British colony, Zammit was forced to tone down the importance of these Classical sites due to their direct connection with Italy?
Work was also done in the second decade of the twentieth century by Thomas Ashby from the British School at Rome. He was allowed by Zammit to help out with numerous excavations, particularly the almost complete investigation of the villa agraria at Ta’ Kaċċatura (Birżebbuġa) (Figure 9) and a villa maritima at Ramla l-Ħamra in Gozo (Figure 10). These, together with his other research on the Islands, formed the basis of his long paper entitled ‘Roman Malta’, which also served as a sort of an excavation report for the two excavations (Ashby, 1915). It is also thanks to Ashby, particularly to his photographs, that we have a snapshot of numerous Maltese sites visited by him at the start of the twentieth century.²

Somewhat surprisingly, we have to wait almost another 50 years before any new Roman discoveries of note were found. In 1960, David Trump, the then curator of the National Museum of Archaeology, researched, and partially excavated, some of the so-called Roman round (fortification?) towers, recovering compelling evidence, particularly pottery and numismatica, in favour of their attribution to the Roman period (MAR, 1960, pp. 6–7) (Figure 11). Meanwhile, a number of accidental finds enabled the partial investigation of a Roman house at Iklin (MAR, 1975–1976, p. 1) and Żejtun (MAR, 1964, p. 4; 1972–1973, p. 1). Alongside such, however, we are aware of much loss, with finds made poorly documented or built over such as the hundreds of tombs in Rabat.

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² Ashby’s digital photographic archive is available on http://www.bsrdigitalcollections.it/
More substantial were structural remains and finds discovered in 1965 and 1966 at Saqqajja (MAR, 1965, pp. 2–3; 1966, pp. 5–6). Containing the vestiges of a possible mosaic workshop and a humidity-defying floor constructed over inverted amphorae, this site also generated many boxes worth of ceramic finds (Figure 12). Unfortunately, the notebooks for this excavation remain elusive and the site remains unpublished. Further discoveries were made between 1983 and 1984 in the nearby Museum Esplanade at Rabat, where a group of

Figure 9: The site of Ta’ Ċċatura was investigated by Ashby in the early twentieth century, revealing the remains of a Roman villa agraria with rooms surrounding a central peristyle. New, digital documentation of the site is allowing us to understand the site in a fresh and unprecedented way.

Figure 10: Ashby also investigated a site at Ramla l-Ħamra, ruins that belonged to a villa maritima. Today, these ruins are covered by one of the natural sand dunes, which are also protected (Heritage Malta).
archaeologists led by the University of California, Los Angeles, discovered the remains of stone-built houses along a Roman road (Elster, Lander, & Molitor, 1984). This excavation also remained unpublished until the accidental discovery of the site’s notebooks within one of the pottery boxes made way for the understanding and publication of the site’s ceramics (Anastasi, 2019).

On a larger scale, in 1963 the ‘Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta’, directed by prof. Sabatino Moscati (then Director of the Istituto di Studi del Vicino Oriente at the Università “La Sapienza” of Rome) and Michelangelo Cagiano de Azevedo (from the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan), was given a concession by the Maltese Government to excavate three sites: the temple sites of Tas-Silġ and Ras il-Wardiżja and the Roman villa of San Pawl Milqi. Excavations at San Mawl Milqi brought to light the remains of an extensive villa agraria (Missione, 1963–1970). Work on this site was prompted by its name, whose literal translation is St Paul welcomed and linked this house with St Paul’s welcoming on the Island by its protos, Publius, in AD 60. This led researchers to (often biased) conclusions in an attempt to connect this structure with Publius himself. It also led Cagiano de Azevedo to use stratigraphic excavation only within the present chapel of San Pawl Milqi, simply because this must have been the ‘sacred’ area of the house where St Paul started baptising the first local Christian converts. Stratigraphy was thus not used beyond the chapel, with the consequent loss of large amounts of data that would have otherwise told us much more about this establishment and its occupants. Not that the stratigraphic excavation within the chapel helps much anyways. Plans and photographs seemingly only show the chapel when it was fully excavated and little is shown of the stratigraphic sequence. The situation improved with the work of Locatelli – a later member of the Missione – who studied the available data, and particularly construction technique, to identify the various phases of use and physical extension of the villa (Locatelli, 2006). However, the road to fully comprehend this site is still hard and tortuous, especially without the benefit of a final excavation report.

Of the other two sites excavated by the Missione, Tas-Silġ was the more extensively studied and excavated, with somewhat better techniques and results. These excavations uncovered a temple with a first phase starting around 3000 BC and extending up to the Byzantine period. The main Classical phases were associated with the renowned temple of Ashtart, which was heavily renovated between the 1st centuries BC and AD – an architectural phase that forms the basis for the only part of the Missione’s final report published so far (Bonzano, 2017). Parts of the site were also excavated by the Department of Classics and Archaeology of the University of Malta between 1995 and 2005 (final report: Bonanno & Vella, 2015). This revealed a complex stratigraphy, but with very little related to the site’s Roman period. One hopes that
the publication of the remaining final reports by the Missione, as well as the new joint excavations being carried out on the site by Heritage Malta and the Department of Classics and Archaeology, may offer new insights and finally open up these data to researchers with fresh eyes and ideas.

The University of Malta’s Department of Classics and Archaeology has recently also finished reassessing parts of the villa discovered within the grounds of a secondary school at Żejtun in 1964 (MAR 194: 6). This site, although previously thought of as rather small, appears to offer great promise to the understanding of similar Roman (and possibly earlier) rural establishments and we will eagerly wait for the publication of its final report.

4 Current Studies on Roman Malta

Recent developments have seen a renewed interest in the Maltese Islands’ Roman past. First among these changes is a renewed collaboration between Heritage Malta, the National Agency for museums, conservation practice and cultural heritage and the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, the Cultural Heritage regulator, which will lead to the publication of present and past data derived from both development-led
and research investigations. This is a project that, although long-due, is still in its infancy and will take years to conclude.

Reappraisal of a number of sites is also being done by Heritage Malta. One interesting project is the analysis of a carbonised piece of bread discovered by Trump within the charred remains of the Ta’ Ġawhar tower in 1960 (MAR, 1960). This small fragment, although long regarded as an important, indeed unique, find within local archaeology, has never been studied properly (Figure 13). Now, Heritage Malta’s scientists, in collaboration with numerous foreign institutions and specialists, seek to obtain data about its composition, history and date. This project is still in its initial phases, but $^{14}$C dating has already provided a date range of AD 132–380, thus confirming that this structure was actually destroyed by fire during the later Roman period. The bread’s date consequently also dated (even if only relatively) a number of other finds from the same site, like two pieces of chainmail, considered to be the only trace of the Roman military on the Islands (Figure 14).

Other reappraisals include larger-scale sites, like for example the villa agraria at Ta’ Kaċċatura in Birżebbuġa, the ruins of which are being used as a case study for an ongoing research on different photogrammetric methods and are scheduled to undergo an extensive research project to study and reinterpret

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**Figure 13:** Among the artefacts recovered during Trump’s 1960 excavation at Ta’ Ġawhar is this piece of a carbonised bread (Heritage Malta).

**Figure 14:** Also recovered from Ta’ Ġawhar were two pieces of chainmail, the only Roman military paraphernalia found in Malta (Heritage Malta).
the site (Figure 9). At the Roman baths of Ghajn Tuffieha, new trenches have helped to clarify the original configuration of the site and the intimate relation between this type of structure and particular elements within the natural landscape, particularly, water, natural ridges and views (Azzopardi et al., 2016, pp. 42–59) (Figure 8). Moreover, these excavations also revealed a possible second line of rooms, lying mostly buried underneath an early modern road.

A similar, but larger, project will also be starting around the ruins of Mdina’s well-known Roman domus through a partnership that Heritage Malta has established with IDEX at the University of South Florida and a group of independent archaeologists collectively known as Intercontinental Archaeology. Discovered between Mdina and Rabat in 1881, it is only apt that research on this site will resume 140 years after its first discovery, and 101 years after the site was extended and re-investigated by Zammit. Called ‘Melite Civitas Romana’, this project plans to re-investigate the known site through new digital mapping and studies within the few baulks left by Zammit, re-identify and document the trenches excavated by Zammit between 1920 and 1925, but, most importantly, expand the excavation to try and answer at least one important question: can we place this lavish domus within the topographic and social context of the ancient town of Melite? (Figure 15).

Partnerships with the University of Malta and the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage will similarly enable us to investigate a recently discovered site at Bidnija. A multi-year project, this is aimed at investigating substantial structures dated by pottery collected during a field walking survey, to the Roman period with probable phases in preceding and following periods (Docter, Vella, Cutajar, Bonanno, & Pace, 2012). Key to observe here is the site’s evident economic role, connected to oil production; remarkably we may

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3 The studies at Ta’ Kaċċatura are part of the Ghar Dalam Heritage Park Project, currently managed by Heritage Malta. Photogrammetry studies are being carried out in collaboration with the Department of Classics and Archaeology of the University of Malta.
even be able to connect this Roman site to a number of 2000 year-old olive trees in the area which will themselves be studied through a partnership between Heritage Malta and Ambjent Malta.

5 Sites and Their Whereabouts: A Proposal for Future Studies

The recent flourish of new projects on Roman Malta will enable us to add new pieces to the puzzle; but considerable lacunae will inevitably remain. These ongoing projects, and an ongoing doctoral research project on the Phoenician to Late Roman cemeteries around the ancient city of Melite, give rise to an important question: can we identify a pattern between Roman sites and other features around them that may eventually lead to the creation of a predictive model through which we can identify new sites and, in turn, help us understand the Roman landscape?

The main idea behind this question rose during the mapping exercise currently being carried out as part of my ongoing doctoral research called Landscapes of Death and Commemoration: burial space, place and evolution from Phoenician to Late Roman Malta. It was here that, apart from the usual close proximity between tomb and road, a strong relationship was recognised between burial places and surface quarries prompting efforts to try and identify if a similar relationship between a number of features could be connected with any of the Roman rural establishments. This section will thus provide a preliminary proposal of how such a relationship can be found and understood through the investigation of a number of known sites.

The very basic concept of the idea was first penned by Vella et al. (2000, p. 14), who wrote that:

*General principles of settlement and land use will only emerge from the systematic study of sites in locations that are similar and different, that are contemporary and not. The archaeology of the Maltese countryside is an interesting and challenging pursuit. This is an exercise that necessitates comparisons between data along divergent trajectories of time and space.*
Particular elements in the natural and cultural landscape may be intrinsically connected with archaeological sites of a certain type. Two basic groups of parameters were thus identified: values that dictated the choice of site (site choice) and a site's impact on the landscape (site effect). ‘Site choice’ parameters constitute landscape values that may have led people to choose a particular spot from another to build a house, villa, farm or structure. As test cases, we will here be using villa agrariae establishments for which the parameters geology, landscape, agricultural land, accessibility and other sites will be investigated.

One may ask why another, usually important factor – water sources – was not included in this list, particularly in an island with no rivers or lakes. The primary reason for this is the simple fact that we do not currently have any clear study on ancient water sources before the medieval period. Moreover, for the Roman villas, the provision of natural sources of water was not a determining factor; in fact, quite a number of them do not (presently) have an evident nearby water source. In return, though, the Roman builders made sure to provide ample storage, in the form of cisterns and wells, which indicate that the primary source of water was actually rain and its runoff.

The occurrence of earlier structures is attested in many of the known Roman villa establishments in the Maltese islands. The presence of these older structures is, however, being left out as a value in this preliminary study as it requires a more detailed study on its own, particularly to determine in which sites we can speak of continuity or discontinuity. What can be highlighted here is the fact that, the same values used for villae of Roman date may have equally played an important part in the choice of location for the earlier structure.

The second set of parameters relates to the effects the site itself may have had on the landscape with quarries, landscape, tombs, roads, other sites and agricultural boundaries identified as clear values. Although some are relatively difficult to identify, they all leave indelible marks in the landscape. Particularly tantalising among all is the relation with burials.
To test the validity of this theory, we will use these values against some of Malta’s villae agraria sites, starting with ‘site choice’ values for the Ta’ Kaċċatura site.

- **Geology** – Ta’ Kaċċatura is situated in an area with Globigerina Limestone that is easily accessible on the surface or beneath a thin layer of topsoil.

- **Landscape** – This villa was located towards the top of the southern side of Wied Dalam, opposite Ghar Dalam Cave. This location enabled this establishment to be connected with both Wied Dalam and Wied Żembaq, while enabling it to have a clear view of St George’s Bay and the entrance to Marsaxlokk harbour without being right at the water’s edge (Figure 16).

- **Agricultural land** – Fertile, cultivable land is presently still available within both valleys. The numerous rubble walls currently visible across the garigue around the site may indicate that soil was, up to fairly recently, also present on the higher ground between the two valleys.

- **Accessibility** – The site could be accessed from various locations, primarily from the high ground on the Gudja and Hal Ghaxaq side, and from both valleys. The latter, in turn, offered direct access to St George’s Bay and the rest of the coastline (Figure 16).

- **Other sites** – Older sites abound around the villa. The closest is Ghar Dalam cave right across the valley. Just over 100 m, south of Ta’ Kaċċatura, a dolmenic structure, normally datable to the Bronze Age, still...
survives to this day, while Borg in-Nadur’s prehistoric temple and the Bronze Age village that grew around it lie just over 400 m to the south-east.

The effects of this site on the landscape are relatively easy to read given that most of the bedrock around the site is exposed (Figure 17):

- **Quarries** – In a landscape with such an abundance of stone, it is usually fairly easy to identify extraction areas close to the building site itself. At Ta’ Kaċċatura, there are two particular types of quarries. The first–surface quarrying–served to extract stone, while, at the same time, created the required foundation levels. The structure’s stepped layout enables us to identify this type of quarrying beneath a few of the surviving walls. More readily, evident signs are present in the form of the two cisterns (as well as a possible third one) within the site (Figure 18). This type of quarrying activity enabled the builders to extract stone, while at the same time creating the cavity required for the life-saving cistern with less effort than if these were to be done separately.

- **Roads** – The exposed bedrock around the site makes it easier to identify roads and related features, particularly cart ruts. These are, in fact, visible around the site with one particular set running beside a present path. Most interestingly, this same set appears to be going around the site, thus pointing to the possibility that this villa was already there when it was created. At least another set of ruts runs almost perpendicularly across the previous set, leading towards the villa itself. Unfortunately, this is lost under soil and rubble before it reaches the site’s boundaries, so its relation with the structure cannot be ascertained. We must keep in mind that the entrance of this house remains unknown and finding it may eventually be crucial in identifying the cart ruts connected with this villa (Figure 17).

- **Landscape** – In the area immediately south of the villa, we find a number of agricultural trenches (better known in Malta as vine trenches). Trenches like these are fairly common in the Maltese landscape and are
particularly indicative of agricultural activity connected, in particular, with vines. The peculiarity of the ones at Ta’ Kaċċatura is that instead of being cut in a linear fashion, they appear to be dug in a radiating fashion. Could these, given the location and vicinity to the villa, have been the result of a garden rather than fully blow agricultural activity? (Figure 19) We must remain cautious as these particular trenches, now completely devoid of stratigraphy, have never been excavated and cannot thus be clearly identified with any of the villa’s phases.

A short distance away, the Bronze Age Dolmen, also has at least two vine trenches dug around it. The close proximity to the villa makes it tempting to think that this may have been used by the Romans as a garden feature, a folly even. This is, again, very difficult to ascertain, but would make it the only known example in the Maltese Islands (Figure 20).

- **Tombs** – Two tombs are present around the site. One is located less than 200 m east but is presently full of rubble, so thus cannot be investigated further. The second is located less than 100 m to the south and very close to the dolmenic structure mentioned above (Figures 17 and 21).
- **Effect on other sites** – Apart from the dolmenic structure mentioned above, Ghar Dalam cave may have had an impact on the choice for the site’s location, but was possibly also affected by this Roman villa in
return. Almost all of the excavations carried out within and in front of the cave have, in fact, recovered traces of Roman pottery. Unfortunately, these sherds do not survive, so it will never be possible to identify what kind of vessels they belonged to. Had fragments of large storage vessels been clearly identified, they may have indicated that the dark, humid space offered by the cave could have been used to store the olive oil being produced by the villa.

The same methodology can be applied with good results to other Maltese Roman villa sites, particularly the ones at San Pawl Milqi in Burmarrad and the one within the Girls’ Secondary School of Żejtun. These seem to show that:

1. There is a preference to sites in areas that offer easy, quick access to building stone;
2. There appears to be a predilection to build these agricultural villas onto somewhat higher ground than the surroundings, offering ‘unobstructed’ views to nearby lands and to other close sites and features like temples and harbours;
3. Sites are located in fertile areas that are mostly still cultivated to some degree or another. Properties directly onto agricultural land seem to be preferred, but cases where the villa is located a small distance away may also be found;
4. Easy accessibility also had considerable weight in the choice of site and most are located along a (possible/plausible) main route or within areas that are easily accessible from multiple directions.

It can also be ascertained that, once established, these sites have a considerable effect on the surrounding landscape, but these are not always easily identifiable. Thus:

Figure 23: The site at Mosta overlooks the fertile valley of Wied il-Ghasel, but also commanded a view towards the ancient harbours and the nearby access down the Great Fault at today’s Allà w Ommu area.
1. Some form of quarrying is often present within or in close proximity of the sites. In cases where these are missing, the surrounding area is usually mostly unexplored;
2. Roads, although presumed, are not always present, often for the same reasons above. Moreover, although roads may have been present in the vicinity, these may have never led directly to the site, which could have been connected to the main thoroughfare by means of paths;
3. The effects of villas on the landscape are the most difficult aspect to ascertain in the absence of thorough investigation of soils and agricultural features within surrounding lands;
4. The presence of tombs, particularly when in the presence of one or more other features from the list, offers a strong indication for the presence of villas somewhere in the vicinity;
5. Some sites may have reused and modified pre-existing sites.

Certain elements of ‘site choice’ and ‘site effects’ are thus not always present, making it essential for both groups to always be used in tandem, rather than in isolation. The validity of this preliminary checklist will need to be thoroughly tested, ideally through regular use as part of archaeological interventions, particularly the numerous development-driven projects. However, we can attempt this also on a number of possible villa sites that have never been published before.

The first is located along the western slopes along Wied il-Ghasel in Mosta. Its best-known feature is a small hypogeum (later used as an apiary) dug into the ridge just below Misrah Ghonoq and immediately beneath the grounds of the Victorian Fort Mosta (Figure 22). A second, smaller but more traditional hypogeum is found above the ridge within the ground of the same fort. The presence of these two burial
grounds in a very fertile area, but without any known Roman structures, makes this zone an ideal candidate for our small test. Let us thus first look at the parameters affecting the site location:

- **Geology** – The site is located along a natural escarpment known as the Great Fault. This particular location offered easy access to Globigerina and Lower Coralline Limestone, as well as the Mtarfa member, all of which can be found at a short distance from the site. The area is, in fact, still extensively quarried.

- **Landscape** – The site overlooks Wied il-Ghasel with a northern view towards Salina harbour. Its location high up along the slope ensures a clear view of the valley beneath as well as of the main thoroughfares down from the Great Fault, an area known today as T’Alla w Ommu (Figure 23).

- **Agricultural land** – The site is located amidst very fertile land along the valley.

![Figure 25](image_url): In front of the cave burials at Mosta are the remains of a Roman structure. Seen here are: (a) a rock basin; (b) stretches of walls within and behind the present terracing walls; (c) a vertical cut in bedrock may be evidence of on-site quarrying.
Accessibility – Today, accessibility to the site is difficult and only possible through a narrow foot path. It is unclear how the site was reached in antiquity; however, the area of T’Alla w Ommu is full of cart ruts that testify to the heavy traffic that always characterised this area. (Figure 24, no. 4).

Armed with this checklist and the presence of tombs, a (very) small and (very) quick inspection of the area revealed clear evidence for the existence of a (possibly) Roman site still mostly buried beneath the terraced fields. The evidence for this is plenty. A basin, similar in shape and size to ones found in other villa sites, is embedded and reused in one of the rubble walls (Figure 25a). Partly hidden by and incorporated within the terraced walls (which have partly collapsed) are stretches of walls built of ashlars of a size compatible with Roman buildings (Figure 25b). These walls are also partly built onto vertical cuts reminiscent of quarrying activity (Figure 25c) and possibly the result of stepping required to create a horizontal platform onto which the structure could be built.

A similar exercise was carried out for a second site in Żejtun marked on one of the survey sheets held in the archives of the National Museum of Archaeology (SS110) by a pencilled note recording the remains of Roman bricks, tiles and pottery. When run on this final site, the results were equally successful, further confirming how such an exercise, if carried out regularly and on the numerous (seemingly) sporadic sites, may prove fruitful to the identification of important Roman sites on the Maltese islands (Figure 26).

6 Conclusion

While it is assumed that the Romans have had a considerable impact on Maltese Archaeology, very few of the sites have been excavated in a scientific manner, thus leaving us with significant gaps in the
understanding of Roman Malta. Current and planned research aims at mitigating these lacunae. More than anything else, the proposed preliminary study into predictive modelling can help us identify new, unidentified sites that may be studied in further detail. If excavation is not considered a priority, these checklists can at least help us to better identify areas in which the discovery of sites is a high probability – and this works both ways. Knowing that certain features like tombs and quarries are common around a Roman villa makes it possible to identify the area around a known site where these could eventually be discovered, and vice-versa.

There is no doubt that there are certain features in the natural landscape that were looked for and would have, at least partly, determined the location for the construction of a villa or agricultural establishment. The fact that we have here limited ourselves to villae agrariae does not mean that a similar study cannot be done for other types of structures. The needs for such buildings would, however, have been different from those of an agriculture-oriented establishment and the checklists would thus require changing.

It is true that archaeological excavations and assessments within sites give us the ultimate and most complete data sets. However, these are often isolated to a particular site, with little or no effort at studying the landscape and the effects the two had on each other. Sites and landscape have an intimate relation with each other – a relation that makes it very difficult to completely understand one without the other. The creation of such landscape studies, including the creation of possible predictive modelling, is thus deemed a necessity to fully understand how active and extensive ‘Roman’ Malta really was.

In the meantime, we are left with the known Roman sites, particularly the main towns of Melite and Gaulos. Of these, we know the extents but very little on their internal layout and structures. The planned work within and around Melite may, in the long run, offer us new insights into its townscape and importance.

Abbreviations

CIL Corpus Iscriptionum Latinorum
Missione Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta
MAR Annual Report on the Working of the Museum Department

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

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