Research Article

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A Diachronic Maltese Islandscape: Rural Ta’ Qali and ix-Xarolla

https://doi.org/10.1515/opar-2020-0130
received July 30, 2020; accepted January 25, 2021

Abstract: The archaeological study of the Maltese Islands has received considerable scholarly attention in regard to its island settings and long-term human occupation. However, emphasis on the prehistoric periods of the archipelago runs the risk of creating a biased focus with limited engagement in successive periods. In the spirit of this edited volume, the present article seeks to provide a broader chronological view of two rural areas in the larger island of Malta: Ta’ Qali and ix-Xarolla. These two areas have offered some evidence, through intermittent discoveries from recent construction activities, of three broad periods of increased landscape manipulation and transformation during the Middle-Late Bronze Age, Roman, and Early Modern periods. In seeking to provide an islandscape-based narrative, this article seeks to show that the Maltese Islands experienced periods of more intense human occupation that would have inevitably impacted the agriculturally viable areas of Ta’ Qali and ix-Xarolla. Therefore, despite the Roman period focus of this edited volume, this article takes a long-term view of two rural areas to illustrate identifiable landscape uses and changes.

Keywords: Maltese archipelago, Malta, diachronic, rural, Roman, Island archaeology

1 Introduction

The Maltese Archipelago, positioned in the Central Mediterranean, is one of several sets of islands dotting this broad breadth of sea and has acted as host to six millennia’s worth of human occupation. Within the field of archaeology, the Maltese “Temple Period” has long raised attention to the prehistoric megalithic monuments found on the Maltese Islands, which has appropriated a large share of theoretical engagements as well as academic funding. In contrast, the later historic periods continue to find themselves between worthy academic engagements (Anastasi, 2018; Buhagiar, 2016; Palmer, 2016; Sagona, 2015; Said-Zammit, 2016; Spanò Giammellaro & Spatafora, 2008; Vella & Anastasi, 2019) and the frequent uncovering of historic remains as a result of the Maltese Islands’ booming construction industry.

In this paper, we argue that the involuntary separation of prehistoric and Roman Malta is in part due to two conditions that need to be overcome through proper intellectual engagements. First, the prominent theorized island archaeology which only encompasses prehistoric Malta simply cannot continue to dominate the academic domain; for far too long, the study of the Maltese Archipelago has fallen awkwardly between highlighting its prehistoric past for its uniqueness and its subsequent history from a series of

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foreign colonizers. Secondly, the Roman period in Malta urgently needs to be redefined based on the human to landscape interaction. In the view of the present authors, this definition should be part of three fundamental periods of extensive human occupation and transformation: the protohistoric, the Roman, and Early Modern periods.

We believe that the foundational readdressing of the above two conditions is directly connected with the relationship between landscapes and humans. At all times, social constructs and cultural developments exploit the physical environment. Through time, human societies interact and perceive space differently, and these various actions evolved (or even devolved) into complex landscapes. In turn, physical spaces might develop into multifaceted landscapes that can broadly be categorized as political, social, economic, and ritualistic (Smith, 2003). Due to changing land uses or moments of disuse over time, transformative reorganizations reflected new cultural traits and anthropocentric manipulations of the natural world leading to human-modified landscapes (McGlade, 1995). In fact, the global importance of landscapes has not eluded archaeologists as varying approaches and paradigms have long been characterized by “landscape archaeology” (Aston, 2002; Barrett & Ko, 2009; Bender, 2001, 2002; Bradley, 2000; Ingold, 1993; Thomas, 2001; Tilley, 1994; Wylie, 2013).

Insularity and isolation are frequently debated aspects of the human-island existence, but in our instance, we want to focus on the occupied and experienced physical islandscapes, which are defined here as the physical landscapes transformed by human communities within island confines. Far too often, smaller islands feature heavily in continental-based conversations regarding their maritime role within wider trade systems (Bietti Sestieri, 1980) or the impact of colonizers on native communities (Boardman, 1980). Although these are all topics worthy of exploration, we fear that they have often led to the focus on the outward connections of islands rather than their intra-island activities. However, we caution against discussing island communities as if they were global consumers impacted daily through the machinations of larger powers in the Mediterranean Sea. This is not meant as a proposed isolationist view of the Maltese Archipelago, but rather as a note of realism being added to discussions around island archaeology within larger world systems.

In this article, we illustrate that available archaeological data, derived mostly from unpublished rescue archaeology contexts, suggest that the protohistoric, Roman, and Early Modern periods were characterized by intensified agro-industrial landscape usage, memorialization, and infrastructural transformations. Rather than separating out the Roman period, we prefer a diachronic and contextualized view of the Maltese Islands through the case studies of Ta’ Qali and ix-Xarolla (Figure 1), both located in south-central Malta. As a collaborative effort between a prehistoric and a historical archaeologist, the two views on Ta’

Figure 1: The Maltese Archipelago with bays (A) Mgarr (Gozo), (B) Salina, (C) Grand Harbour, (D) Marsa, (E) Marsaxlokk) and archaeological sites: (1) Ir-Ramla il-Ħamra (Xagħra, Gozo), (2) Ras il-Wardija (San Lawrenz), (3) Ghar ix-Xih (Xewkija), (4) Mellieha, (5) Ras ir-Raheb (Bahrija), (6) Iż-Zebbiegh (Mgarr), (7) Tal-Qares (Mosta), (8) Mdina, (9) Ta’ Qali, (10)Ħaż Żebbuġ, (11) Kirkop and Ħal Luqa, (12) Żurrieq, Ħal Safi & ix-Xarolla, (13) Birgu, Isla & Valletta, (14) Bormla and Paola, (15) Ta’ Kaċċatura (Birżebbuġa), (16) Borg in-Nadur, and (17) Tas-Silġ (Marsaxlokk) mentioned below (Basemap ©Esri 2013, DeLorme, NAVTEQ).
Qali and Xarrolla are described through somewhat differing lenses with the ultimate emphasis on the Maltese landscape.

In addition, it should be emphasized that authors were responsible for the development-driven archaeological interventions at Ta’ Qali in 2007 (Vella), 2014/2015 (Spiteri), and ix-Xarrolla in 2013 (Spiteri). All archaeological and artefactual interpretations remain at present preliminary.

2 To a Maltese Islandscape Writ Large

The paragon of certain Mediterranean islands, like the Maltese Islands, is their long-term and, at times, dense occupation. Yet the prolonged presence of humans on islands and their use of islandscapes have garnered less interest than the impacts of island physicality on the cultural developments of its human inhabitants (cf. Cherry & Leppard, 2014; Evans, 1973; Fitzpatrick & Anderson, 2008; Kirch, 1988; Patton, 1996). This focus on island physicality (Patton, 1996), its insular conditions (Bonanno, 2008; Gosden & Pavlides, 1994; Grima, 2001), and cultural isolation (Terrell, Hunt, & Gosden, 1997) has diminished the advancement of landscape-oriented understandings of islands, addressed here as islandscapes. Broodbank (2000, p. 21) defined the idea of islandscapes as circumscribed island landscapes that offered constraints and openings to their inhabitants, or what we refer to above as challenges and benefits.

No two islands are quite the same, as seen in their broad variable physicality, location in relation to mainlands, and in turn, their cultural developments. This article discusses islandscapes from the point of view of the Maltese Archipelago. In contrast, the beginnings of island archaeology were originally rooted in an expectation of shared cultural commonalities. From Mead’s (1957) suggestion of island development as comparative laboratories to Sahlins (1955) examination of monumental efflorescence of islands, and Evans’ (1973, 1977) proposal of islands as cultural laboratories, the earliest establishment of island archaeology promoted a strict sense of difference from non-island settings (Fitzpatrick, Erlandson, Anderson, & Kirch, 2007, p. 231), but fully expected that islands and their human-use exhibit repeated patterns.

Among those repeated patterns of human use, monumentality in island settings has garnered the impression of exaggerated cultural developments in islands such as the Maltese Islands, Sardinia, Crete, and many other non-Mediterranean islands. It is worth highlighting, however, that these periods of unmatched monumentality are overall a small part of a longer diachronic human occupation. For instance, the Maltese Islands have largely featured in this debate through the 4th and 3rd millennia BC Temple Period culture (Evans, 1996; Grima, 2008; Malone, 2008; Pace, 2004; Skeates, 2008; Trump, 2002), which was characterized by large-scale ritual megalithic complexes and a setting of seeming cultural isolation (Robb, 2001; Vella, 2016). There is at least one issue worth teasing apart here. Island archaeology and much of its theoretical compendium and paradigms have been largely conceived from the study of prehistoric contexts.

The advent of numerous technological advancements in the last centuries has drastically changed island lives from those of their prehistoric predecessors. Land and sea are now better traversed and their available resources are more deeply extracted. The ability to travel from islands to the mainland has improved considerably. Despite all of the above, even in our present age there are still some island limitations that distinguish them from their continental counterparts. Climate change is a serious concern as rising sea level begins to affect coastal limits (Church, White, & Hunter, 2006) along with the overexploitation of marine resources (Newton, Cote, Pilling, Jennings, & Dulvy, 2007). Unpredictable winters can play a role in pausing maritime travel and connections, which also means that extraneous supplies can become limited. In turn, the unsustainable demographic growth seen in many islands is artificially maintained through outside contacts and dependence on the importation of goods (Hughes & Lawrence, 2005; Thomas, 2002) with a tendency for quick economic downturns (Welch, 1994; Wilkinson, 1987). Finally, the political voice of islanders within the wider world is often subdued and affected by ex-colonial powers (Baldacchino, 2002, 2008). In providing this view, the present authors do not want to further extenuate the idea of islander isolation or marginality. Instead, there needs to be a serious attempt to curb the polarized views of idyllic
versus isolated islands and stress that the physicality of islands is an influential, but not insurmountable, form of landscape on its human occupants.

In particular, three scholarly works have had an impact on island studies conducted within the Mediterranean basin and the issue of long-term human occupations. Braudel’s (1972) *The Mediterranean in the Age of Phillip II* and his *longue durée* paradigm have had long-lasting effects on academia. Indeed, *The Corrupting Sea* (Horden & Purcell, 2000) reacted to the foundational elements weaved together by Braudel by showcasing an additional attempt at diachronic and comparative studies of the Mediterranean world (Horden, 2005; Purcell, 2003). Finally, *The Making of the Middle Sea* (Broodbank, 2013) has transposed these approaches to the prehistoric Mediterranean. Despite their ample differences, these studies all share an intent to tackle human history through long-term patterns, while also accepting the potential of intense transformative periods.

### 3 Broad Islandscape Impacts Seen Across the Middle-Late Bronze Age, Roman Period, and Early Modern Period of the Maltese Islands

These works lead us to look at the Maltese islandscapes from two lenses: the broader historical population shifts and a more detailed local view of two small rural areas in Malta. These two areas in south-central Malta, Ta’ Qali and ix-Xarolla, experienced and exhibited common elements from the broader population shifts and also illustrated a diachronic occupation of inland agricultural areas to a maximum extent possible. We focus on the interplay of a broad scale historical view and a local geographical scale of two Maltese islandscapes. We also tie the Roman period, within itself a broad and complex period characterized by macro- and micro-scale shifts in the Republican and Imperial Roman world, to the preceding protohistoric and the succeeding Early Modern periods.

Over six millennia, human occupation in the Maltese Islands appears to have expanded during certain periods (Tables 1 and 2), particularly during the Bronze Age (mid-2nd millennium BC), the Roman Imperial Period (first century BC–third century AD), and the Early Modern Period (sixteenth–nineteenth centuries AD). Each period has a number of shared characteristics, such as stable populations, resource maximization, a distinction between growing settlements, extra-urban, and rural spaces, and significant investments in the landscape and infrastructure (cf. Stoddart, 1999).

The late prehistoric-early protohistoric period in the Maltese Islands has come under detailed scrutiny only in recent years (Recchia & Cazzella, 2011; Tanasi, 2014; Tanasi & Vella, 2015), as the majority of prehistoric studies have largely focused on the Maltese Islands’ Temple Period, which spanned the mid-4th and mid-3rd millennia BC and was characterized by the construction of large megalithic monuments that formed part of an intense ritualism and cultural insularity (Pace, 2004). In contrast, the later transformations of the 2nd millennium BC were characterized by settlements, part of the Borġ in-Nadur culture, on naturally defensible hilltops, often protected by perimeter walls and regularly accompanied by rock-cut pits used for storage.

This intent on maximizing the use of the Maltese islandscape was also countered during the mid-2nd millennium BC by the establishment of two larger settlements: coastal Borġ in-Nadur (Tanasi & Vella, 2011) and inland Mdina (Ciasca, 1982). The former site was guarded by a large wall that overlooked the naturally protected anchorage bay of Marsaxlokk. In contrast, at Mdina, unpublished rescue excavations (Cutajar, 2001) suggest a Bronze Age occupation across the Mdina and Rabat hilltop, which is situated above a broad plain: Ta’ Qali.

The arrival of the Phoenicians in the Maltese Islands occurred sometime around the second half of the eighth century BC and they were eventually defeated by the Romans in 218 BC. Mdina became at this juncture the undisputed centre of this archipelago. This formation of an urban space was also countered by differences in relation to rural spaces and extra-urban sanctuaries (cf. Azzopardi, 2014). In contrast, the
### Table 1: A chronological timeline from the prehistory to Roman history of the Maltese Islands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neolithic</th>
<th>Temple Period (Late Neolithic)</th>
<th>Bronze Age/Iron Age</th>
<th>Phoenician/Punic</th>
<th>Hellenistic</th>
<th>Roman</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5000–3500 BC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: A chronological timeline from late antiquity to modern history of the Maltese Islands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Late antiquity</th>
<th>Early Medieval</th>
<th>High Medieval</th>
<th>Late Medieval</th>
<th>Early Modern</th>
<th>Contemporary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Late Roman – Early Byzantine 4th–7th cent. AD</td>
<td>Late Byzantine – Early Arab 8th – early 10th cent. AD</td>
<td>Late Arab – Norman</td>
<td>Late 13th – early 16th cent. AD</td>
<td>Knights – British colonial Late 16th–19th cent. AD</td>
<td>20th cent. AD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
establishment of extra-urban sanctuaries like Tas-Silġ (Marsaxlokk), Ras ir-Raheb (Bahrija), Ghar ix-Xih (Xewkija), and Ras il-Wardija (San Lawrenz) ranged from monumental to small-scale ritual sites (cf. Azzopardi, 2014; Spanò Giammellaro & Spatafora, 2008).

The Roman period across the Maltese Islands saw a diverse range of rural landscape uses including villas, farmsteads, agricultural fields, industrial sites, rural necropolises, and infrastructural networks that were unparalleled in earlier periods. In particular, the formation of a well-defined urban centre was also matched by rural occupations. During the Roman Imperial period, villa sites (Bonanno, 1977, 2018), such as Ir-Ramla il-Hamra (Xagħra, Gozo) and Ta’ Kaċċatura (Birżebbuġa), and industrial sites, like Iz-Zebbiegħ (Mġarr) and Tal-Qares (Mosta), can be found in a number of ecologically advantageous locales (Bruno, 2009). The villa sites came with all the trappings of wealth: statuary, well-planned architectural spaces, and the occupation of desirable locations in Malta. In contrast to such sites, the more common Roman period sites are scattered across the landscape, many geared towards farming activities. Such evidence of ancient agriculture includes signs of viticulture, circumscribed built spaces, and small rock-cut tombs, along with an array of quarrying sites and widespread terracing of fields.

The Arab dominance of the Mediterranean during the Early Middle Ages, between the 8th and 10th centuries AD, brought with it recurring political shifts in the control of the Maltese Archipelago leading to periods of instability (Abulaifi, 2011). With the fall of the archipelago in the hands of the Arabs in 870 AD, the Maltese Islands formed part of a prosperous commercial network that linked Sicily to the Maghreb as evidenced by ceramic assemblages (Cutajar, 2004). The material culture of the Medieval Period retrieved from a number of excavated sites in past years counters arguments inspired by ancient literary sources that refer to an uninhabited archipelago until the mid-eleventh century AD (Molinari & Cutajar, 1999; Cutajar, 2004, p. 59). During the Late Middle Ages, between the late thirteenth and early sixteenth centuries AD, the Islands’ settlements evolved from simple isolated rural structures (rahal) into better defined conglomerations of hamlets and subsequently village settlements (Blouet, 1978; Wettinger, 1975). The diversified but intensely changing agrarian use of the Islands continued to transform the ancient islandscape causing changes to the geomorphological formations at the alluvial plains, such as at the Burmarrad and Marsa embayments (Gambin, 2003; Cutajar, 2004, p. 63).

The handing of the Maltese Islands to the militant Order of St John and the British occupation of the islands, between the sixteenth to the twentieth century, has ultimately shaped the Early Modern

Figure 2: A panoramic view of the Mġarr plain and the northwestern coastline of Malta.
island landscape. The Order found the Islands unsuitable for their chivalric habits, ushering considerable pressures on the limited environmental resources of the archipelago (Blouet, 1963, p. 49; Luttrell, 1993, pp. 264–265). The urbanization of the Grand Harbour region to provide avant-garde defences of the Order, with the foundation of a number of cities – Birgu, Senglea, and Valletta (Figure 2), turned this part of the Islands into a primary commercial location. The broad changes in the Maltese Islands eventually extended inland, changing various parts of the rural areas, necessitating the expropriation of patches of land to found new urban locations, like Paola, and for the expansion of village towns, such as Ħażżebbuġ by the late eighteenth century and Mellieha in the nineteenth century (Spiteri & Borg, 2015, p. 148; Thake, 1994, p. 43). The Order’s policies to set up foundations earmarked to manage property and agricultural land, as part of its efforts to generate economic investments on the islands, continued to cause the transformation of the rural areas (Figure 3) (Spiteri & Borg, 2015, p. 164). Several public spaces, such as those in Mellieha, and marshlands, like those at Salina (Blouet, 1964, 1967; Spiteri & Borg, 2015, p. 165), were turned into cultivated land and reshaped the geomorphologies of the Maltese Islands. The Order’s construction programmes characterized modern Malta and caused considerable changes of the ancient islandscapes into newly conceptualized spaces, through stone extraction, field preparations, repairs or the rebuilding of farm houses and other agricultural features, as well as with their fortified-town planning schemes.

3.1 Rural Ta’ Qali

Located in central Malta, Ta’ Qali is a low lying, flat confluence basin situated between the high western areas of Mdina and the lower eastern extents of the island (Figure 1), which is now largely characterized by cultivated fields and growing urban centers. In notarial documents dating as far back as the early sixteenth
century, the toponym is described as a ‘... flat land in central Malta between Mosta and Mdina...’ (Wettinger, 2000, p. 432). A significant extent of Ta’ Qali was developed in 2007–2008 (TQL 2007) for the construction of the new United States of America Embassy, and in 2014–2015 (TQL 2014/5), excavations that led to the discovery of a concentration of several archaeological features (Figures 4 and 5).

Sometime during the 2nd millennium BC, a series of bell-shaped circular pits were excavated into the soft limestone bedrock (Figures 6 and 7). These rock-cut features, often described locally as "silo pits" (Sagona, 2015, pp. 165–167), have an uncertain function, but were probably tied to the storage of goods or water. Past excavation of such pits has often proposed that these features were originally dated to the Bronze Age, but were possibly cleared out and filled in by Classical remains. At Ta’ Qali, only one of the sixteen pit clusters contained Borg in-Nadur deposits. However, the remaining pits were cleared out and refilled during the Early Roman Imperial period. These pits were bordered by a cart-rut alignment.

The majority of pits were largely filled with first century BC ceramic assemblages and trash deposits (including charred animal bones and broken ceramics), while some pits were located next to the cart-rut alignment and were filled with broken sub-angular ashlar blocks (Figure 8). The absence of Phoenicio-Punic ceramics across the site and the surprising recovery of an architectural fragment in one of the pits (Figure 9) indicated the dismantling of a second century BC monument that was dumped during the late Republican period (Bolzano, 2016). This architectural fragment, presently unmatched in the Maltese Islands, finds similarities with funerary type tower-mausolea found in North Africa at sites like Dougga and Sabratha (Moore, 2007, pp. 77–78).

The nature of the Roman occupation at Ta’ Qali is not known, largely due to later large-scale quarrying. However, this site provided evidence of Classical era agriculture. A small number of spaced rock-cut trenches were uncovered south of the road alignment. Similar interconnecting elongated rock features, totalling 190 in number, were discovered to the south in the other areas developed in 2014 and 2015 (TQL...
Figure 5: Map indicating the location of the archaeological interventions at TQL 2007 and TQL 2014/15 in relation to an ancient country road (that originally included the cart-tracks uncovered next to the circular pits (1) and burials (2), which leads to Mdina (Basemap ©Esri 2013, DeLorme, NAVTEQ)).

Figure 6: Overlay of an early twentieth-century map on Google Earth imagery, indicating the overall archaeological areas uncovered during the TQL 2007 excavations.
Most probably, these trenches served an agricultural use that is often attributed to vine cultivation and other associated tree crops. Such systems, although smaller, are comparable to those of Roman Italy. In peninsular Italy, labour-intensive trenching was carved into the bedrock to transform inferior land for viticulture (Horden & Purcell, 2000, p. 219). The rather uniform presence of Classical ceramics within the Ta’ Qali trenches ties the pits and the possible viticulture activities together, as seen in other Maltese sites such as Iz-Zejtun (Vella et al., 2017). In addition, the morphology and approximate relative dating of these rock-cut trenches are comparable to other examples in the Mediterranean, such as Can Jordi es Jondal and other rural sites in Ibiza that were used for the cultivation of vine (Gonzalez Villaescusa et al., 2010, p. 171).
While this article focuses on three synchronic moments across Malta’s multi-temporal history, it is hardly surprising that additional uses of this site can be noted in the post-Imperial period. Towards the southern extent of the TQL 2007 site, a badly damaged cluster of seven tombs was discovered (Figure 10). Their small size and rather simple ceramic assemblages pale in comparison to Classical burials found in the urban outskirts of Mdina (Bonanno, 2005; Vella et al., 2001, pp. 290–291). Instead, the Ta’ Qali burial follows the adage of rural necropolises in Malta: they are typically situated on the side of country road alignments, such as at ix-Xarolla (Camilleri & Cutajar, 1999). All of the recovered nineteen individuals showed the characteristics of working people: arthritis, irregular bone growth due to degenerative diseases, and signs of teeth loss or decay. Ribbed amphorae fragments associated with these tombs suggest a dating of eighth century AD.
The final use of this site was perhaps the most radical of all previous uses. Indeed, the site was largely scarred by early modern quarrying activity (Figure 11) which can also be observed in the immediately surrounding area. Industrial-scale quarrying of *franka* (*Globigerina limestone*) for building purposes has a considerably prolonged history as outlined by Bianco (1999, p. 337).

What can be gleaned then from this diachronic and multi-chronological occupation of this part of Ta’ Qali? It is possible that Ta’ Qali offered agriculturally favourable conditions, as well as the close proximity to the political centre of Mdina and Rabat. The memorialization of funerary spaces, such as the presence of architectonic fragments of a Late Punic monument, could be destroyed or altered in an agriculturally productive space. Yet, later replacement of burial spaces shows the continued relationship between life and death in a rural environment. Ultimately, the Early Modern occupations impact and alter, in perhaps the most radical manner, the area’s long-term landscape use by turning an agricultural space into an industrial quarrying site as the Maltese *rahal* grew far larger than any of its predecessors.

### 3.2 Rural ix-Xarolla

Ix-Xarolla is situated in the south-west of Malta between Żurrieq and Hal Safi at 100 metres above sea level (Figure 1). The Coralline plateau of the Żurrieq-Qrendi cuts into the Globigerina rock of the south region of the island and converges towards the Valletta harbour area where it features gentle slopes. This terraced landscape descends further into the flat plains of Kirkop and Hal Luqa.

Until recent decades, ix-Xarolla was part of the Maltese countryside (Figure 12). The agricultural terrain in the area of ix-Xarolla was crossed by three country roads that formed an open space at their intersection. From Tal-Bakkari to the south of this crossroad, the route forked into two and continued toward the east to Hal Safi and to the north toward Żurrieq. A sixteenth century chapel dedicated to St. Andrew and a windmill constructed in 1,724 dominated this open space. To the north of this enclave, agricultural fields were organized on the sloped terrain with terraces oriented on a south–east to north–west axis. A field-path, *Vicolo Barcellona*, cuts across the fields winding down to the lower terraces. Some modern stone quarries are also known within the area. This characterization of the landscape denotes the
economic significance of ix-Xarolla during the Early Modern period. However, this islandscape served a
different purpose in ancient times albeit with unclear use in earlier prehistoric-protohistoric periods,
perhaps in part due to the extensive use in later periods. In the late Roman period, ix-Xarolla was utilized
as a cemetery and is evidenced by tombs and catacombs reported in the early twentieth century (M.A.R.,
1926–1927, pp. iv–v, 1935–1936, p. xx). Other remains of a possible structure reported to date to the same
period were discovered nearby in Żurrieq Road (M.A.R., 1967, p. 7).

While today the area is threatened by the ever-expanding urban sprawl, the Late Roman necropolis and
the Early Modern contexts are critical reminders of the transformations of this landscape’s past. Further
north from the ix-Xarolla enclave, few fields remain from the rural historical islandscape. Yet within these
fields, now being considered for building development, archaeological remains were discovered during the
years 2013 to 2016 (SFI 2013). Only preliminary investigations have so far been conducted, but they have
uncovered a series of rock-cut tombs, cart-ruts, a quarry, and agricultural rock-cut features that indicate at
least four phases which transformed the ix-Xarolla landscape through time (Figure 13).

During the 2013–2016 excavations, at least four late Roman tombs were discovered alongside a set of
cart-ruts, while another cluster of at least three tombs was found further to the north of the site. These
features were quarried extensively at a later phase, probably in Early Modern times. The tombs are of three
types: those accessed through a square-type shaft, another type entered from an elongated corridor, and a
small cluster accessed from a quarry pit. The first two types are accessed by a flight of steps. One of the
tombs has two chambers and their entrance sides were carved into simple columns. The occurrence of
tombs in this area suggests extended funerary spaces and a considerable occupation of ix-Xarolla in Roman
times, especially when the new tombs are considered as an extension of the catacomb cluster found further
south next to the chapel. This cluster, which extends underneath the chapel and windmill, was partially
excavated from 1996 to 1999 (Camilleri & Cutajar, 1999).
Judging by their funerary architecture, these tombs belong to the late Roman period. Some were lavishly decorated by columns and steps that led up to the burial rooms. Other tombs were simply cut into a symmetrical type having a shaft and chamber. The necropolis, similar to the Ta’ Bistra (Mosta) and Salina rural catacombs, reached its apex in the course of the third and fourth centuries AD as indicated by fragments of terra sigillata vessels recovered during the 1990s excavations (Camilleri & Cutajar, 1999; Bruno, 2009, p. 206). At the ix-Xarolla enclave, these funerary complexes had lost their ceilings and some areas were encroached by a nineteenth century quarry.

The second phase at this site was composed of a series of elongated rock trenches and pits situated to the sides of the quarry. At SFI 2013, the bedrock was scarred by quarrying activity. In Early Modern times, quarrying in this area exploited the local topography by cutting into the hill slope on at least three levels (Figures 13 and 14). The lowest level of the quarry could have extended over an area of about 0.2 hectares (field 3) with distinct levels noticeable. These differences in levels are demarcated by two quarry faces. Adjoining these quarried edges are elongated separation trenches of half a metre in width, which indicate the quarrying processes used at this site. These trenches were cut perpendicular to the natural layering of the rock. Similar trenches were then cut in an opposite direction, so together these trenches formed a series of quarry pits. These pits served to extract blocks of stones of about two metres by one metre and of a height of 0.6 m. Only the tomb floors and parts of their stairs were spared, indicating the intensity of the Early Modern quarrying.

Subsequently, this quarry site was changed into terraced agricultural fields. The soils found in these fields contained ceramic fragments datable to the seventeenth–twentieth centuries. Dry rubble walls of about one metre in height were built on top of and along the quarry faces and pits. The upper levels of the quarry were re-utilized as platforms for fields 1 and 2 (Figure 13), while field 3 occupied the deepest part of

Figure 13: Plan of the archaeological remains discovered in the ix-Xarolla area and includes cart-ruts, quarrying features, and tombs.
the quarry. Although in some areas a thin layer of stone chippings was found in the quarry, it is strongly suggested that the quarry base was exposed at the time of field construction and minimal additional rock levelling occurred during field preparation. The levelling of bedrock to create easier tillable surfaces and enclosures for deeper soils is recorded in early modern historical records where rock surfaces were ‘peeled off’ to make bedrock permeable and lessen surface water run-off (Giacinto, 1811; Spiteri & Borg, 2016). At the

Figure 14: Cart-ruts roughly along a north-south direction and rock-hewn stairs cutting into one of the earlier truncated tombs.

Figure 15: Quarrying activity along the southern perimeter of field 3. Multiple linear incisions in rock are evidence of field management.
ix-Xarolla fields, multiple linear incisions in rock probably relate to these aspects of field management (Figure 15).

The ix-Xarolla example discussed here accentuates the landscape transformations which occurred during the Roman and Early Modern periods with some similarities to what has been observed at Ta’ Qali observations. The funerary landscape values were in later times long-forgotten and subjected to altered anthropocentric manipulations serving a changed society. The heavy mutilation of the site for large-scale stone extraction during the Early Modern era strongly demonstrates the ever-increasing development and land use for improved land-based economies.

4 Conclusion: The Maltese Archipelago as a Diachronic Islandscape

This study does not claim to provide solid answers and proposals on the future of landscapes studies in island contexts. We understand that the overall lack of publications from rescue archaeology contexts has stunted adequate analysis of the Maltese Archipelago and its place within the Central Mediterranean (Vella, 2013). We also realize that in taking a broad diachronic view of two rural Maltese islandscapes, more refined details are missed. These landscapes and their many layers of history had also underwent various moments of destruction, often yielding fragmentary clues and evidence. However, by continuing to discuss the main ancient urban centres, the extra-urban sanctuaries, or villa complexes in Roman Malta, we are missing a crucial sense of daily Maltese life—A life that by and large was experienced solely within the insular confines of the Maltese Islands, despite broader Mediterranean effects. By focusing on the Roman administration (or for that matter any earlier or later colonizing group) of the archipelago, we also risk missing out on identifying some of commonalities and differences that can be traced across time. Instead, this article seeks to propose and provide an island analysis rooted in the authors’ own upbringing and work in the Maltese Archipelago. The narrative provided above highlights three elements in tackling islandscapes and their diachronic nature that need future work.

First, island archaeology as a sub-field has plenty more issues to grapple within the near future. Emerging from the work of scholars researching islands in the mid-twentieth century, this archaeological sub-field has long attempted to overcome oscillating conceptions of islands, namely the idyllic versus the isolated island existence. Being raised in the Maltese Islands does not make our opinions any more or less valid than those posed by others. Nevertheless, island researchers need to better comprehend islandscapes as internally variable and not necessarily outward facing in their cultural set-up. It should also be emphasized that islander communities adapted to their limited resources and devised localized ways of adaptation, be it through connections with outside communities or through a maintained insularity.

Second, certain synchronic moments in Malta had a profound long-term effect. While we do not suggest that the three broad periods described above were most impactful, they did have a significant and lasting effect on the Maltese islandcape. The 2nd millennium BC occupation of the archipelago shifted from earlier settlement patterns by beginning an occupation of defensible sites, while also dotting the landscape with rock-cut pits for storage. That considerable investment in storage leads us to also consider this period as a pivotal moment in which Maltese communities were aiming to supply a potentially growing population.

The Classical period was also characterized by foreign sovereignty being imposed on the archipelago. Despite changing governance, the rural occupation of the Maltese islandcape was variable yet marked within agriculturally productive areas, such as Ta’ Qali and ix-Xarolla. The investment and cutting of trenches into the bedrock, likely for viticulture, are possibly an indication of a growing agricultural industry. The fact that these cut trenches are also increasingly being observed across the Maltese Islands, as seen in the Zejtun Roman Villa and other sites, lends further credence to our point above. In addition, the repeated funerary uses of this area provide an impression of attachment between people, land, and place.
Finally, the Early Modern era was marked by a known growing demography of the rahal sided by a renewed interest in using rural spaces to the urban spaces. The extensive quarrying of limestone for buildings and other projects had an impact on many earlier remains.

In unison, these synchronic periods illustrate the diachronic nature of Malta’s history. Deep transformations had profound effects on this islandscape, but the Maltese Islands were also prone to some degree to outside shifts. In conclusion, we applaud the efforts made within this volume to further push our understanding of Roman Malta and its Central Mediterranean role. We hope that in taking a rural view, a furthered appreciation of islandscapes can occur past Malta’s prehistoric past and throughout its long, winding history.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to acknowledge the valuable assistance and mentorship offered by Dr. Anthony Pace and Nathaniel Cutajar over fifteen years. Christian Mifsud is also owed a deal of gratitude for his assistance and encouragement. Davide Tanasi and Daniel Borg provided useful comments on earlier drafts of this text. Acknowledgment is also owed to various field archaeologists involved throughout these lengthy interventions: Raquel Ozanich-Vella, Andrew Bartolo Parnis, Maria Schembri, Kurt Farrugia, Christian Mifsud, Renata Zerafa, Luisa D’Amato, Ian Scicluna Liveira, Dennis Mizzi, Lucia Argento, Antonio Bianco, Marian Rosado, Stephanie Said, Laura Santovito, Jessica Scicluna, and Paolo Spadaro. Finally, we thank the two peer reviewers who contributed to the revision of this article, as well as the special issue editors.

Author contributions: Authors have accepted responsibility for the entire content of this manuscript and approved its submission.

Conflict of interest: Authors state no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement: The authors state that records and materials can be located at the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, Malta. All requests should be directed to them for their approval and consideration.

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