

BOOK REVIEW

The Archaeology of Malta from the Neolithic Through the Roman Period. By CLAUDIA SAGONA. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xx + 452. Hardcover, \$135.00. ISBN 978-1-107-00669-0.

Although islands have long served as generic metaphors for isolation, the cultural development of Mediterranean islands historically has been linked to that of the mainland.¹ Be it Phoenician, Greek, or Roman, mainland culture undeniably shaped island societies, but the influence did not flow from a single direction. Rather, the situation was one of cultural exchange where events and practices originating on islands likewise had the potential to impact the mainland. For instance, socio-political developments in Sicily (e.g. the Athenian Expedition, ca. 415–413 BCE; the Sicilian slave revolts, ca. 135–132 BCE and 104–100 BCE) significantly altered the course of Greco-Roman history. Nevertheless, island societies are unique in that they were able to determine, more or less, the degree to which they retained their independence and adapted to the influence of foreign stimuli. The islands of the Maltese archipelago are no exception, and through the careful examination of their archaeological record, one can discern the extent to which these islands either accepted or rejected cultural change over time.

Consisting of three islands, Malta, Gozo, and Comino, the Maltese archipelago occupies a privileged position in the central Mediterranean. Given their prime location, the islands became a favored hub for maritime trade, especially by the Phoenicians and the Romans. The material remains of the islands' past peoples, from the enigmatic prehistoric megaliths to the stunning medieval fortresses, have captured the attention of archaeologists since the nineteenth century.² Despite

¹ For more on the subfield of island archaeology, see the early foundational scholarship of J.D. Evans (e.g. 1973. "Islands as Laboratories for the Study of Cultural Process." In *The Explanation of Culture Change: Models in Prehistory*, edited by C. Renfrew, 517–20. London; 1977. "Island Archaeology in the Mediterranean: Problems and Opportunities." *World Archaeology* 9: 12–26), as well as the more recent overview P. Rainbird. 2007. *The Archaeology of Islands*. Cambridge.

² For key works on the archaeology of the Maltese archipelago, see J.D. Evans. 1971. *Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands*. London; C. Sagona 2002. *The Archaeology of Punic Malta*. Leuven; A.D. Atauz. 2008. *Eight Thousand Years of Maltese Maritime History*. Gainesville; R. Skeates. 2010. *An*

this protracted interest, Sagona's book is the first systematic survey of archaeological record of the Maltese archipelago dating from the time of the earliest inhabitants through the Roman period (ca. 5000 BCE–400 CE).

The book is organized chronologically into eight chapters, a conclusion, and two appendices. The Chapter 1, "Malta's Archaeological Past," serves as an introduction, discussing the topography of the islands and the history of their archaeological investigation. The first portion of the book is concerned with the earliest inhabitants of the archipelago. Chapter 2, "First Settlers and Farmers," surveys evidence of Paleolithic and Neolithic inhabitation, while Chapter 3, "The Culture of the Megalith Builders: The Late Neolithic of Malta," and Chapter 4, "Pushing Boundaries at the End of the Megalithic Building Period," focus on the cultural developments that precipitated the rise and fall of Malta's famed prehistoric megalithic structures. Chapter 5, "New Directions: The Appearance of the Axe-Bearers," outlines events and societal shifts that took place during the Bronze Age.

Chapters 6 through 8 detail the periods in which the islands were enveloped in Punic and Roman spheres of influence. Chapter 6, "East Meets West: Phoenician Mariners, Merchants and Settlers," and Chapter 7, "Melita and Gaulos During the Punic Period," cover the Punic Period, while Chapter 8, "Melita's Place in the Roman World," situates Malta within the greater Roman world. The conclusion, entitled "Closing Remarks," provides interpretations of the archaeological evidence presented in the previous chapters. Most notably, Sagona maintains that the inhabitants of the islands participated in Bronze Age trade networks which linked them to southern Italy, Sicily, and the eastern Mediterranean; that they fully integrated with the Phoenician settlers (and their Punic descendants) who arrived in the first millennia BCE; and that their Punic identity persisted well into the Roman period. Finally, the appendices, labeled A and B, respectively provide a list of radiocarbon dates from Malta and a gazetteer of archaeological sites in Malta.

Overall, the book is remarkable for its comprehensive treatment of the archaeology of ancient Malta and its fresh interpretations of previously studied data. It is also beautifully illustrated, containing a plethora of maps, plans, drawings, and images of Maltese architecture and material culture. Readers, however, would benefit from an expanded introduction that also presents the aims of the monograph and discusses its organization. Sagona briefly describes her goals in the Preface, but

given their location, these easily could be overlooked. Despite this omission, Sagona has produced a knowledgeable and authoritative work of scholarship that will serve as a solid point of reference for years to come.

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