

Ras il-Wardija Sanctuary Revisited

**A re-assessment of the evidence and newly-informed
interpretations of a Punic-Roman sanctuary in
Gozo (Malta)**

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Cover image: Ras il-Wardija sanctuary seen from the air.
The sanctuary stands on the promontory seen in the foreground. (Photo: The author)

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To the memory
of
the late Paul Spiteri

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Preface

This book evolved from one of five major case studies presented by the author in his PhD thesis entitled 'Religious Landscapes and Identities of the Maltese islands in a Mediterranean Context: 700 BC-AD 500'. The thesis was presented to the Department of Archaeology at Durham University (UK) for the award of a doctorate in July 2014.

The case study in question dealt with a sanctuary site at Ras il-Wardija on the small Mediterranean island of Gozo and the present book constitutes an amplification and further development of that particular case study following a re-assessment of the existing data, especially data which has been largely overlooked or superficially treated and interpreted in related literature. In addition to this re-assessment, newly-discovered data (particularly concerning the region) and parallels from comparable sites and ritual activities contribute towards fresh observations and interpretations.

In general, the book may also contribute to fill a major *lacuna* with respect to the sanctuary site at Ras il-Wardija. So far, this site does not seem to have been given the attention it rightly deserves as a site which is also unique in its own right. To make good for this 'deficiency', this study seeks to highlight the sanctuary at Ras il-Wardija as another significant site on the religious map of the ancient Mediterranean and, as such, a site with which confrontations or comparisons can also be made.

At the same time, and perhaps more importantly, this volume also seeks to enhance the knowledge available to date about religious practices, experiences, and expressions in the ancient Mediterranean world. But it could also show how these may have possibly migrated with the movements of peoples across the Mediterranean basin, thus also lending its contribution to the field of comparative studies.

Chapter 1

1.1 Introducing the sanctuary site at Ras il-Wardija

The coastal stretch on the western side of the central Mediterranean island of Gozo, near Malta, is marked by a pronounced headland facing south-west and known as ‘Ras il-Wardija’. Best accessed from Ta’ Kercem village or from the nearby one of Santa Luċija (Figure 1), this coastal headland is host to a sanctuary site spread on eight terraces going uphill from the first terrace situated by the cliff edge rising about 120 m above sea level (MISSIONE 1964: 167). The terrace formation appears to have been a later intervention, probably for agricultural purposes (see 3.2 below). However, here and henceforth, the sanctuary areas, features, or finds shall be related to these terraces for ease of reference.

As will be seen in 3.5-6 below, the surviving and most important structural remains of this sanctuary consist of what appears to have been a temple and an artificial quadrangular cave on the first and fifth terraces respectively. The cave has rock-cut features both inside and outside in front of it. The floor features inside and immediately outside the cave are, now, buried. The presumed temple built on the first terrace seems to have been a centre of ritual activity that appears to have extended to the fifth terrace (see 3.5, 3.9 below) where a cave was dug and a room might have been later built in extension to it to provide the set-up for ritual gatherings and ceremonies. Other associated features on the fifth terrace are a water cistern (with a rectangular opening) and a large quadrangular open basin (or pool) both of which

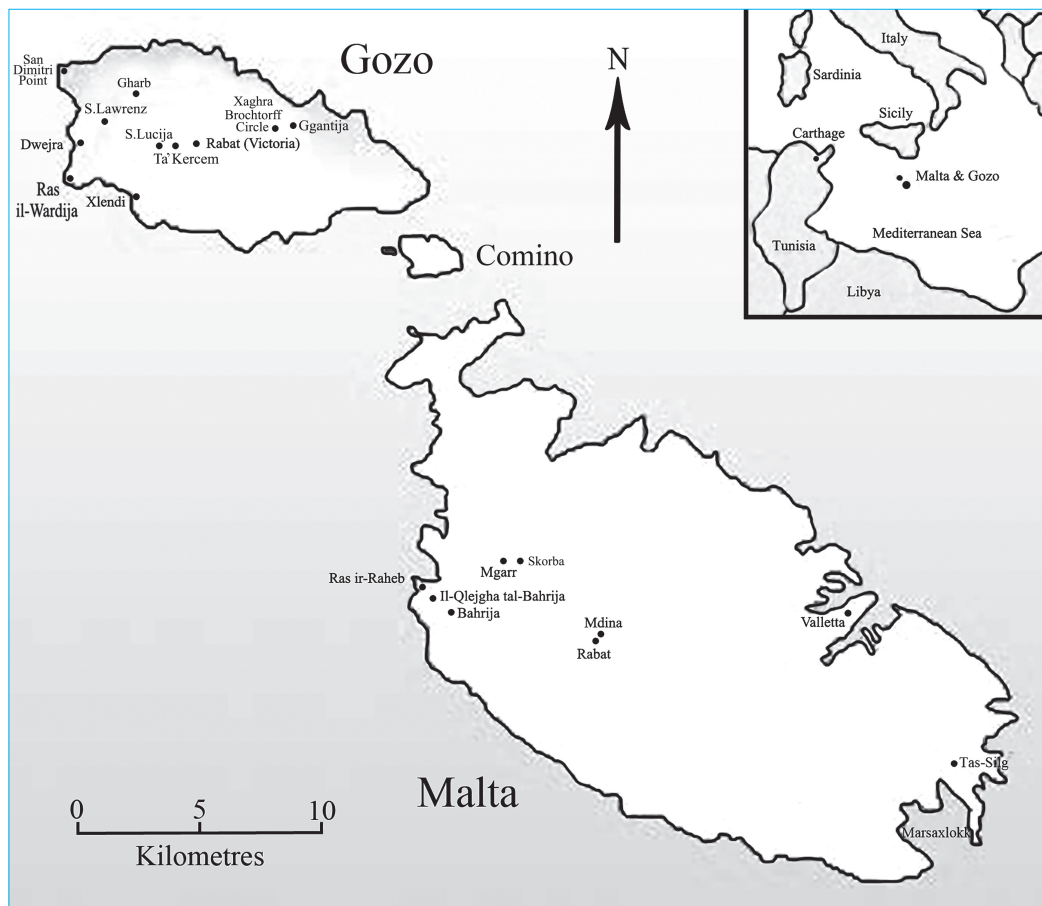


Figure 1. Map of the Maltese islands. It shows the location of Ras il-Wardija on the island of Gozo and other relevant sites on both islands. (After www.geocities.ws/maltashells/NatHist.html).

are also cut in the rock surface. These may have been ancillary facilities with a role to play in the above-mentioned ceremonies while the remaining terraces could have provided the setting where processions or drama performances of a religious character were enacted.

On the basis of the unearthed pottery, the sanctuary appears to have been in use from around the 3rd century BC (late Punic period in the Maltese islands) to the 2nd century AD, and, possibly, even as late as the 4th century AD (late Roman period) (see 3.2 below).

1.2 History of research and existing literature

The sanctuary site was shortlisted for eventual excavation following a reconnaissance exercise involving a number of sites in the Maltese islands that looked promising in terms of their archaeological potential (*MISSIONE 1964*: 167-8). This exercise was undertaken in 1962 under the direction of Michelangelo Cagiano de Azevedo of the Catholic University of Milan and as part of a research initiative – including archaeological excavations – entrusted to the *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta* and which the latter was to develop over the following years.

The site was, in fact, excavated between 1964 and 1967 by the above-mentioned *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta* of the Institute of Near Eastern Studies of the University of Rome (*MISSIONE 1964-7*). The excavation method focused more on buried structures and features as the site's stratigraphy was found to have been disturbed perhaps as a result of agricultural activity in later times. But although found disturbed, the ceramic repertoire was found to be homogeneous and, thus, did not appear to have been extraneous to the site. Thus, it could provide a reliable basis at least for a broad dating of the site.

The results attained from the excavation were published in a series of four preliminary reports by the said institution but, apart from these reports, no major publications on this site are known to have ever made their appearance. The Ras il-Wardiya sanctuary does, at times, feature alongside other sites of a similar nature or of the same period in books or journal papers but, even in such instances, the material concerning the sanctuary of Ras il-Wardiya as laid out in these publications is generally a synthesis or a re-elaboration of the data given in the *Missione's* preliminary reports without any serious attempt to provide an analysis or any interpretations other than those already supplied by the Italian archaeologists of the *Missione* in the 1960s.

1.3 Objectives, aims, approach, and method of this study

Whilst bringing out its uniqueness, this study seeks to look at the sanctuary site of Ras il-Wardiya first within its own regional context and then also within the wider religious and cultural context of the Mediterranean. To this end, due emphasis is afforded to the landscape aspect and, in particular, to the religious landscape. Parallels are drawn between this site and sites of a similar nature across the Mediterranean not only in terms of physical landscape but also (wherever possible) in terms of certain ritual practices and experiences which certain Mediterranean religious sites and the sanctuary site at Ras il-Wardiya in Gozo seem to have shared on the basis of similar features or characteristics they exhibit. The aim of this adopted approach is to demonstrate that, ultimately and although unique in its own right, the sanctuary at Ras il-Wardiya formed part of the wider Mediterranean cultural and religious scenario.

Prior to a detailed study of the sanctuary itself, an examination of its regional context will help locate nearby and any possibly associated settlements and identify the activities that formed part of the daily life in these settlements. But, as suggested mainly by its coastal location, the sanctuary seems to have been essentially connected to maritime life. The neighbouring coastline with its cliffs, inlet, and harbour, thus, features prominently as part of the sanctuary's regional set-up. Therefore, this study will also look into the life of the maritime people who, through their visits to the nearby inlet and harbour – and,

presumably, to the sanctuary too – are expected to have contributed to the sanctuary’s dynamism and significance in no small measure.

Wherever possible, data are drawn from primary sources, particularly the Museums Annual Reports which give yearly accounts and details of archaeological fieldwork and chance discoveries. But in many instances, features or finds have never been officially recorded or published. Nonetheless, as they often physically survive (and, thus, are subject to observation), they are included as well.

Then, this study moves on to focus on the sanctuary itself and its landscape but also affords due consideration to artefacts it yielded in an attempt to reconstruct ritual practices and experiences at the sanctuary in its heyday and, possibly, identify any associated cults. Site data for this part of the study are also drawn from primary sources, relying heavily and almost exclusively on the reports of the excavations undertaken at Ras il-Wardija in the 1960s by the *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta (MISSIONE 1964-7)*.

But the site is not looked at in isolation. To attain a more holistic picture in terms of both site itself and its related activities, this study also pays due attention not only to the regional but also to the wider Mediterranean context. The gathered data is, thus, synthesised and analysed with reference to wider literature not only to come up with interpretations regarding the site and its associated ritual practices but also to put the sanctuary within the contemporary religious context of the wider Mediterranean region.

1.4 Background to the Maltese islands: a brief historical profile

In various respects, the Maltese islands – comprising Malta (the largest of the group), Gozo, and Comino (the smallest and least inhabited island) – are akin to other Mediterranean islands particularly those that, like them, are to be found in the central part of the sea like Pantelleria, Sicily, and the Lipari islands, though not without their distinct characteristics. The physical landscape of the Maltese islands was shaped by geomorphological processes over thousands of years, resulting in a coastline marked by cliffs, promontories, open beaches and sheltered coves and a hinterland marked by hills, fertile plains, winding valleys, and settled areas. These topographical features also played their part to varying degrees in the unfolding developments that shaped Maltese history (and prehistory) within its broader Mediterranean context.

Situated at the very heart of the Mediterranean, the Maltese group of islands lay at the centre of a network of movements and activities which shaped the Mediterranean region – and not least the Maltese islands themselves – for many centuries. As a result, during the 7000 years or so of their occupation, the Maltese islands came in contact with various cultures: different prehistoric peoples (Neolithic, Temple Period, and Bronze Age), Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Sicilian-Arabs, Normans, Angevins, Aragonese, Knights Hospitallers of St John, and British (Figure 2). All of these were constantly competing for geographically strategic positions, for military exploitation, for influences, for political control, and for commercial markets in the Mediterranean (Fiorini and Mallia-Milanes 1991).

The Maltese islands appear to have been first settled around 5000 BC (Trump (with Cilia) 2004: 10, 23, 26, 54-5) and remained occupied ever since, though not uninterruptedly. But this study will focus on the early historical period of the islands starting around 700 BC. By this time, mainly through their commercial networks in the Mediterranean, the Phoenicians came in contact with the islanders. Initially, there may have been sporadic contacts that, gradually, consolidated themselves into a form of permanent presence. While the Phoenicians integrated themselves with the rest of the population, they introduced and adapted new ideas too as evidenced by their surviving material legacy (examples in Bonanno (with Cilia) 2005: 20-71). This period appears to have also ushered in a new settlement pattern with emphasis laid more on centrally-located urbanisation as exemplified by Melite (today’s Rabat and Mdina) in Malta and Għawls (today’s Victoria) in Gozo. In the religious sphere, new cults were introduced (as can be shown,

Period	Phase	Duration
Early Neolithic	Għar Dalam	c. 5000 – 4300 BC
“	Grey Skorba	c. 4500 – 4400 BC
“	Red Skorba	c. 4400 – 4100 BC
Late Neolithic / Temple	Żebbuġ	c. 4100 – 3700 BC
“	Mġarr	c. 3800 – 3600 BC
“	Ġgantija	c. 3600 – 3200 BC
“	Saflieni	c. 3300 – 3000 BC
“	Tarxien	c. 3150 – 2500 BC
Bronze Age	Tarxien Cemetery	c. 2500 – 1500 BC
“	Borġ in-Nadur	c. 1500 – 700 BC
“	Baħrija	c. 900 – 700 BC
Phoenician		c. 700 – 550 BC
Punic		c. 550 – 218 BC
Roman	Republican	c. 218 – 27 BC
“	Imperial	27 BC – AD 535
Medieval	Byzantine	AD 535 – 870
“	Muslim	AD 870 – 1091
“	Norman	AD 1091 – 1194
“	Hohenstaufen	AD 1194 – 1266
“	Angevin	AD 1266 – 1283
“	Aragonese	AD 1283 – 1530
Early Modern	Knights	AD 1530 – 1798
“	French	AD 1798 – 1800
Modern	British	AD 1800 – 1964

Figure 2. Table of Maltese chronology.

for instance, at Tas-Silġ sanctuary) although, initially, these may have been syncretised cults developed from earlier ones.

By the time the Phoenicians were well established in the western Mediterranean, the city of Carthage (itself under Phoenician domination) assumed a leading role in the western Mediterranean, comprising also the Maltese islands as from the late 6th or early 5th century BC. From now on, the Maltese islands found themselves also immersed in the political and military intricacies that, by then, were characterising the central Mediterranean as Carthage and the newly-emerging power – Rome – were competing for power and supremacy.

This situation gradually ended with the balance tipping in favour of Rome and the Maltese islands shifted to Roman control around 218 BC. (Bonanno (with Cilia) 2005: 35, 131). This ushered in a long period of around seven centuries during which the Maltese islands were to participate – to greater or lesser degrees – in the unfolding developments that shaped the Roman world. In the initial stages of Roman occupation, ‘Maltese’ culture and religion were a blend of reworked Phoenician / Punic, Greek, and Roman elements as evidenced, for instance, by contemporary coinage but, in peripheral areas of the islands, these hybrid culture and religion are likely to have survived longer.

The Roman control of the islands lasted when, around AD 445, the islands may have been taken over by the Vandals and, then, possibly by the Ostrogoths around AD 477 until, finally, they were incorporated within the Byzantine empire in AD 535. But from the 1st century AD onwards and in circumstances which, to date, remain largely obscure, Christianity had already started to develop alongside other cults until, gradually, it took over in a rather syncretised form. The material record for early Christianity or for any other cults (alongside Christianity) in late antiquity is negligible; possibly, having been destroyed.

As shown above, in the sphere of colonial domination, the Maltese and Gozitans changed masters more than once when their occupation shifted amongst different competing powers. These shifts brought about changes in colonial relationships and also in alliances not only in the internal realm of politics but also in that of religion, further confirming the close relationship and mutual influence between these two realms.

Furthermore, during all periods of domination by external powers, the Maltese at large were imbued with a feeling of subordination and dependence very typical of colonised communities. Yet, somehow sidelined from the mainstream of the dominating (and urban) culture, the rural communities managed to maintain, to a greater extent and for quite long periods of time, a re-worked but autonomous culture. On the other hand and largely with respect to the remaining categories of Maltese society, external domination enabled contacts bringing in influences and ideas from outside not least in the religious sphere. Along with the somewhat 'conservative' character typical of rural cultures, this contact with changing and diverse external cultures over such a long span of time has helped fashion the Maltese cultural identity into a multi-cultural one (Fiorini and Mallia-Milanes 1991).