

Roman Architecture in Malta

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The location of the Maltese Islands at the centre of the Mediterranean between Sicily and North Africa made them an obvious crossroads of cultures in antiquity. Punic, Greek, and Roman influences all contributed to shaping the local material culture. In recent years, Malta's archaeological heritage has been the subject of scientific research that has advanced our knowledge and has provided data to be compared with other Mediterranean contexts. Works of synthesis have been published, such as the overview of Malta's history and culture from Phoenician to Roman times by Anthony Bonanno (2015). An attempt to assess long-term archaeological issues from the Neolithic through to the Roman era was presented by Claudia Sagona (2015), and most recently, a contribution that has filled many gaps in the study of Roman pottery from the Maltese archipelago was published by Maxine Anastasi (2019). Despite the difficulties that surround the investigation and preservation of cultural heritage in our days, this is a thriving period for the local archaeology, which goes hand-in-hand with the active role played by Heritage Malta since its establishment in 2002.

The present book by David Cardona engages with a topic that had been treated unsystematically in past studies, not being the subject of dedicated research: the architecture and decoration of Roman-period buildings in Malta. The book stems from the author's MA dissertation submitted to the University of Malta in 2010 and fits well with the renewed interest towards the archaeology of these islands. The core of this publication is represented by Cardona's autoptic analysis of elements of architectural decoration during his studies (a preliminary report was provided in Cardona 2013). As is often the case, the poor preservation of archaeological remains and the destruction and recycling of materials in antiquity make their examination difficult. Scholars have to deal frequently with scattered artefacts (*disiecta membra*) whose original contexts of use are not easy to reconstruct. Accessibility of the materials is another issue that had to be confronted by the author, some of these objects being dispersed among various collections or being unavailable for study (the impossibility to access the materials excavated by the Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta is flagged up many times in the text). Another challenge involves the dissemination of these data. Instead of a traditional catalogue of the materials, the author and publisher opted for a more user-friendly type of book, which is meant to be accessible to specialists and general readers alike. This has proved to be a sensible choice – although, unfortunately, one must remark that the book remains largely unavailable for purchase outside Malta. Given the format of this publication, more detailed information such as measurements of the recorded artefacts could not be included, but perhaps they may be made available eventually as an online appendix.

Even at first glance, readers will appreciate that the principal strength of this publication lies in its excellent graphic apparatus: this includes high-quality colour photographs, illustrations, plans, reconstructive drawings, reproductions of black-and-white archival documents, along with breath-taking landscape and aerial views of the Maltese Islands and their archaeological sites, for which the skills of the photographer Daniel Cilia must be acknowledged. This apparatus serves well the purpose of accompanying the topics discussed and makes them easy to follow. There are, however, quite a few typographic and other errors throughout the book. Most of these, such as spelling mistakes or inconsistencies, do not affect understanding of the text, but in a small

number of cases they might create problems especially to non-academic readers: for example, on p. 228, *Giallo Antico* (Numidian Yellow) marble is referred to as of Turkish provenance, while this stone was notoriously quarried at Chemtou, ancient Simitthus, in Tunisia. Should the publisher be planning a paperback and/or digital edition of the book, perhaps these issues could be fixed at that point.

In the introduction (11–21), Cardona sketches out a brief history of archaeological research on Malta, paying attention to the (occasional) mention of architectural elements in previous studies from the seventeenth century to modern days. Chapter 1 (23–45) outlines the function of public and private architecture in the Roman world and is written with a general reader in mind. Overall, it is a useful addition to the book contents, although sometimes one wonders about the actual connection between these themes and the evidence from Malta. For instance, what was the significance of the Late Republican and Augustan construction projects in the city of Rome to the contemporary public buildings of Malta? With regard to private edifices, like in most handbooks of Roman art and architecture, the ‘atrium house’ is used here to describe the canonical type of Roman residence. It might have been good to point out that, while this type was attested regionally in Campania (Pompeii and Herculaneum are our main source of information on domestic architecture), the most common form of elite dwellings across the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean was represented by houses that developed around a central peristyle in place of the atrium.

In chapter 2 (47–85), the focus shifts to building activities on the Maltese Islands from the Phoenician-Punic period to the Roman republican and imperial eras. In addition to outlining the evolution of Malta’s built environment, these pages also serve as a useful historical background to the narrative that follows in the subsequent chapters. Important observations are presented here, such as the strong influence of Punic traditions that influenced the layout of the Maltese buildings; for instance, Egyptian-style gorge (cavetto) cornices are attested through various examples, including peculiar local variations that were applied to the decoration of capitals and pillars. Roman rule on these islands determined the introduction of new architectural styles, although the extant archaeological remains are not always easy to assess and there are gaps that prevent us from acquiring a comprehensive picture. In various cases buildings are only known through epigraphic evidence, such as the Temple of Proserpina that was restored by Chrestion, procurator of Malta and Gozo under Augustus (*CIL X*, 7494), which is believed to have stood on Mtarfa Hill on the spot that is currently occupied by the statue of St Nicholas. Despite the incompleteness of this dataset, Cardona offers a valuable, synthetic account, which is complemented by three tables at the end of the chapter (79–81) listing the location and a brief description of (dated and undated) Roman remains.

Chapter 3 (87–221) is the principal and longest section of the book, where Roman-period buildings and their decoration are examined. Most of the evidence comes from the ancient town of Melite, which lies underneath part of present-day Rabat and Mdina. The site is well-known for its remains of Roman houses, and in particular for the Roman Domus of Rabat that was discovered in 1881. This building has been discussed several times in the literature and was recently re-examined in the light of its mosaic decoration in a BA dissertation by Antonio Caselli at the University of Malta, whose results were summarized in a short article (Caselli 2013). In these pages (89–111), Cardona makes profitable use of all the available data to present an up-to-date account of this building. The house was built towards the end of the second or early first century BC and was in use at least until the late first century AD (around the mid-first century AD, the owner enriched the house decoration with a group of marble statues of the Julio-Claudian dynasty). Only a portion of the house has been unearthed and some aspects of its layout remain unclear; for example, the location of the entrance or the presence of an atrium are still an open question. The main sector is constituted by a square peristyle decorated with an elaborate mosaic floor and surrounded by a Doric colonnade. The author examines the proportions of this architectural order, pointing out the slenderness of the columns that contradicts the instructions prescribed by

Vitruvius in his *De architectura*. One must note that such deviations from the Vitruvian canons occur regularly across the Graeco-Roman world, attesting to the variety of architectural solutions that were adopted in the different local contexts. They also serve to remind us that Vitruvius' work was not meant to be used as an on-site manual by ancient architects, but it was rather conceived as a corpus of knowledge addressed primarily at an audience of patrons from Rome's metropolitan elite.

The features of public architecture on the Maltese Islands are more challenging to study due to the scarcity of finds that can be attributed to specific buildings. Nevertheless, scattered architectural elements provide at least some information on styles and workmanship under imperial rule (122–53). Corinthian capitals of Asiatic style attest to the spread of these decorative forms from Asia Minor – a phenomenon that characterized the whole Mediterranean basin from the latter half of the second century AD onwards. Despite the standardization of these productions, the author calls attention to the occurrence of certain local variations, such as a group of Corinthianizing capitals with an egg motif placed among the acanthus leaves. Elements of entablatures also attest to a more localized production, where the canonical repertoire is supplemented by reworked decorative motifs. Among the known examples of Maltese sacred buildings, the Sanctuary of Ashtart at Tas-Silġ stands out for its continuity of use and for the renovations it underwent through time, from the Neolithic up to the early Medieval period (191–209). Data on this building are available through the reports of the *Missione Archeologica Italiana a Malta* and thanks to the recent publication of the University of Malta's excavations (Bonanno and Vella 2015). Of particular relevance to Cardona's study is the architectural development of the temple around the late second or early first century BC, when its layout was deeply transformed through the addition of Hellenistic-influenced features – in particular a large courtyard in front of the cella, to which fragments of Doric columns and entablatures can be attributed.

Chapter 4 (223–43) looks at building materials and carving techniques. Apart from imported marble, the majority of stone used for constructions in Roman Malta was of local provenance. The Globigerina limestone was preferred for the decorative components of buildings, because of its soft surface that tended to become harder once exposed to air, while Coralline limestone, which is much harder to carve, was used for the structural parts. The author's analysis of architectural elements revealed traces of the tools that were used by the stonemasons in antiquity, such as the hammer, chisel, saw, and drill; furthermore, a relief depicting some of these instruments is carved on one of the walls of St Paul's Catacombs, although no date is provided. Finally, in chapter 5 (245–53) a brief conclusion is offered, which summarizes the main points discussed in the book and is followed by two appendices: a glossary of architectural terms and a table listing the amount of material recorded during the research (381 fragments, 241 of which are provenanced).

What emerges with clarity from these pages is the author's familiarity with the Maltese sites, which allowed him to carry out a thorough study of the extant architectural remains and present them in a way that makes them accessible to a broad audience. This is praiseworthy and deserves a full acknowledgement. One caveat about the discussion, however, is its limited engagement with the broader Mediterranean framework. In particular, readers will notice the absence of a contextualization of these materials in relation to the evidence from Sicily, to which the government of the Maltese Islands was attached in Roman times. One finds a brief mention of Sicilian comparanda when the author describes some Italic-Corinthian capitals from Malta (99–100), but it would have been useful to go beyond this. For instance, the layout of the Roman Domus of Rabat with its Doric peristyle recalls many of the elite residences of Sicily. Recent studies and reassessments of the Sicilian archaeological remains have shown that most of these houses were built in the second and first centuries BC, which would make them contemporary with the Domus of Rabat; a wealth of data comes from the Hellenistic-Roman district at Agrigento (see De Miro 2009 for a general overview), and analogous observations apply to sites such as Solunto, Monte Iato, Tindari, and Palermo (see, for instance: Portale 2006,

67–95; De Vincenzo 2013, 313–59; Wilson 2013, 106–9). While a detailed comparative analysis would have fallen beyond the scope of this book, there should have been at least a reference to this evidence. At the same time, a brief glance at contemporary houses from North Africa, in particular at Utica, might have been beneficial for readers (see Lézine 1956; 1968, 107–32). Further links between Malta and Sicily emerge when one looks at specific elements of decoration. For example, the miniature sofa capital from the Sanctuary at Tas-Silġ (107: arbitrarily named ‘pseudo-Ionic’ here) finds a direct comparison with larger pieces from private and public buildings at Solunto, Monte Iato, Segesta, Syracuse, Akrai, and Lilybaeum (De Vincenzo 2013, 199, figs 102–3, with references). Similarly, the fragmented statue of a satyr in the Telamon pose recovered from the Ramla l-Hamra *villa maritima* on Gozo (183; first mentioned in Ashby 1915, 72, fig. 29) can be compared to similar figures that decorated the stage buildings of Sicilian theatres and other public edifices (De Vincenzo 2013, 174–78, fig. 87; Wilson 2013, 101–2, fig. 4.18, with previous bibliography). One therefore wonders whether the owner of this villa chose deliberately to replicate these ornamental features in a private context to showcase his social role, taste, and cultural connections.

Hopefully some of these missing pieces, as well as other gaps in the Maltese archaeological record, will be addressed in future studies by this author or other scholars (some interesting prospects for further research on Roman Malta are outlined in Cardona 2021). For the time being, despite some critiques raised above, this work on the architecture and architectural ornament of the Maltese Islands offers a dataset that will be of use to anyone working on these topics across the ancient Mediterranean. This is an important step towards a better understanding of Malta’s cultural heritage, and one must be thankful to the author and publisher for making these materials available to the scientific and larger community.

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