

CULT PLACES AND RITUALS IN MALTA

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Religion and cult beliefs in the Maltese islands had been established for millennia from the Neolithic Age. The great number of the megalithic temples all over the country testified of a strong and shared religious feeling up to the Bronze Age. At the beginning of the Iron Age and especially with the arrival of the Phoenicians, the echo of this feeling was still strong, as evidenced by the reuse of the Bronze Age megalithic temples of Tas-Silġ in southern Malta, Ras ir-Raħeb on the north-western coast of Malta and Ras il-Wardija on Gozo. The three sacred areas, notwithstanding their particularities and specific features, seem to share some other common issues, as the connection with the sea and the navigation and the relations to their agricultural hinterland.

Keywords: Phoenician and Punic archaeology; Astarte; Maltese Islands; Phoenician religion; sanctuaries

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Maltese archipelago temple areas reflect, better than other archaeological contexts, the dynamics of interaction of Phoenician culture with the millennia-old local civilization. Three Phoenician shrines in Malta and Gozo, in fact, either stand on Prehistoric temple structures, and integrate parts of them within the Iron Age layout, as in Tas-Silġ and Ras ir-Raħeb, or reuse architectural elements from an earlier temple in the Punic-Roman layout, as at Ras il-Wardija (fig. 1). These three Phoenician sanctuaries will be examined below, highlighting the elements of continuity and diversity between the Bronze Age and Phoenician-Punic phases.

2. TAS-SILĠ. THE PREHISTORIC, PHOENICIAN AND PUNIC SANCTUARY

The Phoenician sacred area of Astarte at Tas-Silġ is located southeast of Malta in a dominant position over the Marsaxlokk bay, the main southern harbor of the island. It is a large complex, built on several terraces of natural bedrock, with an intricate stratigraphy due to his continuity of use and the juxtaposition of structures over three millennia.¹

On the higher *plateau* in the northern part of the site, an apsidal temple with two elliptical internal rooms and a curved façade, which remained the central core of the complex over time, was built in the Eneolithic phase of the Tarxien cemetery (3000-2500 BC).

* Paragraphs 1, 2 are by Giuliana Bonanno, paragraphs 3, 4 are by Federica Spagnoli, paragraph 5 is by Federica Spagnoli and Giuliana Bonanno.

¹ The stratigraphic complexity of the site has been underlined by the *Missione Italiana a Malta* co-directed by Sabatino Moscati and Michelangelo Cagiano de Azevedo from 1963 to 1970. Antonia Ciasca directed the Mission from 1996-2000 together with Maria Pia Rossignani, that carried on the excavations until 2011. The University of Malta also carried out excavations from 1996 to 2005 (Bonanno - Vella eds. 2015). The stratigraphy of the site has been subject of debate for the interpretation of the use of the complex by Phoenicians and indigenous either contemporaneously (Ciasca 1970; 1976-1977; Semeraro 2012, 117) or at different times (Brusasco 1993, 14-18).

During the Bronze Age phase of Borg in-Nadur (2500-600 BC) these structures were occupied and refurbished, with the construction of a rounded cyclopic wall.²

2.1. *Tas-Silġ. Phases, architecture and installations*

Since the end of the 8th to the 5th century BC the upper part of the complex, including the apsidal Prehistoric temple and the surrounding open area with a natural bedrock pavement, was reused by Phoenician colonists. It seems that in this early frequentation no transformations were made on the pre-existent Prehistoric structures. Moreover, the adoption of the curvilinear plan of the Prehistoric temple represents a *unicum* toward the Phoenician sacred architecture. The open area enclosed with a fence, as suggested by regular holes on the ground, hosted the installations used for ritual activities: a rectangular altar with three libation holes in front of the temple entrance, a pierced stone and a little framed shrine preserved only in its foundations³ that could have hosted the goddess *simulacrum*.⁴ The temple facade is framed with two panels defined by pillars ending with an Egyptian cyma, recalling the oriental symbolism of the “non-bearing isolated pillars”.⁵ In this period the sanctuary is also provided with a complex network of channels and drains connected to a cistern.

At the beginning of the 4th century BC the central area underwent several modifications due to an intense building activity. The *temenos* consists of stone wall encircling an area floored with limestone flakes, the little shrine is dismantled and another altar, framed by architraves and engraved with two cavities filled with a foundation deposit, consisting of two bowls and other offerings, is erected in the courtyard.⁶ Water installations such as cisterns and a quadrangular bath were placed in the northern part of the sacred area.

By the 2nd century BC, according to the Hellenistic taste, the courtyard undergoes through further transformations assuming a monumental shape with the construction of a two-aisled porch on the four sides and a new pavement of limestone slabs.

2.2. *Tas-Silġ. Votive objects, cult and rituals*

Since the beginning of the 7th century BC the deity worshipped in the sanctuary is Astarte, as testified by the numerous dedicatory inscriptions carrying her name found in the site. These inscriptions, engraved on different supports, shed some lights on several important aspects of the rituals performed: tableware pottery is the most common support for inscriptions, especially if compared to cooking pots and basins. This suggests the practice of offering food to the goddess rather than the consumption of communitarian sacred meals, also due to their small dimensions. These vessels may be considered not simply votive objects but actual cult instruments.⁷

² For a deepening on the prehistoric structures see: Cazzella - Recchia 2012; Trump 2004.

³ The shrine shape could be reconstructed from a votive limestone *edicola* that represents the Goddess standing and framed by two little pillars ending with the Egyptian cyma, topped by a lintel with the solar disc (Moscati 1973; Bonzano 2016, 170, fig. 7).

⁴ Ciasca 1965, 52; Bonzano 2016, 151.

⁵ Ciasca - Rossignani 2000, 54.

⁶ Ciasca - Rossignani 2000, 55-56; Rossignani 2009, 120-123.

⁷ Amadasi Guzzo a cura di 2011, 38-41; Cavaliere - Piacentini 2016, 354-356.

2.2.1. Inscriptions engraved on pottery, stone and ivory

The majority of the inscribed stone objects and vessels bear the dedication “to Astarte” (“L·ŠTRT”) and in two cases the formula is enriched by the epicletism “NN”, that is to say “Maltese”. This data confirms both the role of the goddess as protectress of the whole island and the interregional (or international?) importance of the Temple.⁸

The inscriptions engraved on tableware and cooking pots were made before firing, suggesting the votive purpose of the vessels since their manufacture and the use of these objects for food offerings to the goddess.

It is very likely that the vessels used in ritual practices were produced within the sacred area, where scribal school must also have been located.

2.2.2. Cult and rituals

When the cult of Astarte at Tas-Silġ was established, it merged with the one of the Mother Goddess worshipped in this place during the Prehistoric Age.⁹

The Levantine Goddess will be later assimilated to Hera/Juno, as it is recalled by Cicero when speaking about Verre’s depredation of the sanctuary.¹⁰

Until the 5th century BC Astarte’s cult shows chthonian features recalling the local religious traditions,¹¹ as it seems by the presence of hypogeum structures accessible through stairs toward a ritual path¹² and the use of the altar for burning sacrifices.¹³ From the end of the 5th century BC the cult seems to open up to Mediterranean influences, losing its chthonic value and acquiring characteristics linked both to sea and navigation and to the water itself, intended as an element of purification, perhaps due to the international importance of the site.¹⁴ In this period, in fact, the hypogeum structures are closed, and the 7th century’s altar was dismantled.

Nevertheless, the assimilation of Astarte to Juno during the Roman period still bears echoes of the cult of the Prehistoric Mother Goddess, as Hera/Juno is the Goddess of childbearing and one of her attributes is the pomegranate, symbol of fertility¹⁵.

⁸ For a deepening on the variety of the inscriptions see: Amadasi Guzzo a cura di 2011.

⁹ Bonanno 2022, 35.

¹⁰ In this occasion Cicero (*Verr.*, II, 5, 184) tells that Juno is worshipped since ancient times in the islands of Malta and Samos. In the temple of Samos, the cult consisted in bathing and purification of the *simulacrum* of the goddess. This practice has been proposed for Malta too (Bonzano 2016, 156).

¹¹ Some scholars exclude a connection between Astarte and the Prehistoric Mother Goddess, claiming that the Maltese Astarte had not fertility characteristics but rather she was protectress of mariners from the very beginning of her cult at this maritime cult site (Bonanno 2007, 109; Sagona 2015, 185, 199). It should be noted though that the complex nature of the goddess Astarte includes on one side chthonian and fertility features linked to the Indo-European Mother Goddesses, while on the other displays astral characteristics related to navigation typical of the near-eastern goddesses such as Ishtar (Spagnoli 2022a, 19-20).

¹² The excavators exclude an interpretation of the hypogeum as an underground cistern (Bonzano - Grassi 2015; Bonzano 2016, 152-153).

¹³ At the time of its discovery the altar still preserved traces of combustion (Ciasca - Rossignani 2000, 54).

¹⁴ A. Ciasca (1999, 23-24) and later other scholars (Pedley - Hughes Clarke - Galea 2002; Bonanno 2005; 2007, 108-109) suggested the non-commercial role of Malta among the Phoenician’s routes in the Mediterranean, considering its scarce mineral resources. Rather, the island would have a role of defensive place and safe refuge for navigators directed to the west and its main temple, Tas Silġ, therefore, was a great colonial sanctuary, a place of asylum, accumulation of public riches, storage of goods and commercial transactions.

¹⁵ Nigro - Spagnoli 2018, 53-54, 64-66.

Moreover, the centrality of food in rituals, emphasized by its preparation, offering and consumption, is a typical feature of a cult linked to the earth, the harvest and the seasons, in a word, to fertility. At Tas-Silġ, such aspect of the cult is underlined since the Prehistoric Period, by the presence of a baetyl in front of the Great Goddess temple entrance. The baetyl represents a masculine deity and his relationship with the Mother Goddess is the expression of the fertility cult.¹⁶

The theme of the death and rebirth of the vegetation is also recalled by the coral offerings found at the site.¹⁷ Coral was used as an amulet to protect from navigation's dangers, but in later mythological traditions it was also associated to the cult of Adonis, God of the resurgence of vegetation.

3. RAS IL-RAĦEB, FROM A NEOLITHIC TO A PUNIC-ROMAN CULT PLACE

The sanctuary of Ras ir-Raħeb, also known as Ras il-Knejjes, is located on a high promontory, 45 m a. s. l. , overlooking the Malta-Gozo channel and the promontory of Ras il-Wardija.¹⁸ The archaeological importance of this sanctuary has been known since at least the late 16th century BC: G. Bosio and M.A. Axiaq, basing on the account of the *Fanum Junonis* by Cicero, which described its location as not far from the city of Melite (*ab eo oppidum non longe*), identified the ruins of Ras ir-Raħeb with those of the famous temple of Juno in Malta. Moreover, the two Semitic toponyms, Ras ir-Raħeb (Headland of the Hermit) and Ras il-Knejjes (Headland of the Churches) may indicate that the site had some religious function also in the Middle Age.¹⁹

Actually, archaeological investigations carried out in last century have shown that this place had a religious purpose since the Neolithic times, and it also remained in use as a cult place in Punic and Roman period.²⁰

3.1. *Ras ir-Raħeb. Phases, plan and architecture*

The sanctuary of Ras ir-Raħeb was surrounded on the three sides by a semi-circular *temenos* 62 m long. The walls, as like as the other structures of the sanctuary, have been preserved only in the foundations, which consist of regularly squared limestone blocks (1.54 × 0.56 m) outlining several rectangular rooms, set around a central square court paved with small white marble cubes. In the NE corner of the sanctuary lies a long, narrow rectangular cistern with a circular mouth (outside diameter 55 cm; inside diameter about 41 cm) carved out of a limestone block (1.30 × 1.00 m), with a recess on one side for rainwater runoff. The rainwater collection and the exploitation of the nearby freshwater spring of Ghajn Bierda provided the water supply for the sacred complex.²¹

The presence of two megalithic blocks included in the sanctuary structures attests that the Punic and Roman sanctuary arose on an earlier cult place. The two megaliths of upper

¹⁶ Cagiano de Azavedo 1968; Vella 1987, 315-321.

¹⁷ Quercia 2008, 201-207.

¹⁸ Cardona 2020, 3.

¹⁹ Buhagiar 1989, 69.

²⁰ Hassam 2020, 105.

²¹ Buhagiar 1989, 70.

coralline stone (3.00 x 2.44 m) are the remains of an earlier prehistoric structure, reused and incorporated into the Punic sanctuary just as at Tas-Silġ.

3.2. *Ras ir-Raħeb. Cult installations and rituals*

Archaeological remains, such as the objects and pottery found in the sanctuary, suggest that the cult was tributed to a male deity: a statuette of Heracles and a fragment of an ivory plaque point to the cult of Melqart-Heracles, also represented by two baetyl found inside one of the rooms around the central court. A reassessment of Strabo's account²² of two temples in Malta dedicated to Heracles allows us to identify Ras ir-Raħeb with one of these two temples.²³

The interpretation of this intriguing site needs to be supported by new archaeological investigations, which, despite the severe soil erosion, could bring new and interesting data to understand the nature and the ancient consideration of this cult place.

4. RAS IL-WARDIJA, A PUNIC-ROMAN CAVE SANCTUARY

On the same coast, but on the Gozitan versant, on a high promontory in a dominant position, arose the sanctuary of Ras il-Wardija, another Punic-Roman cult place, visible from Ras ir-Raħeb and connected to it by a common function. Due to their location, the two shrines were a kind of landmark visible from the sea, useful for sailing routes along the western part of the Maltese archipelago, in a treacherous stretch of windswept coastline with strong sea currents and high cliffs.²⁴ The lighthouse function of the two shrines is also made plausible by the presence, between the two promontories, of the important port of Xlendi, a prominent trading hub in Gozo during the Punic and Roman and later periods. Ras il Wardija and Ras ir-Raħeb were probably included in a signaling and control system that also involved other lighthouses, such as the one on the Ta' Ġurdan Lighthouse hill, visible from Wardija, or the lighthouse of St. George in the south of the island.

4.1. *Ras Il-Wardija. Architecture and landscape*

The general plan of the sanctuary has been clarified by the excavations of the Italian Mission at Malta that operated in the site between 1963 and 1967 (fig. 2). Excavations were resumed by the Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo in 2021²⁵ aiming to clarifying the nature of the cult and the rituals by meaning of a reexamination of the archaeological remains and the analysis of pottery, objects, and architectural elements, today only partially published.²⁶

The sanctuary rests on five terraces sloping down towards the cliff overhanging the sea and includes two main buildings: the cave complex on the upper terraces and the Temple of

²² Strabo, *Geog.* 4.3.13.

²³ Buhagiar 1989, 70-71.

²⁴ Spagnoli 2022b, 21.

²⁵ In 2021 the Sapienza Archaeological Mission at Gozo launched a multi-year research program (Ras il-Wardija Project) thanks to a new agreement with Heritage Malta and the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage. The Project is aimed at the publication of the Italian excavations and at the enhancement of this important, but little-known, Punic-Roman sanctuary. The Project is financed by the 2021 and 2022 funds of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation for Archaeology - MAECI.

²⁶ Spagnoli 2022b, 22-23.

Astarte, a large, square-block building with a monumental threshold on the lower terrace surrounded by a *temenos*. The sanctuary was in use from the 4th century BC until the Imperial Roman period (2nd century BC).

4.1.1. The cave complex and cult installations

The cave complex on the upper terraces consists of a rock-cut cave and the ancillary structures in front and to the sides of the cave entrance. The cave is a rectangular chamber decorated by five framed niches (fig. 3). Leaning against the walls are three wide benches divided in the centre by a 1 m wide corridor, carved into the rock, which continues outwards, where it intersects perpendicularly with another long transversal corridor, running the entire length of the rock wall. Long benches are arranged on either side of the outer corridor. Both inside the chamber and outside on the benches, are numerous circular cavities of different sizes, interpreted as ritual cups, and two altars consisting of a stone slab with two circular hollows. Outside the complex, in front of the cave, there is a cistern for collecting rainwater that supplied the sanctuary, while to the south of the outer corridor, is a pool in which the water collected was intended for a cult use. The pool was accessed by a staircase on the west side.

4.1.2. The Temple of Astarte on the lower terrace

On the lower terrace arose the Temple of Astarte, a rectangular building of stone blocks, with a large entrance aligned to a monumental structure in front of the threshold,²⁷ consisting of two stone slabs with two circular recesses for offerings, surmounted by two squared blocks on the east side, and two more blocks, higher up, now lost²⁸ (fig. 4). The temple is surrounded by an outer wall, interpreted as a sacred precinct or *temenos*, connected to the structure described above, probably a monumental entrance²⁹. In the inner corner of the *temenos* a limestone stone in the shape of a pyramidion was found (RW S-20). All the structures on the first terrace have the same east - west orientation as the cave complex; the dimensions of the threshold suggest a monumental size of the building, which was much larger than the part preserved at today. The temple was built with local stone blocks laying directly on the rock soil, which was covered with a floor of limestone marl mixed with marble fragments, while the walls were covered with plaster.³⁰ The temple was plastered both inside and outside and, in some points, such as the entrance, enhanced with plastic decorations.³¹ The outer altar and the monumental threshold were aligned with another structure inside the temple, originally located in a square recess cut into the pavement, measuring 1 m for a dept of 8 cm. The hollow probably hosted a pedestal or podium that supported the cult image of the deity.³²

On the basis of the preserved remains, we can draw a parallel for the temple of Astarte at Ras il-Wardiya with the temple of Baalat at Byblos depicted on a coin of M. Opellius Macrinus (218 AD), i.e. a rectangular sacred enclosure with a monumental entrance on the

²⁷ Tamassia 1966, 147-150.

²⁸ Tamassia 1967, pl. 72:2; Caprino 1968, 87-88.

²⁹ Azzopardi 2017, 40-42.

³⁰ Tamassia 1966, 151.

³¹ Tamassia 1967, 105-106.

³² Spagnoli 2022b, 24-25.

long side and a podium supporting a baetyl in the centre.³³ The temple of Kypris-Astarte at Koukليا-Palaephaphos³⁴ had the same planimetric and architectural model. The temple of Astarte at Ras il Wardija would therefore be part of a widespread typology for shrines to the goddess in the Levantine area, not unlike the better-known temples above mentioned. The frequent occurrence of slabs with circular recesses similar, albeit smaller in size to those at the sanctuaries of Gigantjia and Tarxien, used at Ras il-Wardija as cultic installations (in the cave complex) or as parts of them (as in the altar in front of the temple) suggests that, as in the case of Ras ir-Raheb, some elements belonging to an older temple were reused at this in Punic and Roman sanctuary.³⁵

4.2. Ras Il-Wardija. Rituals

The baetyls and stelae discovered during the 2021 campaign, suggest that the cult of Astarte officiated at the sanctuary mainly retained its original aniconic feature and preserved, throughout the entire period of use, a Phoenician hallmark. Among the ceramic materials found in the temple were some fragments inscribed with the dedication or the name of Astarte. These findings are a further confirmation of the ownership of the sacred area and set this sanctuary in a Maltese religious context in which the goddess was a predominant figure.³⁶

The large number of tableware points to the ritual of food offerings, perhaps on specific feasts or celebrations, and the presence of a large quantity of storage and cooking pottery suggests that food for ritual meals was prepared in the sanctuary area.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The Phoenician inscription *CIS I*, 132 found in Gozo in 1855, also known as “Melitensia Quinta”,³⁷ mentions three Phoenician shrines, not specifying their location, and two deities, Sadam Baal and Astarte to whom two of these shrines were dedicated. The cult of Astarte in the Maltese archipelago was of such international importance as to merit the mention of the seat of the cult itself (*ʾnn*, “of Malta”).³⁸ The finding of many dedicatory inscriptions to this goddess engraved on the vessels offered within the three sanctuaries we have examined, points us towards a kind of common cult paid to Astarte, the “Lady” of the Phoenician pantheon, which finds a precursor in the Prehistoric religious tradition of the Mother Goddess. In Maltese Phoenician and Punic sanctuaries, according to the Levantine tradition, Astarte is worshipped with her companion, as clearly attested at Ras ir-Raheb, where the male element, although also present at Tas-Silġ and Ras il-Wardija, seems to be prevalent.

Despite their elevated position, dominating and controlling the sea routes, the religious activities performed in these sanctuaries were not exclusively linked to the maritime rituals. Actually, archaeological evidence indicates that the goddess worshipped in the three sanctuaries had mainly a chthonic prerogative related to the fertility rites, the agricultural

³³ Stockton 1974-1975, 7; Dussaud 1927, 119-120, fig. 1-2.

³⁴ According to the reconstruction by Maier and Karageorghis (1984, 97-98, figs. 81-82); Bloch-Smith 2014, 188.

³⁵ The long period of use is one of the characteristics shared by many cave-sanctuaries in the Mediterranean. In this regard see: López-Bertran 2014, 822-823.

³⁶ Spagnoli 2022b, 26.

³⁷ Lanci 1855; Heltzer 1993; Saliba 2002, 12.

³⁸ The inscription is incised on a stone slab found at Tas-Silġ: *lrbt l'šrt ʾnn*, “to the Lady Astarte of Malta” (Garbini 1965, 153-154; Amadasi Guzzo ed. 2011).

world and the underground world - as the *hypogeum* at Tas-Silġ or the cave at Ras il-Wardija indicate - and connects this cult of Astarte to that of the Great Goddess of Maltese Prehistory who had in the chthonic sphere her range of action. As the previous temples of the Neolithic and Bronze Age period, also the three Phoenician sanctuaries can rely on a vast and rich agricultural hinterland, exploited through the terracing of slopes in both Malta and Gozo.

This connection between cult activities and agricultural hinterland is most evident at Tas Silġ and Ras il-Wardija, where some specific features of the ritual, such as the preparation offering of the food within the sanctuary, as well as the considerable quantity of storage vessels found in the temple area, suggest that the exploitation of the resources of the territory was important for the activities of the sanctuary, that probably must also have been in some way a place of goods storage.³⁹

The encounter of the Phoenician culture with the Maltese *milieu*, which took place by the end of the 8th century BC, occurred in continuity with the local religious tradition originating the Prehistoric Age, oriented towards a female cult concerning the sphere of fertility, agricultural cycles and reproduction.⁴⁰ In the wake of this tradition, the Phoenicians decided to build their sanctuaries in the places where the earlier Maltese temples arose, by reusing or incorporating the pre-existing structures, and choose to preserve the deep sense of the original worship by privileging the aspect of the cult of Astarte closest to the prerogatives of the Maltese goddess. This has fostered a peaceful settlement and a fruitful coexistence between the newcomers and the local populations, inheritors and custodians of a millennia-old culture, and laid the basis for the development of an original and distinctive culture that characterized the Maltese archipelago in Phoenician and later times.

ABBREVIATIONS

CIS *Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum. Pars prima: Inscriptiones phoenicias continens*, 1-3, Paris 1881-1962.

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³⁹ As stated by A. Ciasca (1999, 23-24) for Tas-Silġ, a possible place of accumulation of public/collective resources.

⁴⁰ Vella 1987; Bonzano 2016, 148-154.

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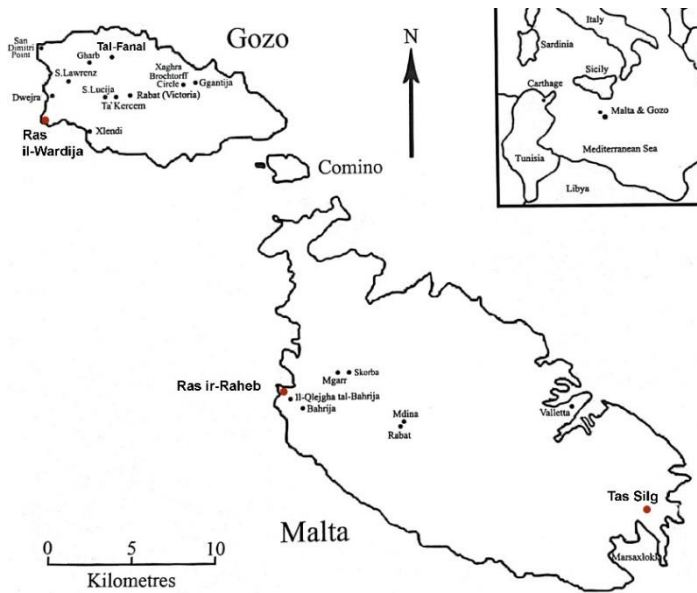


Fig. 1 - Map of the Maltese archipelago illustrating the location of the three sanctuaries (after Azzopardi 2017, fig. 1).

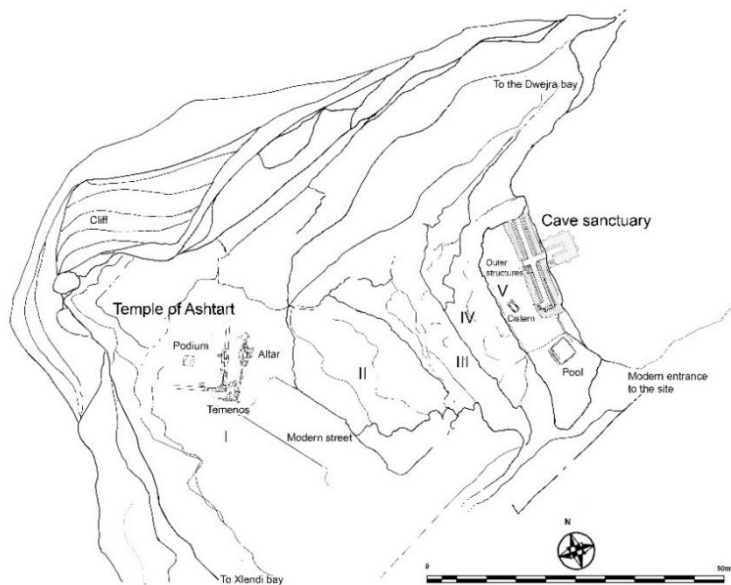


Fig. 2 - General plan of the sanctuary of Ras il-Wardija (© Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo archive).



Fig. 3 - Ras il-Wardija. The cave complex on the upper terrace (after Spagnoli 2022b, fig. 2).



Fig. 4 - The Temple of Astarte and the altar on the lower terrace, from south (© Sapienza Archaeological Mission to Gozo archive).