

## Book Reviews

Andrea Pessina and Nicholas C. Vella, eds. *Luigi Ugolini's Malta Antica I: i templi neolitici di Tarxien. The Tarxien Neolithic Temples* (Valletta: Midsea Books Ltd, 2021, 531pp., 395 figs, hbk, ISBN 978-99932-7-397-4)

Andrea Pessina, Nicholas C. Vella and Anton Bugeja, eds. *Luigi Ugolini's Malta Antica II: i maggiori templi neolitici e l'ipogeo. The Major Neolithic Temples and the Hypogeum* (Valletta: Midsea Books Ltd, 2021, 271pp., 233 figs, hbk, ISBN 978-99932-7-398-1)

Andrea Pessina, Nicholas C. Vella and Anton Bugeja, eds. *Luigi Ugolini's Malta Antica III: templi neolitici minori e monumenti megalitici. Minor Neolithic Temples and Megalithic Monuments* (Valletta: Midsea Books Ltd, 2021, 156pp., 111 figs, hbk, ISBN 978-99932-7-399-8)

Andrea Pessina and Nicolas C. Vella. *Malta and Mediterranean Prehistory: Luigi Maria Ugolini, Politics, and Archaeology between the Two World Wars* (Midsea Books Ltd, 2021, 508pp., 238 figs, hbk, ISBN 978-99932-7-758-3)

This set of four volumes reminds us that, even when we try to tease them apart, archaeology and politics remain stubbornly entangled. But let us imagine, to begin with, that the politics of the past can be set to one side and explore the corpus of Maltese prehistoric antiquities originally compiled in manuscript form by Luigi Ugolini (1895–1936), now reconstructed, edited, and published by Andrea Pessina, Nicholas Vella, and Anton Bugeja. We will, however, need to return to the politics later.

Ugolini's ambitious plan to collate and publish a catalogue of the prehistoric archaeology of Malta, accompanied by an answer to the hotly debated question of the origins of its megalithic monuments and their builders, would probably have been fully achieved were it not for his untimely death in 1936, aged 41. Following a first study trip to Malta in 1924, Ugolini's work of systematizing existing archaeological information culminated in his monograph *Malta: origini della civiltà mediterranea* ('Malta: Origins

of the Mediterranean Civilization') (Ugolini, 1934). In the frontispiece to this, he listed five volumes in a series to be titled *Malta Antica* ('Ancient Malta'). The first these, on the Tarxien temples, although listed 'in press', remained in manuscript form, along with two less complete manuscripts 'in preparation'. These manuscripts, along with other papers and a collection of over 2,500 photographic negatives and prints, had lain largely untouched in the archive of the Pigorini Museum in Rome until Andrea Pessina confirmed their existence to Oliver Gilkes and Nicholas Vella in 2000. All three manuscript volumes have now, nearly ninety years on, been seen through to publication and are reviewed here. Ugolini also intended to publish two more volumes in the series—the fourth on the temples, cemeteries, and materials of the Copper Age in Malta, and the fifth offering conclusions—but insufficient traces of these were found in the museum archive to warrant their reconstruction. It turns out that a second, slightly more

advanced, manuscript version of the first volume, including several corrections marked up by Ugolini and by Piero Barocelli, plus an accompanying set of photographs, existed in the Barocelli archive in Turin (Quercia & Trapani, 2021). Pessina and Vella, however, remained unaware of this until the present volumes were almost in print and therefore decided not to make full use of this complementary source. This is a shame, given the meticulous research undertaken by them on the Rome archive, but understandable 'Given that this discovery was made so late in the day and that the [Turin] version does not alter what we reproduce here in any significant manner' (MA I: xc).

Ugolini's first volume focuses on the Neolithic megalithic 'temples' of Tarxien. His introduction locates the site in terms of its topography and toponymy, its relation to archaeological remains known in the surrounding area, the discovery of the monument in 1913, the series of excavations undertaken there by Themistocles Zammit between 1915 and 1919, and the additional pieces of information resulting from clandestine excavations. Although not explicitly acknowledged, it is evident from the access that Zammit afforded Ugolini to his site, museum collection, notebooks, photographs, and plans, that Ugolini's documentation of Tarxien benefited greatly from the excavator's generosity and his *ferma speranza* ('firm hope') in Ugolini's project (Pessina & Vella, 2021: 212). The rest of the volume is divided into a first part, which deals with the Neolithic monument and materials, and a second part dedicated to the 'Eneolithic' (Copper Age). The monument is introduced with praise for its builders, followed by descriptions of its general state of preservation, destruction across various eras, reconstruction and conservation, and related museum collections. The various

architectural elements of the temple complex are then described and measured systematically, accompanied by plan, section, and reconstruction drawings and by photographs. The materials are divided into statuettes, human and zoomorphic figurines, decorative friezes, building models, ceramic vessels, and fragments with decoration, stone tools, and other objects made of stone, bone, and shell. Based on Zammit's unpublished excavation notebooks (pages of which are reproduced in Pessina and Vella's introduction to this volume), notes are also provided on the excavated archaeological deposits, including the location of certain objects within them. The Neolithic section then ends with a summary of the results of the supplementary excavations undertaken by Thomas Ashby in 1921 beneath the pavements of the temple complex, with particular attention paid to the ceramics. The following Eneolithic part takes the form of an appendix that provides an illustrated catalogue of the artefacts discovered in the (Early Bronze Age) Tarxien Cremation Cemetery and displayed in the Museum of Valletta, together with extracts from Zammit's excavation diary.

Ugolini's second volume deals with four other major Neolithic sites: the above-ground megalithic 'temples' of Ġgantija, Haġar Qim, and Mnajdra, and the underground mortuary site known as Ħal Saflieni Hypogeum. Compared to the first volume, the text of this one is disappointing in terms of originality and completeness and is overshadowed by the rich set of photographs from the Ugolini archive added by the editors. For the Ġgantija, based on a newly commissioned site plan, Ugolini describes, space by space, the architectural plan of the two temples and of their enclosure wall, which then enabled him to contribute to debate over the architectural development of the temple complex. He also summarizes

the small collection of artefacts from the site then displayed in the Valletta Museum. Haġar Qim's architecture and artefacts receive a similar treatment, while the text for Mnajdra is much shorter. It is also truncated in the case of ̄Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, for which no description of the monument was found among the papers in the Ugolini archive, although the range of artefacts found at the site is covered with reference to Zammit et al.'s (1912) published report on them. The editors' introduction puts a brave face on all this, continuing to praise Ugolini's 'attention to detail' (MA II: xliv) and 'masterful execution' (MA II: l), and pointing out that 'Ugolini's account of Ġgantija is the last known survey before the site was excavated and restored in the 1930s, describing material not available for study to John D. Evans in the 1950s.' (MA II: xlvii). They concede, however, that 'The account reproduced here appears to have been put together in a relatively short period of time' and that 'what survives is essentially a draft, an unedited text' (MA II: l).

The third volume, dedicated to minor Neolithic temples and megalithic monuments, is even thinner. Indeed, it is described by the editors as reflecting 'a work very much still in progress' (MA III: xiii). The first part provides written descriptions and illustrations for some significant sites on the island of Malta, such as Mġarr, Borg in-Nadur, and Il-Bahrija, while the rest of the volume comprises photographs from the Ugolini archive of sites less well known at the time. The lack of an original text accompanying the photographs is frustrating and even confusing when, for example, it comes to trying to evaluate the significance of a photograph of a possible *allée couverte* perhaps located at Il-Magħtab (MA III: fig. 66), although the editors' footnote and commentary on this image (MA III: n. 193, xviii) does an

excellent job of attempting to identify and contextualize the stone structure.

Pessina and Vella's introduction to the first (Tarxien) volume is revealing, not so much about Ugolini's method and theory (which are detailed in their companion volume to the Malta Antica series), but about their own editorial choices and actions taken in transforming Ugolini's archived manuscript into this set of three lavishly published volumes through a process of 'painstaking reconstruction' (MA I: inside front cover). They have: imposed structure on the text (based on precedents established in Ugolini's published works); marked up points of missing information in the original manuscript; added footnotes, including cross-references to the companion volumes, National Museum of Archaeology inventory numbers, and bibliographic references to related (and more recent) works on Maltese prehistory; included redrawn plans; selected and incorporated photographs and line drawings from the Ugolini archive to supplement the original text; and added to these annotations, figure captions in Italian, and amplified descriptions in English. Pessina and Vella (MA I: lv) readily admit that 'We cannot say that we have produced in this volume what Ugolini had intended, down to the minutest detail'. However, like ethically minded restorers, they specify clearly what they have done, enabling the reader to identify Ugolini's original text, and to see what has been added. And, in doing so, they enable the reader to begin to question the status and necessity of this reconstructed end-product, which goes so far beyond the original, and in turn to question of value of the original manuscript.

A key question is, what does Ugolini's account, particularly of the Tarxien temples, add to archaeological knowledge and understanding, either by the standards of his day or ours? Pessina and Vella (MA

I: lv) assert that ‘Ugolini’s volume on Tarxien would have been a masterpiece of 1930s scholarship—the fruit of much hard work’. My first impression was much less positive. However, I decided to put this to the test by examining and comparing in detail Ugolini’s treatment of a category of Maltese artefact I know well: axe-amulets/-pendants (Skeates, 2002; Burkette & Skeates, 2022). Ugolini (MA I: 273–274) documents their total number, shapes, dimensions, smoothed surfaces, perforations, fractures and state of preservation, rock types, and colours, including with reference to a photograph of a selection of them. More interpretatively, he also recognizes that their stones were imported from outside the Maltese archipelago and suggests that they could be regarded not as work tools but as votive axes. He also goes one step further in aesthetic response to the colour and completeness of two examples. In comparison, Themistocles Zammit’s previously published treatment of these was minimal (Zammit 1915–16: 143, pl. XVI fig. 3 & pl. XVII fig. 2; 1920: 194, fig. 17), as was his field notebook entry reproduced by Pessina and Vella (MA I: fig. 0.23d) which comprises just a simple sketch accompanied by the brief note, ‘one jadeite pendant, greenish.’ John Evans’s (1971: 146, pl. 51.12) later publication of the same group of artefacts was, however, even more detailed, providing, for example, the widths as well as the lengths of each artefact, and finds contexts for some of them. So, my test confirms that Ugolini’s Tarxien manuscript would, if published at the time it was written, have offered valuable new information on the archaeology of the Tarxien temples, and that my first impression was biased by familiarity with Evans’s survey. A second benefit of Ugolini’s manuscript would have been, and remains, the fact that it makes accessible to readers in the Italian language archaeological details of the Tarxien temples,

whose documentation was previously dominated by the English language.

There is also a question of style: how Ugolini (and his editors) chose to use words and images. Ugolini’s text is dominated by description of the archaeological remains found at Tarxien, but he does provide some engagingly written short glosses. These extend from an apology for his ‘*alquanto prolissa, monotona e qualche volta [...] noiosa*’ (‘somewhat verbose, monotonous, and sometimes [...] boring’) description of the monument to his poetic praise for the achievements of the monument builders as demonstrating ‘*la potenza creatrice dell’umanità*’ (‘the creative potential of humanity’) (MA I: 12). Ugolini was also not afraid to offer appropriate scholarly criticism of the quality and impact of archaeological excavations previously undertaken at the sites he reported on, including Zammit’s work at Tarxien (MA I: xl, 307) and Margaret Murray’s work at Borg in-Nadur (MA III: 12, 14). But it is the high quality of Ugolini’s photographs that stands out, both technically and aesthetically. Thanks to the painstaking research undertaken by Pessina and Vella, these add significant value to the three volumes, especially as records of past, historical, and present ‘ways of seeing’ Maltese antiquities. However, by rendering the (re)constructed Malta Antica series so visually enchanting, Pessina and Vella almost blind us to Ugolini’s politics and to their own.

The fact is, Ugolini was a Fascist Italian archaeologist. After having been heroically wounded, decorated, and discharged in the First World War, he developed his interest in archaeology and ancient art history. He studied first at the University of Bologna, then at the Regia Scuola Archeologica in both Rome and Athens, expanding his knowledge through study-trips abroad and participation in archaeological fieldwork projects. His influential

mentors and patrons included the Etruscologist Pericle Ducati and archaeologist Giulio Giglioli, who actively contributed to the development of Italian archaeology in the service of the state and Fascist ideology. By 1923, Ugolini had joined the Fascist Party, partly out of admiration for its leader Benito Mussolini but also out of personal ambition. All this was sufficient for him to be appointed in 1924 as the Director of the Italian Archaeological Mission to Albania, which was the object of Italian political designs in competition with the French and, therefore, sponsored by the Italian foreign ministry. Having used Albanian archaeological remains to forge and publicize the idea of a long and uninterrupted trans-Adriatic connectivity between the peoples of Albania and Italy, Ugolini then secured a personal directive from Mussolini appointing him as an Inspector of Antiquities, but only limited resources to pursue his interest in Malta. Like the official Italian archaeological missions in Albania and other countries around the Mediterranean, Ugolini bound his Maltese research project to the geopolitical interests of the Italian State, which was investing in promoting cultural and political connections between Malta and Italy, arguably to fuel the anti-British/pro-Italian Maltese nationalist movement and Italian irridentism in Malta. As part of this process, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published and promoted Ugolini's (1934) *Origini* volume, after the final proofs were approved by Mussolini himself. This monograph fed archaeology to Fascist ideology as well as to Maltese *italianità*, by arguing that the Neolithic 'Maltese civilization' was not only the most ancient Mediterranean (and hence European) civilization (predating those of the Aegean, and with nothing to do with colonising Phoenicians or Aryans), but also that, as a precursor to Imperial Rome,

its pioneering Mediterranean race diffused beneficial cultural influences especially to the nearby Italian peninsula and also to central and northern Europe and to the Aegean. Although it received dutiful applause in Fascist Italy, and some praise for the photography, wider scholarly reception of *Origini* was divided, particularly regarding its bold new chronology and theory of 'Ex medio lux', while its political bias afforded Ugolini long-lasting notoriety.

In *Malta and Mediterranean Prehistory: Luigi Maria Ugolini, Politics, and Archaeology between the Two World Wars*, the last book covered by this review, Pessina and Vella (and their contributors) provide a complete summation of their in-depth research into the archaeological work of Ugolini in and around Malta and their re-evaluation of his place in the wider socio-political history of Maltese and Mediterranean archaeology. In contrast to the Ugolini manuscript, it is written entirely in English. Part I deals with the Ugolini archive of papers and photographs held by the Pigorini Museum in Rome. Part II introduces Ugolini's formative education, experiences, relationships, and ambitions. Part III reconsiders Ugolini's Italian Archaeological Mission in Albania. Part IV then focusses on Malta. It sets the scene of Maltese antiquarianism and archaeology prior to Ugolini's first visit in 1924, and the politics of the past at a time of growing Maltese resistance to British colonial rule. It details the genesis and nature of Ugolini's research there, and re-evaluates the ideas presented in his *Origini*. It also considers the extent to which Ugolini might have acted as an Italian government agent in Malta. Part V takes a wider, Mediterranean scale, looks at the setting and reception of Ugolini's ideas on Maltese prehistory and megalithism. Part VI then concludes by re-evaluating the legacy of Ugolini's project



on Malta's prehistory. This is followed by a valuable appendix of short biographies of forty-five key protagonists. An outstanding dimension of this volume (like the series it accompanies) is that, as the authors note,

It is richly illustrated in an effort to bring to the fore the nature of the evidence that was recovered in different archives and, through photographs of key personalities, to lend the book the personal/ethnographic touch that provides much of the evocative social context of the archaeological undertaking we have searched for' (2021: 7).

This is matched by Pessina and Vella's research into Ugolini's use of photography as a form of archaeological documentation. Interestingly, Pessina and Vella (2021: 7) suggest that Ugolini may have been obliged to use photography, due to a decree published by the Italian State in 1923 which made photographs mandatory when compiling catalogues of cultural objects, although they also persuasively argue that Ugolini embraced and made ground-breaking use of this technology in archaeology, enthused by Fascism's drive for modernity in which cinematography and photography played an important role. They might also have considered the use of photography by Ugolini as a strategic tool to appropriate Maltese heritage, comparable to earlier British cartography in the Mediterranean and to contemporary colonial Italian photography in Ethiopia (Mengiste, 2019). In sum, this volume represents the most rigorously researched, in-depth, well-presented, and interesting case study in the history of archaeology that one might wish for. It is, however, incomplete, not so much in terms of missing minutiae inevitably still to be rediscovered in other archival sources, nor the missed opportunity to engage more deeply with the gender dimensions of Ugolini's life and times, nor the limited

comparative analysis of the prior and well received work of synthesis undertaken in Malta by the German scholar Albert Mayr (1901), but regarding reflexivity.

Pessina and Vella (2021: 2–3) accept and work from the premise that 'archaeology is always political' and 'cannot be seen to exist apart from its creation in a social context' (emphasis in the original). But they appear to forget this lesson when it comes to reflecting critically on their own practice as historians of archaeology. Pessina and Vella have been working on Ugolini's work in Malta for over two decades, stimulated by and collaborating with other scholars, such as Oliver Gilkes, who have done the same for Ugolini's earlier Italian Archaeological Mission in Albania (e.g., Gilkes, 2003). I wonder if they have grown too fond of Ugolini in the process. They appear to accept that their work contributes to a 'rehabilitation of the figure of Luigi Ugolini' (Pessina and Vella 2021: 4), but go on to argue that Ugolini's 'competence cannot be negated *a priori* just because he adhered to the Fascist party' (2021: 5), and to question 'If indeed he was a Fascist', although they have to 'conclude that he was indeed very close to the Regime' (2021: 332). This leads me to ask, perhaps too bluntly for Pessina and Vella's sensibilities, what are their own politics and identities? Or, to put this question another way, to what extent do they embrace the ambitions of the late Director of the (national) Museo della Civiltà in Rome, Filippo Gambari, stated in the Foreword to their volume, to see their work

*'costruire l'occasione per un ulteriore potenziamento e rilancio delle attività di ricerca e promozione culturale tra l'archeologia italiana e quella maltese, rilevantisima per l'analisi delle più antiche relazioni mediterrane'* ('to build the opportunity for further strengthening and relaunching of research and cultural promotion activities between Italian

and Maltese archeology, very relevant for the analysis of the most ancient Mediterranean relationships') (2021: xviii).

This echoing of sentiments that Ugolini might himself have expressed suggest, at least to my eyes (as a politicized interpretative archaeologist specialising in Central Mediterranean prehistory and as a British national married into an Italian family), that the old geopolitical game of archaeology is still being played.

We should not completely disavow Ugolini and write off his rich corpus of work because he was a Fascist, and we should be grateful to Pessina and Vella for superbly bringing them back to our attention, but we should also not uncritically accept the rehabilitation of Ugolini as a young war hero turned ambitious Mediterranean archaeologist: an 'Italian Lawrence of Arabia in Malta' (2021: 308). Without wishing to deny the increasingly authoritarian British colonial government of Malta during the early twentieth century, we should not forget that Ugolini subscribed to, benefitted from, and was ultimately complicit in a totalitarian, dictatorial, belligerent, racist, male-chauvinist regime. At a time now when the Italian government has recently undergone a seismic shift with the appointment of another far-right, populist, and nationalist Prime Minister, the four volumes reviewed here should remind us that archaeologists and historians still face serious, consequential choices in reconstructing and revising, forgiving, and forgetting.

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