



McDONALD INSTITUTE MONOGRAPHS

Temple landscapes

Fragility, change and resilience of Holocene environments in the Maltese Islands

By Charles French, Chris O. Hunt, Reuben Grima,
Rowan McLaughlin, Simon Stoddart & Caroline Malone



Volume 1 of Fragility and Sustainability – Studies on Early Malta,
the ERC-funded *FRAGSUS Project*

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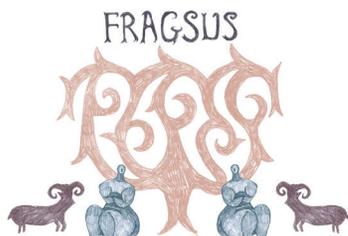
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On the cover: *View towards Nadur lighthouse and Ghajnsielem church with the Gozo Channel to Malta beyond, from In-Nuffara (Caroline Malone).*

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CONTENTS

Contributors		xi
Figures		xiii
Tables		xvi
Preface and dedication		xix
Acknowledgements		xxi
Foreword		xxiii
<i>Introduction</i>	CAROLINE MALONE, SIMON STODDART, CHRIS O. HUNT, CHARLES FRENCH, ROWAN McLAUGHLIN & REUBEN GRIMA	1
0.1. Introduction		1
0.2. Background to <i>FRAGSUS</i> as an archaeological project		3
0.3. Environmental research in Malta and the Mediterranean		5
0.4. The development of the <i>FRAGSUS Project</i> and its questions		6
0.5. Archaeological concerns in Maltese prehistory and the <i>FRAGSUS Project</i>		8
0.6. The research programme: the sites and their selection		9
0.7. Investigating the palaeoenvironmental context		10
0.8. Archaeological investigations		11
Part I	The interaction between the natural and cultural landscape – insights into the fifth–second millennia BC	17
<i>Chapter 1</i>	The geology, soils and present-day environment of Gozo and Malta PETROS CHATZIMPALOGLOU, PATRICK J. SCHEMBRI, CHARLES FRENCH, ALASTAIR RUFFELL & SIMON STODDART	19
1.1. Previous work		19
1.2. Geography		19
1.3. Geology		21
1.4. Stratigraphy of the Maltese Islands		23
1.4.1. Lower Coralline Limestone Formation		23
1.4.2. Globigerina Limestone Formation		23
1.4.3. Chert outcrops		25
1.4.4. Blue Clay Formation		26
1.4.5. Greensand Formation		28
1.4.6. Upper Coralline Limestone Formation		28
1.4.7. Quaternary deposits		29
1.5. Structural and tectonic geology of the Maltese Islands		29
1.6. Geomorphology		29
1.7. Soils and landscape		31
1.8. Climate and vegetation		32
<i>Chapter 2</i>	Chronology and stratigraphy of the valley systems CHRIS O. HUNT, MICHELLE FARRELL, KATRIN FENECH, CHARLES FRENCH, ROWAN McLAUGHLIN, MAARTEN BLAAUW, JEREMY BENNETT, RORY P. FLOOD, SEAN D. F. PYNE-O'DONNELL, PAULA J. REIMER, ALASTAIR RUFFELL, ALAN J. CRESSWELL, TIMOTHY C. KINNAIRD, DAVID SANDERSON, SEAN TAYLOR, CAROLINE MALONE, SIMON STODDART & NICHOLAS C. VELLA	35
2.1. Methods for dating environmental and climate change in the Maltese Islands		35
2.1.1. Data sources for chronology building		35
2.1.2. Pottery finds		41

2.2. Basin infill ground penetrating radar surveys	41
ALASTAIR RUFFELL, CHRIS O. HUNT, JEREMY BENNETT, RORY P. FLOOD, SIMON STODDART & CAROLINE MALONE	
2.2.1. <i>Rationale</i>	41
2.2.2. <i>Geophysics for basin fill identification</i>	41
2.2.3. <i>Valley locations</i>	43
2.3. The sediment cores	43
CHRIS O. HUNT, MICHELLE FARRELL, RORY P. FLOOD, KATRIN FENECH, ROWAN McLAUGHLIN, NICHOLAS C. VELLA, SEAN TAYLOR & CHARLES FRENCH	
2.3.1. <i>Aims and methods</i>	43
2.3.2. <i>The core descriptions</i>	49
2.3.3. <i>Magnetic susceptibility and XRF analyses of the cores</i>	59
2.4. Age-depth models	64
MAARTEN BLAUW & ROWAN McLAUGHLIN	
2.4.1. <i>Accumulation rates</i>	64
2.5. A local marine reservoir offset for Malta	65
PAULA J. REIMER	
2.6. Major soil erosion phases	65
RORY P. FLOOD, ROWAN McLAUGHLIN & MICHELLE FARRELL	
2.6.1. <i>Introduction</i>	65
2.6.2. <i>Methods</i>	66
2.6.3. <i>Results</i>	67
2.6.4. <i>Discussion</i>	68
2.6.5. <i>Conclusions</i>	71
Chapter 3 The Holocene vegetation history of the Maltese Islands	73
MICHELLE FARRELL, CHRIS O. HUNT & LISA COYLE McCLUNG	
3.1. Introduction	73
CHRIS O. HUNT	
3.2. Palynological methods	74
LISA COYLE-McCLUNG, MICHELLE FARRELL & CHRIS O. HUNT	
3.3. Taxonomy and ecological classification	75
CHRIS O. HUNT	
3.4. Taphonomy	75
CHRIS O. HUNT & MICHELLE FARRELL	
3.5. The pollen results	87
MICHELLE FARRELL, LISA COYLE-McCLUNG & CHRIS O. HUNT	
3.5.1. <i>The Salina cores</i>	87
3.5.2. <i>Wied Żembaq</i>	87
3.5.3. <i>Xemxija</i>	87
3.5.4. <i>In-Nuffara</i>	87
3.5.5. <i>Santa Verna</i>	95
3.5.6. <i>Ġgantija</i>	105
3.6. Synthesis	107
3.6.1. <i>Pre-agricultural landscapes (pre-5900 cal. BC)</i>	107
3.6.2. <i>First agricultural colonization (5900–5400 cal. BC)</i>	108
3.6.3. <i>Early Neolithic (5400–3900 cal. BC)</i>	109
3.6.4. <i>The later Neolithic Temple period (3900–2350 cal. BC)</i>	110
3.6.5. <i>The late Neolithic–Early Bronze Age transition (2350–2000 cal. BC)</i>	111
3.6.6. <i>The Bronze Age (2000–1000 cal. BC)</i>	112
3.6.7. <i>Late Bronze Age, Punic and Classical periods (c. 1000 cal. BC to AD 1000)</i>	112
3.6.8. <i>Medieval to modern (post-AD 1000)</i>	113
3.7. Conclusions	113

<i>Chapter 4</i>	Molluscan remains from the valley cores	115
	KATRIN FENECH, CHRIS O. HUNT, NICHOLAS C. VELLA & PATRICK J. SCHEMBRI	
	4.1. Introduction	115
	4.2. Material	117
	4.3. Methods	117
	4.4. Radiocarbon dates and Bayesian age-depth models	117
	4.5. Results	117
	4.5.1. Marsaxlokk (MX1)	127
	4.5.2. Wied Żembaq (WŻ)	127
	4.5.3. Mġarr ix-Xini (MĠX)	128
	4.5.4. Marsa 2	128
	4.5.5. Salina Deep Core	133
	4.5.6. Xemxija 1 and 2	152
	4.6. Interpretative discussion	153
	4.6.1. Erosion – evidence of major events from the cores	153
	4.7. Environmental reconstruction based on non-marine molluscs	155
	4.7.1. Early Holocene (c. 8000–6000 cal. BC)	155
	4.7.2. Mid-Holocene (c. 6000–3900 cal. BC)	155
	4.7.3. Temple Period (c. 3900–2400 cal. BC)	155
	4.7.4. Early to later Bronze Age (2400–c. 750 cal. BC)	155
	4.7.5. Latest Bronze Age/early Phoenician period to Late Roman/Byzantine period (c. 750 cal. BC–cal. AD 650)	156
	4.8. Concluding remarks	156
	4.9. Notes on selected species	157
	4.9.1. Extinct species	157
	4.9.2. Species with no previous fossil record	158
	4.9.3. Other indicator species	158
<i>Chapter 5</i>	The geoarchaeology of past landscape sequences on Gozo and Malta	161
	CHARLES FRENCH & SEAN TAYLOR	
	5.1. Introduction	161
	5.2. Methodology and sample locations	164
	5.3. Results	165
	5.3.1. Santa Verna and its environs	165
	5.3.2. Ġgantija temple and its environs	174
	5.3.3. Skorba and its immediate environs	183
	5.3.4. Taċ-Ċawla settlement site	188
	5.3.5. Xaġhra town	190
	5.3.6. Ta' Marżiena	192
	5.3.7. In-Nuffara	192
	5.3.8. The Ramla valley	193
	5.3.9. The Marsalforn valley	195
	5.3.10. Micromorphological analyses of possible soil materials in the Xemxija 1, Wied Żembaq 1, Marsaxlokk and Salina Deep (SDC) cores	196
	5.4. The Holocene landscapes of Gozo and Malta	213
	5.5. A model of landscape development	217
	5.6. Conclusions	221
<i>Chapter 6</i>	Cultural landscapes in the changing environments from 6000 to 2000 BC	223
	REUBEN GRIMA, SIMON STODDART, CHRIS O. HUNT, CHARLES FRENCH, ROWAN McLAUGHLIN & CAROLINE MALONE	
	6.1. Introduction	223
	6.2. A short history of survey of a fragmented island landscape	223
	6.3. Fragmented landscapes	225

	6.4. The Neolithic appropriation of the landscape	227
	6.5. A world in flux (5800–4800 cal. BC)	227
	6.6. The fifth millennium BC hiatus (4980/4690 to 4150/3640 cal. BC)	228
	6.7. Reappropriating the landscape: the ‘Temple Culture’	230
	6.8. Transition and decline	236
	6.9. Conclusion	237
Part II	The interaction between the natural and cultural landscape – insights from the second millennium BC to the present: continuing the story	239
<i>Chapter 7</i>	Cultural landscapes from 2000 BC onwards	241
	SIMON STODDART, ANTHONY PACE, NATHANIEL CUTAJAR, NICHOLAS C. VELLA, ROWAN McLAUGHLIN, CAROLINE MALONE, JOHN MENEELY & DAVID TRUMPT	
	7.1. An historiographical introduction to the Neolithic–Bronze Age transition into the Middle Bronze Age	241
	7.2. Bronze Age settlements in the landscape	243
	7.3. The Bronze Age Phoenician transition and the Phoenician/Punic landscape	246
	7.4. Entering the Roman world	250
	7.5. Arab	250
	7.6. Medieval	251
	7.7. The Knights and the entry into the modern period	251
<i>Chapter 8</i>	The intensification of the agricultural landscape of the Maltese Archipelago	253
	JEREMY BENNETT	
	8.1. Introduction	253
	8.2. The <i>Annales</i> School and the Anthropocene	254
	8.3. The Maltese Archipelago and the <i>longue durée</i> of the Anthropocene	255
	8.4. Intensification	257
	8.5. Population	258
	8.5.1. <i>Sub-carrying capacity periods</i>	258
	8.5.2. <i>Post-carrying capacity periods</i>	260
	8.6. The agrarian archipelago	262
	8.6.1. <i>The agricultural substrate</i>	262
	8.6.2. <i>The development of agricultural technology</i>	262
	8.7. Discussion: balancing fragility and sustainability	264
<i>Chapter 9</i>	Locating potential pastoral foraging routes in Malta through the use of a Geographic Information System	267
	GIANMARCO ALBERTI, REUBEN GRIMA & NICHOLAS C. VELLA	
	9.1. Introduction	267
	9.2. Methods	267
	9.2.1. <i>Data sources</i>	267
	9.2.2. <i>Foraging routes and least-cost paths calculation</i>	268
	9.3. Results	271
	9.3.1. <i>Garrigue to garrigue least-cost paths</i>	271
	9.3.2. <i>Stables to garrigues least-cost paths</i>	273
	9.4. Discussion	276
	9.4. Conclusions	283
<i>Chapter 10</i>	Settlement evolution in Malta from the Late Middle Ages to the early twentieth century and its impact on domestic space	285
	GEORGE A. SAID-ZAMMIT	
	10.1. The Medieval Period (AD 870–1530)	285
	10.1.1. <i>Medieval houses</i>	288

10.1.2. <i>Giren and hovels</i>	289
10.1.3. <i>Cave-dwellings</i>	292
10.1.4. <i>Architectural development</i>	292
10.2. The Knights' Period (AD 1530–1798)	293
10.2.1. <i>The phase AD 1530–1565</i>	293
10.2.2. <i>The phase AD 1565–1798</i>	293
10.2.3. <i>Early modern houses</i>	294
10.2.4. <i>Lower class dwellings</i>	297
10.2.5. <i>Cave-dwellings and hovels</i>	298
10.2.6. <i>The houses: a reflection of social and economic change</i>	298
10.3. The British Period (AD 1800–1900)	298
10.3.1. <i>The houses of the British Period</i>	299
10.3.2. <i>The effect of the Victorian Age</i>	300
10.3.3. <i>Urban lower class dwellings</i>	301
10.3.4. <i>Peasant houses, cave-dwellings and hovels</i>	301
10.4. Conclusions	302
Chapter 11 Conclusions	303
CHARLES FRENCH, CHRIS O. HUNT, MICHELLE FARRELL, KATRIN FENECH, ROWAN McLAUGHLIN, REUBEN GRIMA, NICHOLAS C. VELLA, PATRICK J. SCHEMBRI, SIMON STODDART & CAROLINE MALONE	
11.1. The palynological record	303
CHRIS O. HUNT & MICHELLE FARRELL	
11.1.1. <i>Climate</i>	303
11.1.2. <i>Farming and anthropogenic impacts on vegetation</i>	307
11.2. The molluscan record	308
KATRIN FENECH, CHRIS O. HUNT, NICHOLAS C. VELLA & PATRICK J. SCHEMBRI	
11.3. The soil/sediment record	310
CHARLES FRENCH	
11.4. Discontinuities in Maltese prehistory and the influence of climate	313
CHRIS O. HUNT	
11.5. Environmental metastability and the <i>longue durée</i>	314
CHRIS O. HUNT	
11.6. Implications for the human story of the Maltese Islands	316
CHARLES FRENCH, CHRIS O. HUNT, CAROLINE MALONE, KATRIN FENECH, MICHELLE FARRELL, ROWAN McLAUGHLIN, REUBEN GRIMA, PATRICK J. SCHEMBRI & SIMON STODDART	
References	325
Appendix 1	
How ground penetrating radar (GPR) works	351
ALASTAIR RUFFELL	
Appendix 2	
Luminescence analysis and dating of sediments from archaeological sites and valley fill sequences	353
ALAN J. CRESSWELL, DAVID C.W. SANDERSON, TIMOTHY C. KINNAIRD & CHARLES FRENCH	
A2.1. Summary	353
A2.2. Introduction	354
A2.3. Methods	355
A2.3.1. <i>Sampling and field screening measurements</i>	355
A2.3.2. <i>Laboratory calibrated screening measurements</i>	355
A2.4. Quartz OSL SAR measurements	356
A2.4.1. <i>Sample preparation</i>	356
A2.4.2. <i>Measurements and determinations</i>	356

A2.5. Results	357
A2.5.1. <i>Sampling and preliminary luminescence stratigraphies</i>	357
A2.5.2. <i>Gozo</i>	357
A2.5.3. <i>Skorba</i>	363
A2.5.4. <i>Tal-Istabal, Qormi</i>	363
A2.6. Laboratory calibrated screening measurements	363
A2.6.1. <i>Dose rates</i>	367
A2.6.2. <i>Quartz single aliquot equivalent dose determinations</i>	367
A2.6.3. <i>Age determinations</i>	371
A2.7. Discussion	372
A2.7.1. <i>Ġgantija Temple (SUTL2914 and 2915)</i>	372
A2.7.2. <i>Ramla and Marsalforn Valleys (SUTL2917–2923)</i>	373
A2.7.3. <i>Skorba Neolithic site (SUTL2925–2927)s</i>	373
A2.7.4. <i>Tal-Istabal, Qormi (SUTL2930)</i>	376
A2.7. Conclusions	376
<i>Appendix 2 – Supplements A–D</i>	379
<i>Appendix 3</i> Deep core borehole logs	401
CHRIS O. HUNT, KATRIN FENECH, MICHELLE FARRELL & ROWAN McLAUGHLIN	
<i>Appendix 4</i> Granulometry of the deep cores	421 (online edition only)
KATRIN FENECH	
<i>Appendix 5</i> The molluscan counts for the deep cores	441 (online edition only)
KATRIN FENECH	
<i>Appendix 6</i> The borehole and test excavation profile log descriptions	535
CHARLES FRENCH & SEAN TAYLOR	
<i>Appendix 7</i> The detailed soil micromorphological descriptions from the buried soils and Ramla and Marsalforn valleys	549
CHARLES FRENCH	
A7.1. Santa Verna	549
A7.2. Ġgantija Test Pit 1	551
A7.3. Ġgantija WC Trench 1	552
A7.4. Ġgantija olive grove and environs	553
A7.5. Skorba	553
A7.6. Xagħra town	554
A7.7. Taċ-Ċawla	555
A7.8. In-Nuffara	555
A7.9. Marsalforn Valley Profile 626	556
A7.10. Ramla Valley Profile 627	556
A7.11. Dwerja	556
<i>Appendix 8</i> The micromorphological descriptions for the Malta deep cores of Xemxija 1, Wied Żembaq 1, Marsaxlokk and the base of the Salina Deep Core (21B)	557
CHARLES FRENCH & SEAN TAYLOR	
<i>Appendix 9</i> The charcoal data	563
NATHAN WRIGHT	
Index	565

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Figures

0.1	<i>Location map of the Maltese Islands in the southern Mediterranean Sea.</i>	2
0.2	<i>Location of the main Neolithic archaeological and deep coring sites investigated on Malta and Gozo.</i>	11
0.3	<i>Some views of previous excavations on Malta and Gozo.</i>	12–13
0.4	<i>Some views of recent excavations.</i>	14
1.1	<i>The location of the Maltese Islands in the southern Mediterranean Sea with respect to Sicily and North Africa.</i>	20
1.2	<i>Stratigraphic column of the geological formations reported for the Maltese Islands.</i>	22
1.3	<i>Geological map of the Maltese Islands.</i>	22
1.4	<i>Typical coastal outcrops of Lower Coralline Limestone, forming sheer cliffs.</i>	23
1.5	<i>Characteristic geomorphological features developed on the Lower Coralline Limestone in western Gozo (Dwerja Point).</i>	24
1.6	<i>The Middle Globigerina Limestone at the Xwejni coastline.</i>	24
1.7	<i>An overview of the area investigated in western Malta.</i>	25
1.8	<i>The end of the major fault system of Malta (Victorian Lines) at Fomm Ir-Rih.</i>	26
1.9	<i>An overview of the western part of Gozo where the chert outcrops are located.</i>	27
1.10	<i>Chert outcrops: a) and c) bedded chert, and b) and d) nodular chert.</i>	27
1.11	<i>Four characteristic exposures of the Blue Clay formation on Gozo and Malta.</i>	28
1.12	<i>Map of the fault systems, arranged often as northwest–southeast oriented graben, and strike-slip structures.</i>	30
2.1	<i>Summary of new radiocarbon dating of Neolithic and Bronze Age sites on Gozo and Malta.</i>	36
2.2	<i>Summed radiocarbon ages for the main sediment cores.</i>	36
2.3	<i>The location of the Birzebbuga Ghar Dalam and Borġ in-Nadur basins and their GNSS-located GPR lines.</i>	42
2.4	<i>The core locations in Malta and Gozo.</i>	44
2.5	<i>Radiocarbon activity in settlement cores.</i>	48
2.6	<i>The Xemxija 2 core by depth.</i>	51
2.7	<i>The Wied Żembaq 1 and 2 cores by depth.</i>	52
2.8	<i>The Mġarr ix-Xini core by depth.</i>	54
2.9	<i>The Marsaxlokk 1 core and part of 2 by depth.</i>	55
2.10	<i>The resistivity and magnetic susceptibility graphs for Xemxija 1 core.</i>	60
2.11	<i>The resistivity and magnetic susceptibility graphs for Xemxija 2 core.</i>	60
2.12	<i>The multi-element data plots for Xemxija 1 core.</i>	61
2.13	<i>The multi-element data plots for Wied Żembaq 1 core.</i>	62
2.14	<i>The multi-element data plots for Marsaxlokk 1 core.</i>	63
2.15	<i>RUSLE models of soil erosion for the Maltese Islands in September and March.</i>	69
2.16	<i>R and C factors and their product.</i>	70
3.1	<i>Valley catchments and core locations in the Mistra area of Malta.</i>	79
3.2	<i>The modern pollen spectra.</i>	81
3.3	<i>Pollen zonation for the Salina Deep Core.</i>	82–3
3.4	<i>Pollen zonation for the Salina 4 core.</i>	88–9
3.5	<i>Pollen zonation for the Wied Żembaq 1 core.</i>	92–3
3.6	<i>Pollen zonation for the Xemxija 1 core.</i>	96–7
3.7	<i>Pollen zonation for the pit fills at In-Nuffara.</i>	101
3.8	<i>Pollen and palynofacies from the buried soils below the temple at Santa Verna.</i>	102
3.9	<i>Pollen and palynofacies from Test Pit 1 on the southwestern edge of the Ġgantija platform.</i>	104
3.10	<i>Photomicrographs (x800) of key components of the palynofacies at Santa Verna and Ġgantija.</i>	106
4.1	<i>Marsaxlokk 1 molluscan histogram.</i>	120
4.2	<i>Wied Żembaq 1 molluscan histogram.</i>	122
4.3	<i>Mġarr ix-Xini molluscan histogram.</i>	129
4.4	<i>Marsa 2 molluscan histogram.</i>	134
4.5	<i>Salina Deep Core molluscan histogram.</i>	138
4.6	<i>Marine molluscan histogram for the Salina Deep Core.</i>	139

4.7	<i>Xemxija 1 molluscan histogram.</i>	144
4.8	<i>Base of Xemxija 2 molluscan histogram.</i>	145
5.1	<i>Location map of the test excavation/sample sites and geoarchaeological survey areas on Gozo and Malta.</i>	164
5.2	<i>Plan of Santa Verna temple and the locations of the test trenches.</i>	166
5.3	<i>Santa Verna excavation trench profiles all with sample locations marked.</i>	167
5.4	<i>The red-brown buried soil profiles in Trench E, the Ashby and Trump Sondages within the Santa Verna temple site.</i>	170
5.5	<i>Santa Verna soil photomicrographs.</i>	172–3
5.6	<i>Plan of Ġgantija temple and locations of Test Pit 1 and the WC Trench excavations, with as-dug views of the WC Trench and TP1.</i>	175
5.7	<i>Section profiles of Ġgantija Test Pit 1 on the southwest side of Ġgantija temple and the east-west section of the Ġgantija WC Trench on the southeast side.</i>	176
5.8	<i>Ġgantija TP 1 photomicrographs.</i>	178
5.9	<i>Ġgantija WC Trench 1 photomicrographs.</i>	180
5.10	<i>Section profiles of Trench A at Skorba showing the locations of the micromorphological and OSL samples.</i>	183
5.11	<i>Skorba Trench A, section 1, photomicrographs.</i>	185
5.12	<i>Skorba Trench A, section 2, photomicrographs.</i>	186
5.13	<i>Taċ-Ċawla soil photomicrographs.</i>	189
5.14	<i>A typical terra rossa soil sequence in Xaghra town at construction site 2.</i>	191
5.15	<i>Xaghra soil photomicrographs.</i>	191
5.16	<i>In-Nuffara photomicrographs.</i>	193
5.17	<i>The Marsalforn (Pr 626) and Ramla (Pr 627) valley fill sequences, with the micromorphology samples and OSL profiling/dating loci marked.</i>	194
5.18	<i>Ramla and Marsalforn valley profiles soil photomicrographs.</i>	195
5.19	<i>Photomicrographs of the Blue Clay and Greensand geological substrates from the Ramla valley.</i>	199
5.20	<i>Xemxija 1 deep valley core photomicrographs.</i>	202
5.21	<i>Wied Żembaq 1 deep valley core photomicrographs.</i>	206
5.22	<i>Marsaxlokk and Salina Deep Core photomicrographs.</i>	210
5.23	<i>Scrub woodland on an abandoned terrace system and garrigue plateau land on the north coast of Gozo.</i>	213
5.24	<i>Terracing within land parcels (defined by modern sinuous lanes) on the Blue Clay slopes of the Ramla valley with Xaghra in the background.</i>	216
6.1	<i>The location of the Cambridge Gozo Project survey areas.</i>	224
6.2	<i>Fieldwalking survey data from around A. Ta Kuljat, B. Santa Verna, and C. Ġhajnsielem on Gozo from the Cambridge Gozo survey and the FRAGSUS Project.</i>	227
6.3	<i>The first cycle of Neolithic occupation as recorded by the Cambridge Gozo survey using kernel density analysis for the Ghar Dalam, Red Skorba and Grey Skorba phases.</i>	229
6.4	<i>The first half of the second cycle of Neolithic occupation as recorded by the Cambridge Gozo survey using kernel density analysis implemented for the Żebbuġ and Mġarr phases.</i>	232
6.5	<i>The second half of the second cycle of Neolithic occupation as recorded by the Cambridge Gozo survey using kernel density analysis for the Ġgantija and Tarxien phases.</i>	233
7.1	<i>Kernel density analysis of the Tarxien Cemetery, Borg in-Nadur and Bahrija periods for the areas covered by the Cambridge Gozo survey.</i>	244
7.2a	<i>The evidence for Bronze Age settlement in the Mdina area on Malta.</i>	245
7.2b	<i>The evidence for Bronze Age settlement in the Rabat (Gozo) area.</i>	245
7.3	<i>Distribution of Early Bronze Age dolmen on the Maltese Islands.</i>	246
7.4	<i>Distribution of presses discovered in the Mġarr ix-Xini valley during the survey.</i>	248
7.5	<i>The cultural heritage record of the Punic tower in Żurrieq through the centuries.</i>	249
7.6	<i>The changing patterns of social resilience, connectivity and population over the course of the centuries in the Maltese Islands.</i>	252
8.1	<i>An oblique aerial image of the northern slopes of the Maghtab land-fill site, depicting landscaping efforts including 'artificial' terracing.</i>	256
8.2	<i>RUSLE estimates of areas of low and moderate erosion for Gozo and Malta.</i>	259
9.1	<i>a) Sheep being led to their fold in Pwales down a track; b) Sheep grazing along a track on the Bajda Ridge in Xemxija, Malta.</i>	269

9.2	<i>Least-cost paths (LCPs), connecting garrigue areas, representing potential foraging routes across the Maltese landscape.</i>	271
9.3	<i>Density of LCPs connecting garrigue areas to random points within the garrigue areas themselves.</i>	272
9.4	<i>Location of 'public spaces', with size proportional to the distance to the nearest garrigue-to-garrigue LCP.</i>	273
9.5	<i>LCPs connecting farmhouses hosting animal pens to randomly generated points within garrigue areas in northwestern (A) and northeastern (B) Malta.</i>	274
9.6	<i>As for Figure 9.5, but representing west-central and east-central Malta.</i>	274
9.7	<i>As for Figure 9.5, but representing southern and southwestern Malta.</i>	275
9.8	<i>Location of 'public spaces', with size proportional to the distance to the nearest outbound journey.</i>	276
9.9	<i>a) Public space at Tal-Wei, between the modern town of Mosta and Naxxar; b) Tal-Wei public space as represented in 1940s survey sheets.</i>	277
9.10	<i>Approximate location of the (mostly disappeared) raħal toponyms.</i>	279
9.11	<i>Isochrones around farmhouse 4 representing the space that can be covered at 1-hour intervals considering animal walking speed.</i>	280
9.12	<i>Isochrones around farmhouse 2 representing the space that can be covered at 1-hour intervals considering animal walking speed (grazing while walking).</i>	281
9.13	<i>a) Isochrones around farmhouse 5 representing the space that can be covered at 1-hour intervals; b) Isochrones around farmhouse 6; c) Isochrones around farmhouse 7.</i>	282
10.1	<i>The likely distribution of built-up and cave-dwellings in the second half of the fourteenth century.</i>	286
10.2	<i>The lower frequency of settlement distribution by c. AD 1420.</i>	286
10.3	<i>The distribution of settlements just before AD 1530.</i>	288
10.4	<i>The late medieval Falson Palace in Mdina.</i>	289
10.5	<i>A girna integral with and surrounded by stone dry walling.</i>	290
10.6	<i>A hovel dwelling with a flight of rock-cut steps.</i>	291
10.7	<i>The hierarchical organisation of settlements continued, with the addition of Valletta, Floriana and the new towns around Birgu.</i>	295
10.8	<i>An example of a seventeenth century townhouse with open and closed timber balconies.</i>	296
10.9	<i>An example of a two-storey razzett belonging to a wealthier peasant family.</i>	297
10.10	<i>The distribution of built-up settlements in about AD 1900.</i>	299
10.11	<i>An example of a Neo-Classical house.</i>	301
11.1	<i>Summary of tree and shrub pollen frequencies at 10 sample sites.</i>	304
11.2	<i>Summary of cereal pollen frequencies at 14 sample sites.</i>	305
11.3	<i>Schematic profiles of possible trajectories of soil development in the major geological zones of Malta and Gozo.</i>	311
11.4	<i>The main elements of a new cultural-environmental story of the Maltese Islands throughout the last 10,000 years.</i>	317
A2.1	<i>Marsalforn valley, Gozo.</i>	360
A2.2	<i>Marsalforn valley, Gozo.</i>	361
A2.3	<i>Ramla valley, Gozo.</i>	361
A2.4	<i>Ġgantija Test Pit 1, Gozo.</i>	361
A2.5	<i>Skorba Neolithic site; trench A, East section; trench A, South section.</i>	362
A2.6	<i>Skorba, Trench A, South section.</i>	362
A2.7	<i>Tal-Istabal, Qormi, Malta.</i>	364
A2.8	<i>Tal-Istabal, Qormi, Malta.</i>	364
A2.9	<i>Photograph, showing locations of profile sample and OSL tubes, and luminescence-depth profile, for the sediment stratigraphy sampled in profile 1.</i>	365
A2.10	<i>Photograph, and luminescence-depth profile, for the sediment stratigraphy sampled in profile 3.</i>	365
A2.11	<i>Photograph, and luminescence-depth profile, for the sediment stratigraphy sampled in profile 2.</i>	366
A2.12	<i>Photograph, and luminescence-depth profile, for the sediment stratigraphy sampled in profiles 4 and 6.</i>	366
A2.13	<i>Photograph, and luminescence-depth profile, for the sediment stratigraphy sampled in profile 5.</i>	367
A2.14	<i>Apparent dose and sensitivity for laboratory OSL and IRSL profile measurements for SUTL2916 (P1).</i>	370
A2.15	<i>Apparent dose and sensitivity for laboratory OSL and IRSL profile measurements for SUTL2920 (P2).</i>	370
A2.16	<i>Apparent dose and sensitivity for laboratory OSL and IRSL profile measurements for SUTL2913 (P3).</i>	370
A2.17	<i>Apparent dose and sensitivity for laboratory OSL and IRSL profile measurements for SUTL2924 (P4).</i>	370

A2.18	<i>Apparent dose and sensitivity for laboratory OSL and IRSL profile measurements for SUTL2929 (P5).</i>	371
A2.19	<i>Apparent dose and sensitivity for laboratory OSL and IRSL profile measurements for SUTL2928 (P6).</i>	371
A2.20	<i>Apparent dose and sensitivity for laboratory OSL and IRSL profile measurements for SUTL2931 (P7).</i>	371
A2.21	<i>Probability Distribution Functions for the stored dose on samples SUTL2914 and 2915.</i>	374
A2.22	<i>Probability Distribution Functions for the stored dose on samples SUTL2917–2919.</i>	374
A2.23	<i>Probability Distribution Functions for the stored dose on samples SUTL2921–2923.</i>	375
A2.24	<i>Probability Distribution Functions for the stored dose on samples SUTL2925–2927.</i>	375
A2.25	<i>Probability Distribution Function for the stored dose on sample SUTL2930.</i>	376
SB.1	<i>Dose response curves for SUTL2914.</i>	385
SB.2	<i>Dose response curves for SUTL2915.</i>	385
SB.3	<i>Dose response curves for SUTL2917.</i>	386
SB.4	<i>Dose response curves for SUTL2918.</i>	386
SB.5	<i>Dose response curves for SUTL2919.</i>	387
SB.6	<i>Dose response curves for SUTL2921.</i>	387
SB.7	<i>Dose response curves for SUTL2922.</i>	388
SB.8	<i>Dose response curves for SUTL2923.</i>	388
SB.9	<i>Dose response curves for SUTL2925.</i>	389
SB.10	<i>Dose response curves for SUTL2926.</i>	389
SB.11	<i>Dose response curves for SUTL2927.</i>	390
SB.12	<i>Dose response curves for SUTL2930.</i>	390
SC.1	<i>Abanico plot for SUTL2914.</i>	391
SC.2	<i>Abanico plot for SUTL2915.</i>	391
SC.3	<i>Abanico plot for SUTL2917.</i>	392
SC.4	<i>Abanico plot for SUTL2918.</i>	392
SC.5	<i>Abanico plot for SUTL2919.</i>	392
SC.6	<i>Abanico plot for SUTL2921.</i>	393
SC.7	<i>Abanico plot for SUTL2922.</i>	393
SC.8	<i>Abanico plot for SUTL2923.</i>	393
SC.9	<i>Abanico plot for SUTL2925.</i>	394
SC.10	<i>Abanico plot for SUTL2926.</i>	394
SC.11	<i>Abanico plot for SUTL2927.</i>	394
SC.12	<i>Abanico plot for SUTL2930.</i>	395
SD.1	<i>Apparent ages for profile 1, with OSL ages.</i>	397
SD.2	<i>Apparent ages for profile 2, with OSL ages.</i>	397
SD.3	<i>Apparent ages for profile 3, with OSL ages.</i>	398
SD.4	<i>Apparent ages for profiles 4 and 6, with OSL ages.</i>	398
SD.5	<i>Apparent ages for profile 5, with OSL ages.</i>	399
SD.6	<i>Apparent ages for profile 7.</i>	399

Tables

1.1	<i>Description of the geological formations found on the Maltese Islands.</i>	21
2.1	<i>The cultural sequence of the Maltese Islands (with all dates calibrated).</i>	37
2.2	<i>Quartz OSL sediment ages from the Marsalforn (2917–2919) and Ramla (2921–2923) valleys, the Skorba temple/buried soil (2925–2927) and Tal-Istabal, Qormi, soil (2930).</i>	40
2.3	<i>Dating results for positions in the sediment cores.</i>	45
2.4	<i>Summary stratigraphic descriptions of the sequences in the deep core profiles.</i>	57
2.5	<i>Mean sediment accumulation rates per area versus time for the deep cores.</i>	64
2.6	<i>Radiocarbon measurements and ΔR values from early twentieth century marine shells from Malta.</i>	65
2.7	<i>Calibrated AMS ^{14}C dates of charred plant remains from Santa Verna palaeosol, Gozo.</i>	68
2.8	<i>Physical properties of the catchments.</i>	68
2.9	<i>Normalized Diffuse Vegetation Index (NDVI) for the catchments in 2014–15 and average rainfall data for the weather station at Balzan for the period 1985 to 2012.</i>	69
3.1	<i>Semi-natural plant communities in the Maltese Islands.</i>	76

3.2	<i>Attribution of pollen taxa to plant communities in the Maltese Islands and more widely in the Central Mediterranean.</i>	77
3.3	<i>Characteristics of the taphonomic samples from on-shore and off-shore Mistra Valley, Malta.</i>	80
3.4	<i>The pollen zonation of the Salina Deep Core with modelled age-depths.</i>	84
3.5	<i>The pollen zonation of the Salina 4 core with modelled age-depths.</i>	90
3.6	<i>The pollen zonation of the Wied Żembaq 1 core with modelled age-depths.</i>	94
3.7	<i>The pollen zonation of the Xemxija 1 core with modelled age-depths.</i>	98
3.8	<i>The pollen zonation of the fill of a Bronze Age silo at In-Nuffara, Gozo.</i>	103
3.9	<i>Summary of the pollen analyses of the buried soil below the Santa Verna temple structure.</i>	103
3.10	<i>Summary of the pollen analyses from the buried soil in Ġgantija Test Pit 1.</i>	105
3.11	<i>Activity on Temple sites and high cereal pollen in adjacent cores.</i>	105
4.1	<i>List of freshwater molluscs and land snails found in the cores, habitat requirement, palaeontological record and current status and conservation in the Maltese Islands.</i>	118
4.2	<i>Molluscan zones for the Marsaxlokk 1 core (MX1).</i>	121
4.3	<i>Molluscan zones for the Wied Żembaq 1 core (WŻ1).</i>	123
4.4	<i>Molluscan zones for the Wied Żembaq 2 core (WŻ2).</i>	125
4.5	<i>Integration of molluscan zones from the Wied Żembaq 1 and 2 cores.</i>	128
4.6	<i>Molluscan zones for the Mgarr ix-Xini 1 core (MĠX1).</i>	130
4.7	<i>Molluscan zones for the Marsa 2 core (MC2).</i>	135
4.8	<i>The non-marine molluscan zones for the Salina Deep Core (SDC).</i>	140
4.9	<i>Molluscan zones for the Salina Deep Core (SDC).</i>	142
4.10	<i>Molluscan zones for the Xemxija 1 core (XEM1).</i>	146
4.11	<i>Molluscan zones for the Xemxija 2 core (XEM2).</i>	148
4.12	<i>Correlation and integration of molluscan data from Xemxija 1 (XEM1) and Xemxija 2 (XEM2).</i>	151
5.1	<i>Micromorphology and small bulk sample sites and numbers.</i>	162
5.2	<i>Summary of available dating for the sites investigated in Gozo and Malta.</i>	163
5.3	<i>pH, magnetic susceptibility, loss-on-ignition, calcium carbonate and % sand/silt/clay particle size analysis results for the Ġgantija, Santa Verna and the Xagħra town profiles, Gozo.</i>	168
5.4	<i>Selected multi-element results for Ġgantija, Santa Verna and Xagħra town buried soils, and the Marsalforn and Ramla valley sequences, Gozo.</i>	169
5.5	<i>Summary of the main soil micromorphological observations for the Santa Verna, Ġgantija and the Xagħra town profiles, Gozo.</i>	181
5.6	<i>pH, magnetic susceptibility and selected multi-element results for the palaeosols in section 1, Trench A, Skorba.</i>	184
5.7	<i>Loss-on-ignition organic/carbon/calcium carbonate frequencies and particle size analysis results for the palaeosols in section 1, Trench A, Skorba.</i>	184
5.8	<i>Summary of the main soil micromorphological observations of the buried soils in sections 1 and 2, Trench A, Skorba.</i>	188
5.9	<i>Summary of the main soil micromorphological observations of the possible buried soils at Taç-Ċawla.</i>	189
5.10	<i>Field descriptions and micromorphological observations for the quarry and construction site profiles in Xagħra town.</i>	190
5.11	<i>Sample contexts and micromorphological observations for two silo fills at In-Nuffara.</i>	192
5.12	<i>Summary of the main soil micromorphological observations from the Ramla and Marsalforn valley fill profiles.</i>	196
5.13	<i>Main characteristics of the Upper and Lower Coralline Limestone, Globigerina Limestone, Blue Clay and Greensand.</i>	197
5.14	<i>Summary micromorphological descriptions and suggested interpretations for the Xemxija 1 core.</i>	200
5.15	<i>Summary micromorphological descriptions and suggested interpretations for the Wied Żembaq 1 core.</i>	207
5.16	<i>Summary micromorphological descriptions and suggested interpretations for the Marsaxlokk 1 core.</i>	209
5.17	<i>Summary micromorphological descriptions and suggested interpretations for the base zone of the base of the Salina Deep Core.</i>	211
8.1	<i>Carrying capacity estimates for the Neolithic/Temple Period of the Maltese Archipelago.</i>	258
8.2	<i>Summary of population changes in the Maltese Archipelago.</i>	261
11.1	<i>Summary of the environmental and vegetation changes in the Maltese Islands over the longue durée.</i>	306

11.2	<i>Summary of events revealed by the molluscan data in the deep cores.</i>	309
11.3	<i>Major phases of soil, vegetation and landscape development and change during the Holocene.</i>	312
11.4	<i>Occurrence of gypsum in FRAGSUS cores and contemporary events.</i>	314
A2.1	<i>Sample descriptions, contexts and archaeological significance of the profiling samples used for initial screening and laboratory characterization.</i>	358
A2.2	<i>Sample descriptions, contexts and archaeological significance of sediment samples SUTL2914–2930.</i>	360
A2.3	<i>Activity and equivalent concentrations of K, U and Th determined by HRGS.</i>	368
A2.4	<i>Infinite matrix dose rates determined by HRGS and TSBC.</i>	368
A2.5	<i>Effective beta and gamma dose rates following water correction.</i>	369
A2.6	<i>SAR quality parameters.</i>	369
A2.7	<i>Comments on equivalent dose distributions of SUTL2914 to SUTL2930.</i>	372
A2.8	<i>Quartz OSL sediment ages.</i>	372
A2.9	<i>Locations, dates and archaeological significance of sediment samples SUTL2914–2930.</i>	373
SA.1	<i>Field profiling data, as obtained using portable OSL equipment, for the sediment stratigraphies examined on Gozo and Malta.</i>	379
SA.2	<i>OSL screening measurements on paired aliquots of 90–250 µm 40% HF-etched ‘quartz’.</i>	380
SA.3	<i>OSL screening measurements on three aliquots of 90–250 µm 40% HF-etched ‘quartz’ for SUTL2924.</i>	382
SA.4	<i>IRSL screening measurements on paired aliquots of 90–250 µm 15% HF-etched ‘polymineral’.</i>	382
SA.5	<i>IRSL screening measurements on three aliquots of 90–250 µm 15% HF-etched ‘polymineral’ for SUTL2924.</i>	383
A3.1	<i>Stratigraphy and interpretation of the Salina Deep Core.</i>	401
A3.2	<i>Stratigraphy and interpretation of the Salina 4 core.</i>	405
A3.3	<i>Stratigraphy and interpretation of the Salina 2 core.</i>	407
A3.4	<i>Stratigraphy and interpretation of the Xemxija 1 core.</i>	408
A3.5	<i>Stratigraphy and interpretation of the Xemxija 2 core.</i>	411
A3.6	<i>Stratigraphy and interpretation of the Wied Żembaq 1 core.</i>	413
A3.7	<i>Stratigraphy and interpretation of the Wied Żembaq 2 core.</i>	413
A3.8	<i>Stratigraphy and interpretation of the Mgarr ix-Xini core.</i>	414
A3.9	<i>Stratigraphy and interpretation of the Marsaxlokk core.</i>	416
A3.10	<i>Stratigraphy and interpretation of the Marsa 2 core.</i>	417
A3.11	<i>Stratigraphy and interpretation of the Mellieħa Bay core.</i>	418
A3.12	<i>Key to the scheme for the description of Quaternary sediments.</i>	419
A4.1	<i>Marsa 2.</i>	421 (online edition only)
A4.2	<i>Mgarr ix-Xini.</i>	424 (online edition only)
A4.3	<i>Salina Deep Core.</i>	427 (online edition only)
A4.4	<i>Wied Żembaq 2.</i>	429 (online edition only)
A4.5	<i>Wied Żembaq 1.</i>	430 (online edition only)
A4.6	<i>Xemxija 1.</i>	432 (online edition only)
A4.7	<i>Xemxija 2.</i>	435 (online edition only)
A4.8	<i>Marsaxlokk 1.</i>	438 (online edition only)
A5.1	<i>Marsa 2.</i>	442 (online edition only)
A5.2	<i>Mgarr ix-Xini.</i>	456 (online edition only)
A5.3	<i>Salina Deep Core non-marine.</i>	466 (online edition only)
A5.4	<i>Salina Deep Core marine.</i>	478 (online edition only)
A5.5	<i>Wied Żembaq 2.</i>	490 (online edition only)
A5.6	<i>Wied Żembaq 1.</i>	496 (online edition only)
A5.7	<i>Xemxija 1.</i>	502 (online edition only)
A5.8	<i>Xemxija 2.</i>	516 (online edition only)
A5.9	<i>Marsaxlokk 1.</i>	528 (online edition only)
A8.1	<i>Xemxija 1 core micromorphology sample descriptions.</i>	557
A8.2	<i>Wied Żembaq 1 core micromorphology sample descriptions.</i>	559
A8.3	<i>Marsaxlokk core micromorphology sample descriptions.</i>	560
A8.4	<i>Salina Deep Core micromorphology sample descriptions.</i>	561
A9.1	<i>The charcoal data from the Skorba, Kordin, In-Nuffara and Salina Deep Core.</i>	563

Preface and dedication

Caroline Malone

The *FRAGSUS Project* emerged as the direct result of an invitation to undertake new archaeological fieldwork in Malta in 1985. Anthony Bonanno of the University of Malta organized a conference on 'The Mother Goddess of the Mediterranean' in which Colin Renfrew was a participant. The discussions that resulted prompted an invitation that made its way to David Trump (Tutor in Continuing Education, Cambridge University), Caroline Malone (then Curator of the Avebury Keiller Museum) and Simon Stoddart (then a post-graduate researcher in Cambridge). We eagerly took up the invitation to devise a new collaborative, scientifically based programme of research on prehistoric Malta.

What resulted was the original Cambridge Gozo Project (1987–94) and the excavations of the Xagħra Brochtorff Circle and the Ġhajnsielem Road Neolithic house. Both those sites had been found by local antiquarian, Joseph Attard-Tabone, a long-established figure in the island for his work on conservation and site identification.

As this and the two other volumes in this series report, the original Cambridge Gozo Project was the germ of a rich and fruitful academic collaboration that has had international impact, and has influenced successive generations of young archaeologists in Malta and beyond.

As the Principal Investigator of the *FRAGSUS Project*, on behalf of the very extensive *FRAGSUS* team I want to dedicate this the first volume of the series to the enlightened scholars who set up this now 35 year-long collaboration of prehistoric inquiry with our heartfelt thanks for their role in our studies.

We dedicate this volume to:

Joseph Attard Tabone
Professor Anthony Bonanno
Professor Lord Colin Renfrew

and offer our profound thanks for their continuing role in promoting the prehistory of Malta.

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Foreword

Anthony Pace

Sustainability, as applied in archaeological research and heritage management, provides a useful perspective for understanding the past as well as the modern conditions of archaeological sites themselves. As often happens in archaeological thought, the idea of sustainability was borrowed from other areas of concern, particularly from the modern construct of development and its bearing on the environment and resource exploitation. The term sustainability entered common usage as a result of the unstoppable surge in resource exploitation, economic development, demographic growth and the human impacts on the environment that has gripped the World since 1500. Irrespective of scale and technology, most human activity of an economic nature has not spared resources from impacts, transformations or loss irrespective of historical and geographic contexts. Theories of sustainability may provide new narratives on the archaeology of Malta and Gozo, but they are equally important and of central relevance to contemporary issues of cultural heritage conservation and care. Though the archaeological resources of the Maltese islands can throw light on the past, one has to recognize that such resources are limited, finite and non-renewable. The sense of urgency with which these resources have to be identified, listed, studied, archived and valued is akin to that same urgency with which objects of value and all fragile forms of natural and cultural resources require constant stewardship and protection. The idea of sustainability therefore, follows a common thread across millennia.

It is all the more reason why cultural resource management requires particular attention through research, valorization and protection. The *FRAGSUS Project* (Fragility and sustainability in small island environments: adaptation, cultural change and collapse in prehistory) was intended to further explore and enhance existing knowledge on the prehistory of Malta and Gozo. The objective of the project as

designed by the participating institutional partners and scholars, was to explore untapped field resources and archived archaeological material from a number of sites and their landscape to answer questions that could be approached with new techniques and methods. The results of the *FRAGSUS Project* will serve to advance our knowledge of certain areas of Maltese prehistory and to better contextualize the archipelago's importance as a model for understanding island archaeology in the central Mediterranean. The work that has been invested in *FRAGSUS* lays the foundation for future research.

Malta and Gozo are among the Mediterranean islands whose prehistoric archaeology has been intensely studied over a number of decades. This factor is important, yet more needs to be done in the field of Maltese archaeology and its valorization. Research is not the preserve of academic specialists. It serves to enhance not only what we know about the Maltese islands, but more importantly, why the archipelago's cultural landscape and its contents deserve care and protection especially at a time of extensive construction development. Strict rules and guidelines established by the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage have meant that during the last two decades more archaeological sites and deposits have been protected in situ or rescue-excavated through a statutory watching regime. This supervision has been applied successfully in a wide range of sites located in urban areas, rural locations and the landscape, as well as at the World Heritage Sites of Valletta, Ġgantija, Ғaġar Qim and Mnajdra and Tarxien. This activity has been instrumental in understanding ancient and historical land use, and the making of the Maltese historic centres and landscape.

Though the cumulative effect of archaeological research is being felt more strongly, new areas of interest still need to be addressed. Most pressing are those areas of landscape studies which often become

peripheral to the attention that is garnered by prominent megalithic monuments. *FRAGSUS* has once again confirmed that there is a great deal of value in studying field systems, terraces and geological settings which, after all, were the material media in which modern Malta and Gozo ultimately developed. There is, therefore, an interplay in the use of the term sustainability, an interplay between what we can learn from the way ancient communities tested and used the very same island landscape which we occupy today, and the manner in which this landscape is treated in contested economic realities. If we are to seek factors of sustainability in the past, we must first protect its relics and study them using the best available methods in our times. On the other hand, the study of the past using the materiality of ancient peoples requires strong research agendas and thoughtful stewardship. The *FRAGSUS Project* has shown us how even small fragile deposits, nursed through protective legislation and guardianship, can yield significant information which the methods of pioneering scholars of Maltese archaeology would not have enabled access to. As already outlined by the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage, a national research agenda for cultural heritage and the humanities is a desideratum. Such a framework, reflected in the institutional partnership of the

FRAGSUS Project, will bear valuable results that will only advance Malta's interests especially in today's world of instant e-knowledge that was not available on such a global scale a mere two decades ago.

FRAGSUS also underlines the relevance of studying the achievements and predicaments of past societies to understand certain, though not all, aspects of present environmental challenges. The twentieth century saw unprecedented environmental changes as a result of modern political-economic constructs. Admittedly, twentieth century developments cannot be equated with those of antiquity in terms of demography, technology, food production and consumption or the use of natural resources including the uptake of land. However, there are certain aspects, such as climate change, changing sea levels, significant environmental degradation, soil erosion, the exploitation and abandonment of land resources, the building and maintenance of field terraces, the rate and scale of human demographic growth, movement of peoples, access to scarce resources, which to a certain extent reflect impacts that seem to recur in time, irrespectively of scale and historic context.

Anthony Pace
Superintendent of Cultural Heritage (2003–18).

Chapter 8

The intensification of the agricultural landscape of the Maltese Archipelago

Jeremy Bennett

In this harsh environment man created the land on which he could live.

Bowen-Jones, Dewdney & Fisher (1961, 350)

8.1. Introduction

Bowen-Jones *et al.* (1961) in *Malta: Background for Development* furnish the reader with a prophetic edict which carries the threat of environmental catastrophe unless there is continual human investment.

Everything one sees in Malta [the Maltese Archipelago], other than major topographical features, is man-made and man-maintained in existence. For this reason, there is an unstable equilibrium that eternally threatens to collapse (1961, 349).

This book provides an unparalleled geographic assessment of the Maltese agricultural economy, in the years prior to independence, and still serves as a compendium of knowledge and terminology nearly sixty years later. The authors' opening gambit recognizes the swell in national identity and the resulting desire to exert more control over the nation's socio-economic direction. However, their opening tonality also expresses an awareness of the influence of development and its potential threat moving into the future, thus directing the authors to the formation of a study that facilitated a greater understanding of the interplay between socio-economics and the landscapes of the Maltese Islands.

Reflecting upon their edict, a modern reader could be forgiven for agreeing with this assertion. A cursory overview of the islands reveals a marginal, alkaline environment with thin and heavily worked soils, overlain by rampant development and inhabited by 1505 people per sq. km (National Statistics Office 2019). However, at a deeper level, the environmentally

deterministic and modernist view of Bowen-Jones *et al.* (1961) should be eschewed. Writing in the 1950s, these authors continued by stating 'the collapse foreseen is an increasing reality, the unstable equilibrium no longer being maintained.' Yet, in 2020, 'the collapse' has not arrived. What the authors failed to predict was that the future of the islands lay in connectivity: tourism, financial services, light skilled industry and casinos. A deeper historical perspective would have noted a critical threshold at the beginning of the first millennium BC when external investment first became crucial, adding external input to the island system, and reducing direct dependence on the land. At a more theoretical level, what the authors failed to consider was the delicate equilibrium of fragility and sustainability – the core themes of the *FRAGSUS Project*. Where Bowen-Jones *et al.* (1961) lacked a chronological framework, this project has re-asserted the importance of understanding human, rather than simply physical environments, through the full length of time. This leads to a greater comprehension of how humans live in, adapt and manage their environment, forging dynamic landscapes that have deep-seated histories.

A landscape represents an idea greater than the sum total of its constituent parts. Indeed, a concept such as the Maltese (or Gozitan) landscape contains within itself a nested hierarchy of landscape units, which are responses to lower and higher order processes. Although the spatial elements of landscapes are usually in flux, it is the palimpsest-like nature of landscapes through time that should be recognized as the key to understanding the inter-connected relationships between humans and their environments. This can be viewed as the central philosophical difference between Bowen-Jones *et al.* (1961) and the present project.

The *FRAGSUS Project* has focused on the successful reinvestigation and development of the complexities of the prehistoric Maltese Archipelago. However, in recognition of how landscapes develop

through time, elements of the project stretched beyond the prehistoric world to include the classical, medieval and early modern periods. Building on the temporal nature of landscapes, an *Annales* school framework could be adopted to aid the observation of how people have managed the agrarian environment through time, especially in association with the establishment of the Anthropocene epoch. *FRAGSUS* offers detail on three major agricultural phases available for study – prehistory (encompassing the early Neolithic through to the end of the Temple Period and into the Bronze Age), the 1800s (via Alberti *et al.*'s quantitative analysis in Chapter 9) and the contemporary Maltese landscape (see Chapter 10). This chapter will therefore provide a union between these strands of the *FRAGSUS Project* by providing a synthesis of the population change and the linked agricultural intensification within the region. This will link together a synthesis of the *longue durée* of the Maltese landscapes, applying a *quellenkritik* to various phases of evidence. In doing so, the central lines of inquiry will focus on what the available agricultural resource is on the islands and how people have successfully intensified the use of the landscape to balance environmental fragility with population sustainability. This study forms part of a larger doctoral project (Bennett 2020), and many of its implications are further wrapped into the discussion in the concluding Chapter 11.

8.2. The *Annales* School and the Anthropocene

Braudel (1966), the historian, introduced the concept of structuring the understanding of human activity through time, through the medium of three scales of history and change: *événements*, *conjonctures* and *longue durée*. Bintliff (1992) provides a valuable archaeological application of these concepts, describing this paradigm as a series of interdependent wavelengths, which is a useful analogy especially when considering the nature of how waves combine. The shortest of these wavelengths is the history of events or *événements*, which can be described as the staccato record of activities on the shortest timescale. This is framed by the more structuralist account of medium- and long-term markers of time – *conjonctures* and *longue durée* respectively, each of increasing duration and of apparently lower frequency to the observer. Knapp describes the *Annales* direction as having a 'fundamental ambivalence' and the propensity to 'adapt and grow with the demands of an always-shifting method and theory' (Knapp 1992, 16). In sum, it enables the understanding of how long-term processes relate to shorter term events. The increasing acceptance of the Anthropocene as a distinct geological epoch (Waters *et al.* 2016) raises

the implication that intensely applied *événements* can impinge on *longue durée* geological scales.

Goudie and Viles (2016) adopt an approach which blends the often conflicting accounts of various scholars, demonstrating the entwined nature of human activities and geomorphology; avoiding the application of the term 'golden spike', which is common in the Anthropocene literature. Their synthesis negates the marking of the Anthropocene as *événement* and accounts for the ebb and flow of human activities through time, beginning with the *Palaeoanthropocene* (c. 5050 BC–AD 1750), followed by the *Industrial Era* (AD 1750–1945), the *Great Acceleration* (AD 1945–2000) and culminating in the proposed era of *Earth Systems Stewardship* (AD 2000 onwards). Although the authors openly concur with the escalating pulse of change from the Industrial Era onwards, their timeline is designed to account for the 'many examples of the potent impact of humans in previous millennia' (Goudie & Viles 2016, 13). The rationale accords with the *time-transgressive* synthesis, called for by Brown *et al.* (2013) and Butzer (1996, 2015), which promotes a less alarmist response to the changing world. In particular, Butzer stresses the need for a non-anthropocentric view as 'the dynamic menu of ongoing changes ... are by no means ready to be synthesised' (2015, 1540). This agrees with the commonly held view that geological epochs can only be viewed at a distance, from a suitable perspective. Caution must therefore be taken, as the study of the Anthropocene is a complex affair which must account for the 'natural' process of the Holocene and the subsequent layering of human activity (Butzer 2015, 1541). Bauer and Bhan (2018) recognize the tendency for earth systems scientists to observe the Anthropocene in terms of broad geophysical effects, therefore masking the nuanced impact of regional human activities. Human impacts with such locational specificity could necessitate the use of different terminologies, such as *Anthropoeurocene*, that reflect the prominence of particular regions in particular periods (Edgeworth *et al.* 2016); the net effect of human activity is generated from 'place-based actors through a number of differentiated activities that have long been documented by both archaeologists and cultural anthropologists alike' (Bauer & Bhan 2018, 13). However, it should also be noted that significant disparities exist when considering the variation in anthropic effects worldwide (Malm & Hornborg 2014); influenced by long-term social, political and economic factors. Understandably, many islands lie at the least impactful end of this scale, as they are attenuated by their geomorphological size. Despite this, an island such as Malta is by no means devoid of the evidence of the Anthropocene. Where the earth systems approach to the Anthropocene may overlook

the specificity of human activities, it serves to remind us of a core commonality shared by humanity. Gibson and Venkateswar (2015) dwell on this unifying nature of *Anthropos* and build upon the idea that the concept of Anthropocene is not yet fact, instead existing as a product of thought. To take this a step further, I would propose that thought – human cognition – is central to the Anthropocene’s physical origin as opposed to its conceptual origin. The epoch’s genesis is rooted in the net effect of human cognitive traits which value species needs over environmental stability. The Goudie and Viles (2016) approach, perhaps inadvertently, encapsulates the interplay between the *longue durée* and *conjunctures* by emphasizing the role of long and medium term factors with the onset of the Anthropocene. Lapididou *et al.* (2015), emphasize that humans have always had a role in modifying their environments, ‘as we employ flexible and novel solutions for the survival and well-being of our societies’. Captured within this is the sense of *événements*, or the history of events, since niche construction (Smith 2011) can be viewed as a short-term series of events, as well as a longer-term paradigm of human activity. In short, the three temporal categories of the Annales School of thought bleed together, as time progresses. Niche construction can be an event and a cultural pattern; cultural patterns can be viewed geographically and demographically; geography and demography are influenced by the permanence of societies and other natural factors – all of which can influence the creation of one’s niche. This cyclicity is a potential antithesis for Butzer’s (2015) need for analysis of the Anthropocene at a distance. In summary, the *longue durée* of the Anthropocene involves the creation of a complex feedback loop, where early human activities remain layered in the environment and act as an influence for subsequent people.

8.3. The Maltese Archipelago and the *longue durée* of the Anthropocene

While keeping these thoughts in mind, we can turn to the islands of Malta. At present, visitors to the islands are met with a rich palimpsest of overlapping cultural history which has been carved into, and layered above, the natural limestone. Explicitly, much of the islands’ history is visible as built heritage, yet an almost intangible time-depth can be seen within the implicit traditions of the rural world. Neolithic monuments, flanked by terraced slopes, are surrounded by buildings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Each of these features is representative of short-term traditions which are intertwined through time as people act in relation to elements of the past that remain present in their contemporary landscapes.

The central resource is, in essence, the islands themselves – with limestone the primary building material used across time. It is rare to encounter a structure that is not comprised of limestone blocks, especially those which are quarried from the Globigerina Limestone strata. This encapsulates the *longue durée* of the Anthropocene, at least locally, as the layers of human development are constructed using materials which were initially deposited during the Miocene Epoch (c. 5.3 mya – 23 mya). Perhaps ironically, the voids left from this resource extraction have become refilled with the less dense waste of human activity. This has continued to such an extent that new landforms have been generated by the deposition of this anthropic layer, as can be seen at the Magħtab landfill. Fittingly, this site is now undergoing environmental management, including a landscaping programme which has constructed a striking set of terraces on this anthropic landform (Fig. 8.1). In many ways, Magħtab is a microcosm for the Anthropocene within the Maltese Archipelago, with its anachronistic terraces carved to disguise the artificial nature of the location, appearing to mimic the local landscape. Yet, this approach is likely to be ignorant of the ancient and essentially human origin of terracing practices. This is indicative of an engrained *mentalité* where current landscape traits are perceived as the norm, irrespective of what the true natural state may have been.

Focusing on the issue of terracing, there are many similar *longue durée* traits worth considering. Primarily, the archipelago’s topography is dominated by the construction of terraces across all geological zones, through time. Thompson (2006) conveys how the shifting practices in wall construction evidence the gradual change in the cultural makeup of the islands, yet the walls still display a commonality that is millennia old. While the scientific analyses of the terraces may alter the understanding of some terracing practices, particularly where the geological variability is concerned, Thompson’s anthropological study still provides value in the form of the engagement with lived experiences. ‘The contrasting modes of wall, ancient and modern, are reflections of the values supported by the people of the times... No wall is created strictly favouring one ideal set of values over another. Rather, each wall is a complex of these contrasting values and their designs’ (Thompson 2006, 34). Thus, the terraces are as much a cultural palimpsest as the wider landscape is. On a superficial level, they are the anthropic reshaping of the environment, with the creation of each terrace wall as an *événement* which involves a juxtaposed set of *longue durée* processes (quarried geology and subsequent soil erosion). Equally so, on a deeper level, these walls also represent their own palimpsest of fluctuating *mentalités*.



Figure 8.1. An oblique aerial image of the northern slopes of the Maghtab land-fill site, depicting landscaping efforts including 'artificial' terracing (image © 2020 CNES / Airbus).

The blurring of *mentalité* and *conjuncture* can be seen within the system of land tenure in the islands, as demonstrated by Bugeja (2018) who outlines the division between established landlords/church land and peasant landowners. The entrenched stagnation of ownership made it difficult for less economically viable farmers to acquire the land in which they worked. However, the availability of long-term perpetual leasing, *emphyteusis*, 'elevated the tenant into a position of quasi-ownership' (Bugeja 2018, 26). While this form of lease represented balance between the landlord and the tenant, the short-term leasing that was available represented greater gains for the landlord, especially considering the fluctuating value of the land based on its perceived quality. More developed private land would usually be subject to higher taxation, which would be reflected in the leasing costs. In contrast, long-term leasing was commonly found with Government and Church land, which came with lower taxation and 'very often characterised by feudal practices' (Bugeja 2018, 26). Although the annual rent, *qbiela*, relieved the farmer from tithe, they were obliged to repair field walls and to not sub-let land. Where extensive repairs

were required, it was not uncommon for the landowner to intervene, assumedly as a matter of responsibility for maintaining an element of control. Where farmers invested in improving the land, at their own expense, it was common for landlords to increase the rent after the end of tenancies. Accordingly, tenant farmers were disinclined to move on from land they had heavily invested in, especially since no system of compensation existed to account for their improvements. Where landowners 'were largely characterised by a strong sense of elitism' (Bugeja 2018, 27), it is understandable that tenant farmers would opt for long-term leasing in order to regain a sense of control over their destinies.

From the 1850s, there was a considerable effort to encourage the expansion of agricultural practices to the barren, *xaghra* lands (Bugeja 2018). This served to increase governmental revenue and thus offset the cost of repairs elsewhere. Although this land was rarely productive, competitions were held to reward the most successful farmers, and the prizes became a valuable income source. In the period surrounding World War II, when the need for agricultural productivity was heightened, farmers enjoyed legislative changes that

promoted their positive input, protecting them from excessive rent increase and harsh changes in lease conditions. Equally so, the landowner retained the right to reassess tenancy if the farmer was not operating the land adequately. Finally, in the post-war period, the accumulation of wealth and the rise of pensions resulted in the redevelopment of the land tenure system. With farmers retiring earlier and sub-letting their land, the overall amount of cultivated land increased while freeholding was in decline.

In essence the rise of the tenant-farmer class, as described by Bugeja (2018), is an artefact of long-standing tenancy practices. Although aspects of these practices have transformed through time, the process still maintained the architecture of the medieval traditions. This reflects the process of 'Agricultural Involution' (Geertz 1963), as increasing complexity can be found within a seemingly static system. Tied to these practices, the personal experience of the farmer, as presented by Thompson (2006), is effectively encoded in the walls they build and repair; they are indicative of the *conjonctures* that exist. Ultimately, these *conjonctures*, such as the expansion of land in the post-war era, are physically embedded in the *longue durée* as altered and abandoned land, now subject to unimpeded ecological processes. These 'Anthrosapes' ultimately reflect how short and medium term histories can directly influence the flow of the *longue durée*, therefore reinforcing how, at least in Malta, the Anthropocene has been present for a considerable period of time.

During the early twenty-first century, continual population growth and rampant development have placed renewed pressure on the landscapes of the archipelago. The traditional and historical rural locations are increasingly threatened by the advance of urban areas. A variety of public interest groups, utilizing social media, have formed to raise awareness of the risk to the local heritage. When observing much of this development, it is noticeable that many sites remain abandoned. Not wishing to comment further on the specific causes of this, all that remains to be said is that modern development and expansionism are mimicking the drive to incorporate new land, as described above. Ultimately, both cases involve the inscribing of the Anthropocene, with the cyclical nature of the expansion beyond need perhaps forming part of a medium-term *mentalité*.

8.4. Intensification

The concept of intensification is fundamental to the understanding of a number of *longue durée* environments. In this instance, the term specifically refers to the aspects of human activity which drive increased

productivity from managed landscapes. Although this discussion refers to agricultural intensification, it is prudent to remain cognizant of the subsequent forms of intensification that are facilitated by increased agricultural output. Boserup's (1965) model is a fitting point of departure. A basic interpretation suggests that population increase is supported by an advancing technological framework available to that population, with the carrying capacity of the land constantly improved by greater investment of labour and/or the investment in infrastructure. Boserup (1975) pursued this further by emphasizing the importance of the ratio between people and land as the central factor in determining productivity within the context of a rural socio-economic system. Morrison (1994) stresses that archaeologists should exercise caution when using Boserup's (1965) model as a means of understanding intensification, since the approach acts more like a typology of societies rather than a mode of analysis. Morrison notes that Boserup's model cannot account for the myriad of strategies employed by societies through time and space. The restriction of Boserup's model is its linearity and lack of clarity on the specific nature of what intensification involves; instead, research should focus on 'delineating the actual paths of intensification' (Morrison 1994, 145). A more cautious approach should be adopted, especially considering the risk of dichotomous interpretations of intensification/disintensification, with emergent complexity serving as a broad concept that encompasses the intersection between population and production – specifically, the genesis of a complex and self-organizing system comprised of a variety of actors (Marcus & Stanish 2006). Further to this, Miller (2006) stresses the nuances of intensification, noting the concepts of *extensification* and Fuller's (2001) *diversification* as alternate routes to producing an end result similar to Boserupian intensification.

In effect, there is an element of Annales school thinking that needs to be considered here – that production and intensification strategies are part of the cyclical process discussed earlier. Boserup (1975) could be interpreted as observing the concept of production as a string of *événements*, framed by the *conjonctures* of investment methods. The central caveats to draw from Boserup are that investment in pre-mechanized societies is often seen with an increase of labour using pre-existing tools and methods; productivity can be achieved through greater use of status quo techniques. Interestingly, it is worth drawing comparison with Geertz (1963), where the process of 'Agricultural Involution' was defined. In this instance, agriculture develops into a system of increasing complexity, with ever increasing land divisions dominating the outward appearance of the agricultural system. Comparison between both

models suggests that each population continues to a point of maximal indigenous carrying capacity, from which new management strategies must be employed. Boserup (1975) posits the greater investment of labour/technology, followed by economic migrations, while Geertz (1963) observes increasingly complex social management. Crucially, only Geertz (1963) is referring to an island context. Boserup's consideration of economic migration is attenuated by an island setting. Despite this, a fitting proxy would be the factors surrounding the socio-political setting of an island and how these influence the agrarian world. Boserup (1975) suggests that a population has little incentive to produce surplus beyond subsistence, unless external factors provide enough influence to generate a need. This is a vital idea to consider in the framework of the complex history of the Maltese archipelago.

8.5. Population

Dwelling on population as the motivator behind increased production, we must observe the complex demography of Malta through time. Undoubtedly, the complexity of demography is deeply interrelated to the growth of population and social networks. During the Neolithic and Temple Periods, these networks were primarily local-regional/Malta-Sicily, as evidenced by ceramic styles (Malone 1985; Bonanno 1986a) (see Chapter 6) and chert procurement for lithic tools (Chatzimpaloglou *et al.* 2020). Moving through the Bronze and Phoenician periods, the islands enter a wider maritime network (Stoddart 1999) (see Chapter 7), where the archipelago's natural harbours served to increase the external perception of the archipelago's value. These periods represent the islands on the cusp of broad connectivity with the wider Mediterranean, something which would be achieved from the Punic period onwards. Later historical records provide insight to the islands' relationship to the political powers of Sicily and the interplay between the needs of the inhabitants and the structure of wider regional politics. Thus, the phasing of population can be divided into two categories, sub-carrying capacity and post-carrying capacity. Since the islands have finite resources, it is logical to observe the periods that are drawing on insular means of production as distinct from those which rely on the outside world. Not surprisingly, the latter periods involve a marked shift in Malta's inclusion within the extra-regional political world.

8.5.1. Sub-carrying capacity periods

Understandably, the measurement of population in this period carries the most uncertainty, regardless of chronology and technology. There have been

attempts by Renfrew (1973; Renfrew & Level 1979) to estimate the Temple Period population, and from several authors to relate this to death rates from the cultural patterns of burials (Bocquet-Appel 2002; Stoddart & Malone 2015; Thompson *et al.* 2020). From the perspective of this discussion, a prehistoric population estimate could act as an initial representation of the carrying capacity, assuming limited trade and population mobility. Renfrew's estimates for the archipelago reached *c.* 11,000 individuals, based on territories defined by the positions of pairs of megalithic sites and the population required to build such structures. Perhaps more reasonably, Clark (2004) estimated a population of 1407 for the Late Neolithic of Gozo, based on 60 per cent land utilization and 2 ha of land per person. If we extrapolate this to include Malta, the total number becomes 8787. Grima (2008b) presents a systematic analyses of estimated carrying capacity based on areas of low slope (<5 per cent gradient) and a minimum of 1.5 ha per person, which reveals pockets of low lying land totalling 7071 ha and supporting 4713 individuals. Usefully, the Clark (2004) and Grima (2008b) estimations do not exceed records of the medieval population which was not reliant on imports as a means of sustenance. During the fourteenth century, Malta exported grain to Sicily, although this is likely to have been an uncommon practice (Aloisio 2007). During the fifteenth century, the islands suffered from grain shortages every 2–3 years (Wettinger 1982) which drove increased demand of Sicilian grain imports (Aloisio 2007). Referring to Table 8.1, below, the population is likely to have been between 8000 and 10,000 individuals during this century. In contrast, Sagona (2015) presents a brief analysis of the potential carrying capacity of land with recorded archaeological field scars, although this is an unconvincing interpretation which is reliant on poorly applied, northern latitude, ethnography. In brief, the suggested land utilization, based on Gregg (1988), is 0.62 ha to 0.73 ha per person and therefore would suggest a considerable difference in carrying capacity in comparison with the Clark extrapolation.

Table 8.1. Carrying capacity estimates for the Neolithic/Temple Period of the Maltese Archipelago. Figures are based on areas of low slope and calculations of low soil loss, with figures from Grima (2008b) provided for comparison. The figures classed as RUSLE 0–10 t/ha/yr represent a conservative estimate of population based on areas of stable soils. The RUSLE 0–25 t/ha/yr is an expanded area which includes slightly less stable soils as well as those which fall within the RUSLE 0–10 t/ha/yr.

	RUSLE 0–10 t/ha/yr	RUSLE 0–25 t/ha/yr	Grima (2008b)
Area (ha)	3843.81	13997.61	7071
Population (1.5 ha/person)	2562.54	9931.74	4713

Although this may initially conjure the idea of populations ranging towards the Renfrew computation, it is worth considering the highly undefined nature of the prehistoric agricultural environment. *FRAGSUS* has highlighted the potential role of the hilltop plateaux for early agriculture, and emphasized the relative inaccessibility of the clay slopes (see Chapter 5). It is entirely possible that the prehistoric agrarian world, envisaged by each of these models, was far more restricted in reality, and was a landscape of fragmented tamed pockets (see Chapter 6). Finally, while observing

the physical remains of the Temple Period, Malone *et al.* (2009a) caution that the current record only offers a limited synthesis of prehistoric populations, with isolated sites providing an uncertain cross-section of ancient communities.

The use of RUSLE (Revised universal soil loss equation) provides a direct measure of soil stability and erosion (Wischmeier & Smith 1978) (Fig. 8.2; Table 8.1; see Chapter 2), whereas the Grima (2008b) model was based on the presumption of soil stability from low lying areas. These new estimations help extrapolate

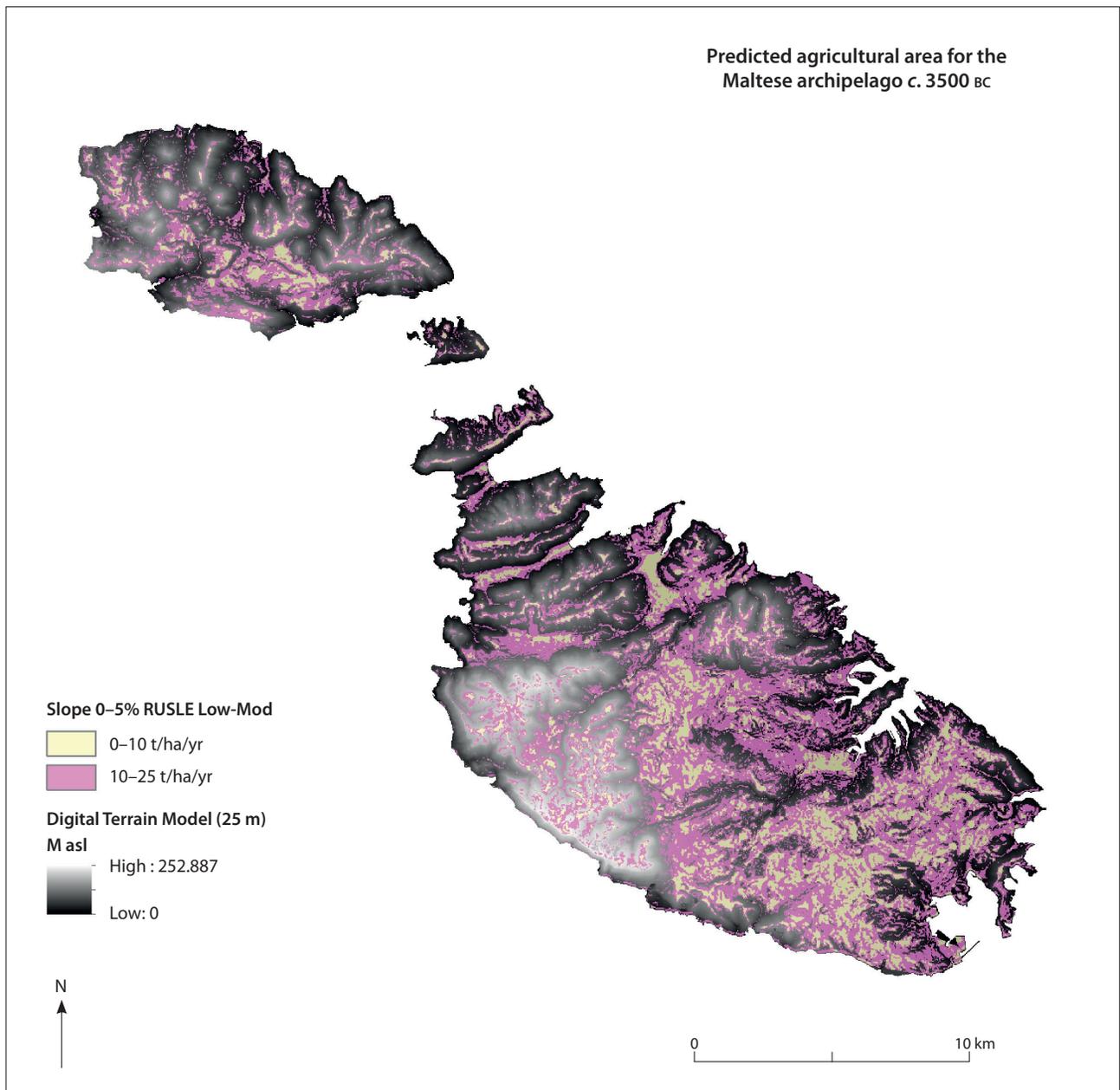


Figure 8.2. RUSLE estimates of areas of low and moderate erosion for Gozo and Malta (J.M. Bennett).

some of the recent environmental findings discussed in this volume and enrich the understanding of the lived experience of these islands during prehistory. Importantly, Grima's (2008b) approach should be recognized as meritorious as it sets the agenda for quantifying the past landscapes of the archipelago. Undoubtedly, future data and refinement of this GIS investigation will further delineate the parameters of early population in these islands.

Moving forward in time, the Bronze Age has had comparatively less research on population structure. Recchia and Fiorentino (2015) suggest that the Maltese archipelago was still within carrying capacity at the end of the Temple period, with the Early Bronze Age population co-habiting with the indigenous in a manner that suggests the islands could support a subsistence based economy. The evidence from the Cambridge Gozo survey (see Chapter 7) suggests an expansion of domestic territory, with site clustering similar to what was seen during the Early Neolithic, and an intensity of activity at re-used sites from earlier periods which is interpreted as a 'recommencement of a cycle of domestic activity that was played out of the earlier Neolithic and Temple Period phases' (Boyle 2013, 287). Boyle also indicates the value of focal locations as loci of trade and communication, given their position on the best routes to natural harbours. However, this perhaps contradicts the assertion that the Bronze Age was marked by a socio-ideological transformation, rather than a significant demographic change. Adding to this, a marked hiatus in cereal agriculture occurred in tandem with an increase in livestock grazing indicated by the palynological data (see Chapter 3). This could be indicative of a net reduction in human activity on the islands. It could be speculated that this reduction is tied to a form of Boserupian economic migration where a proportion of the population left the archipelago because of their inability to intensify production effectively.

Progressing through the Late Bronze Age/Borg in-Nadur phase, the accumulated data suggest a return to greater levels of productivity along with the establishment of defended hilltop settlements (see Chapter 7). The climatic fluctuations between arid and humid periods is reflected in the variation between adopted cereals, which is indicative of local strategies to support population. The crucial difference that Recchia and Fiorentino (2015) highlight is the advantage of wider cultural contacts, which perhaps enabled the used of climate adapted crops more readily than would be found with a less connected island community. This reflects the fact that the Maltese Islands were beginning to enter the increasingly complex Mediterranean classical world which was already urbanized in the east (Malone & Stoddart 2009, 379). Phoenician activity

in the archipelago is well documented, however the generation of a population estimate remains difficult because of the nature of contact and colonization. The account from Herodotus (Book IV, 196) tells of a building of trust through indirect trade at new locations. The Maltese Islands, with poor natural resources other than rock and crops, would appear to have little to offer Phoenician colonizers (Bowen-Jones *et al.* 1961; Blouet 1963; Vella & Anastasi 2019). However, such an assertion ignores the value of the archipelago's sheltered harbours and strategic position between the North African littoral and the Near Eastern heartland of Phoenicia (Recchia & Fiorentino 2015). Considering this, there is an accepted model (Bondi 2014; Sagona 2015) of overlap between the Phoenician traders and the indigenous population, which ultimately gave way to a more permanent form of Phoenician settlement, a feature which is highly evident from the rock-cut burial tombs (Said-Zammit 1997; Sagona 2002). At this stage, the issue of carrying capacity becomes a little more tenuous since the presence of a trade network would suggest that the operation of supply and demand may have existed within the Phoenician period. The subsequent population development, and the transition of Phoenician (trading outposts) to Punic (hinterland management) (Vella 2014), brought the Maltese archipelago into the period of post-carrying capacity populations, or post-insular reliance, where the islands were reliant on external contact as a means of supporting local production capabilities.

8.5.2. *Post-carrying capacity periods*

Said-Zammit (1997) has produced a population estimate for the Punic period of the archipelago, with the estimate representing the population just prior to entry into the Roman world. Based on 100 per cent utilization of cultivable land (equalling 18,960 people on 60 per cent of the total land area), Said-Zammit proposes that the total population was in the region of 17,555 individuals with population incrementally rising to this level. However, caution must be taken with the concept of complete land utilization as geological factors render areas inaccessible to agricultural practices. Although technological innovation would improve accessibility, a significant area of land will always remain unavailable e.g. littoral and steep gradient locations. This is echoed by Alberti *et al.* (2018) in a logistical regression analysis of nineteenth century land quality assessment. Although this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 9, the central theme to consider is that the later historic landscape contained locations which spanned the gamut of agricultural viability. Notably, this includes areas of exceptionally poor agricultural viability, despite near contemporary technology. By

The intensification of the agricultural landscape of the Maltese Archipelago

Table 8.2. Summary of population changes in the Maltese Archipelago (after Bowen-Jones et al. 1961 and Cassar 2002).

Year (AD)	Population	Source	Comments by Bowen-Jones <i>et al.</i> (1961)	Comments by Cassar (2002)
991	21000	Emir Yusef al Futah	Excessive in comparison with Giliberto's report	
1240	5600	Giliberto Abbate		
1241	2199			Potentially the number of hearths as opposed to total population
1400	10000	Bosio	Population did not exceed this number	
1419	8335			Established figure for Malta
1480s	9829			Established figure for Malta
1528	17000	Commissioners of the Order of the Knights of St. John	Number includes 5000 Knights	
1530	25000	Chev. L. de Boisgelin, Bosio and Fra Joannus Quintinus	Multiple suggestions of local population at 20,000 (plus 5000 Knights)	
1535	22000			
1565	31000	Order of the Knights of St. John	22,000 (plus 9000 Knights) pre-Great Siege	
1565	23000	Following casualties according to Zabarella and Bosio	20,000 (plus 3000 Knights)	
1582	20000	Grand Inquisitor Visconti (Malta only)		
1590	32290	Knight de Quadra, for the Viceroy of Sicily		
1632	52900 (51750)	Enumeration under Grand Master de Pawla	48,450 (plus 4450 Knights)	Cassar presents 51,750 excluding 5000 Knights
1736/40	66364			
1741	111000	Enumeration under Grand Master de Despuiz	Conflicts with Ciantar's assessment	
1760	66800	G. A. Ciantar. 1772. <i>Malta Illustrata</i> . (Malta only, excluding members of the Order of Knights)	Excluding members of the Order of Knights	
1798	114000 (98000)	Boisgelin	Unreliable as Gozo estimate is 24,000; this conflicts with 1842 population of 14,000 as there is no known population migration to Gozo	Cassar presents 98,000
1807	115154	<i>Almanaco di Malta 1807</i>	Based on Parish registers; 93,000 'native Catholic' and 22,100 'other inhabitants and domesticated strangers'	
1813	110803	Burril, W. H. 1813. <i>Report on the Plague in Malta</i>		
1828	115945	<i>Historie de Malte 1840</i>	Little difference in comparison with the 1807 account; the plague may have limited population growth, however the enumeration process must be questioned	
1837	119878	Watson, S. B. 1838. <i>The Cholera at Malta in 1837</i>	Over-estimation is also a likely to be at fault here	
1842	113864	The First Census of the Maltese Islands		
1871	200000			
1931	245640			
1948	304991			
1990	355910			

applying this new understanding to the landscapes from the classical period onwards, it is obvious that 100 per cent utilization of the environment is simply not possible. Returning to Said-Zammit's (1997) work, it is straightforward to re-scale this estimate according to a reduction in available land. For example, at 60 per cent utilization of cultivable land (including the additional support of trade) the population would have been around 10,200. Although this is only speculation, it serves as a reminder that a more detailed analysis of the environment must take place – one which incorporates the pedological and spatial investigations of the *FRAGSUS Project*.

In her study of the Roman Imperial and the Byzantine periods, Bruno (2009) states that there is no concrete way to determine the population size. She suggests that the recorded military garrison of 2000 (all male and of military age) is consistent with what would be expected for a significant population size. However, this overlooks the role of the garrison, perhaps suggesting that it served to defend/exert control over the local population, when in fact a frontier garrison may have had other strategic purposes and whose numbers should not be used as an indicator of local demography.

With the appearance of historical records, there is a more reliable basis for understanding the output and requirements of the Maltese Islands. Bowen-Jones *et al.* (1961, 133) provide a useful summary of the population record during the historic period which is adapted in Table 8.2, incorporating their comments and those of Cassar (2002). The first official census on the islands took place *c. AD 1241*, under the jurisdiction of the Norman King Frederick II. Across both islands the local governor, Gilberto Abbate, recorded 1891 families, which equates to *c. 7267* individuals (Bruno 2009). However, comparing this figure with Table 8.2 reveals discrepancies. This emphasizes the need for caution when scrutinizing these early population records, using them as a guide to the general trajectory rather than as absolute fact, at least until the later Medieval period.

Although Bowen-Jones *et al.* (1961) scrutinized the validity of each of these estimates, their overview presents a much clearer idea of how the population has accumulated within the archipelago. At this juncture, the concept of Boserup (1975) and intensified production meets a complex socio-political structure where the nature of external events and external investment influenced activities taking place within the Maltese Islands. To chart this, the following section will consider the environment within which agriculture takes place, and which frames the adaptations driven by either internal or external influences.

8.6. The agrarian archipelago

To develop a synthesis of the development of intensification within the Maltese archipelago, it is essential to comment on the nature of the agricultural environment through time. This section will observe the geological and pedological constraints which provide the context within which technological and population changes occur.

8.6.1. *The agricultural substrate*

Lang's (1960) study has acted as the foundation for the understanding of Maltese soils and their development with three main types of soil identified: Carbonate Raw, Xerorendzinas and Terra soils. In more recent years, *MALSIS – A MALtese Soil Information System (TCY00/MT/036)*, has developed an inventory of soil for the Maltese Archipelago (Vella 2000, 2001, 2003). This has progressed from Lang's considerable work to a quantitative survey which is aligned with the FAO World Reference Base (WRB 2014) of soils. Specifically, this has reclassified the soils identified by Lang (1960) and added some more niche soils that were not previously acknowledged. Calcisols are noted as the most dominant and likely correlate with Lang's Carbonate Raw soils. Linked by the Blue Clay parent material, Vertisols are another reclassification of the carbonate raw soils, defined by deep clayey fissures during the dry summer months. Luvisols correspond to the Terra soils, which are essentially relict soils with subsequent CaCO_3 concentrations which are indicative of the present climatic conditions. Utilizing the WRB (2014) and working with archaeological considerations, French and Taylor (Chapter 5) have presented an extensive re-analysis of the soils and palaeosols across the Maltese Archipelago which emphasizes a shift away from developed argillic brown soils (or Luvisols) as the result of anthropic factors, leaving an environment characterized by thin xeric soils and vertisol slopes. Thus, to manage this delicate situation, soils must be constrained by agricultural terraces and improved through the use of natural and artificial fertilizers.

8.6.2. *The development of agricultural technology*

Sustaining the agricultural environment requires the careful management of a variety of different factors. In the case of the Maltese Archipelago, soil conservation is the key to maintaining any level of agricultural viability. Given the restricted limestone environment, as described by Chatzimpaloglou *et al.* (Chapter 1), the variety of soils available is relatively limited. This is exacerbated by the difficulties of geology, with the predominance of Blue Clay slopes, especially in Gozo. Sagona (2015) reports ethnographic accounts of 1830s

soil production which tell of thin and friable soils, which have good agricultural return. However, where the landscape is denuded of soil, these accounts include the practices involved with the regeneration of a viable substrate. Generally, this relies on the breakdown of the soft limestone (usually the Globigerina), sometimes aided by manual interaction. Through weathering, and improvements such as manuring and crop rotation, the land can be 'amended' to something more viable and productive. Bugeja (2011) describes the practices of surface preparation, such as depicted in Jean Houël's late eighteenth century drawing of Borg in-Nadur. Typically, these involved the clearance of barren rocky areas, with the levelling of protruding stone and the infilling of negative space in the bedrock. Such preparation echoes the medieval 'Red Soil Law,' latterly incorporated within the Fertile Soils (Preservation) Act of 1973, which required anyone who is erecting a building to gather and preserve the red soil present at the building site. Thus the legislative structure of the archipelago preserves an entrenched practice of bedrock preparation and redistribution of soil used to encourage better agricultural productivity.

Folk practices and accounts of pre-mechanized farming (Halstead 2014) are invaluable to the interpretation of agrarian practices through time. Observed practices provide a reference tool for how ancient landscapes may have been utilized, with varying states of technological development. The folk accounts reported by Sagona (2015) are the first 'technological' step in managing the landscape. Awareness of soil performance and the methods required for improvement were advances made during the prehistoric phases. French and Taylor (Chapter 5) describe pockets of developed Pleistocene soils which would have been readily available to prehistoric agriculturalists. Despite this likelihood, evidence from a number of 'Temple' sites suggests that much work was already taking place to improve the productivity of the soil prior to the construction of the 'Temple' buildings (see Chapter 5). Notably, soils at Ġgantija show significant levels of enrichment with settlement-derived organic waste, contained within what could only be described as a rudimentary terrace, based on the spatial setting of the soils. The related strata appear to underlie elements of the megalithic structure and represent an intentional accumulation of soil to form a viable agricultural topsoil. It could be postulated that this may be one of the earliest forms of agricultural terrace in the Mediterranean and beyond; however, further investigation would be required to confirm the veracity of this interpretation.

As Chapters 2 and 5 have revealed, the continual degradation of soils within the archipelago has led to

the adoption of agricultural terracing in the traditional sense. This technology acts as an effective control mechanism for eroding soils. By physically altering the gradient of the hillslope, and creating additional surface roughness, soil can be captured and built into flat surfaces. Terracing is also advantageous as it maximizes water retention within fields – which is vital in semi-arid locations. Labour investment therefore surrounds the construction and maintenance of terraces. On limestone bedrock, Pace (2004) has demonstrated the intentional 'cutting' of the bedrock surface, prior to the creation of a terrace structure, dating to c. 800 BC (see Chapter 7). Although relating to a much later landscape, that practice can also be seen at the site of Tal-Istabal, Qormi, in Malta where the *FRAGSUS Project* used Optically Stimulated Luminescence dating in relation to the exposed archaeological landscape (see Chapters 2 & 5; Appendix 2). Fundamentally, this practice is not dissimilar to the soil preparation techniques described by Sagona (2015) as the limestone cut during the formation process could be crushed and used as for soil formation, if not used in wall construction. Borg (1915) reflects that fields had reached a peak of development as a result of the division of land into terraces. Ploughing was meticulous and reliant on the use of non-mechanized techniques, including the 'Maltese plough.' This device balanced the need for a strong steel ploughshare with the practicalities of maintaining a shallow depth of furrow which avoided exposing the bedrock. Borg also describes the use of the hoe, especially as a spade is not effective in the stony and stiff soils. The challenges, overcome by traditional practices and steel tools, were likely an even greater problem for ancient agriculturalists. The creation and development of soil is one achievement while the seasonal process of working the soil is another. Accounts such as those of Borg (1915) and Halstead (2014) suggest that scratch agriculture, using simple tools, may have been very long established, perhaps since the prehistoric period.

Establishing a date for the onset of agricultural terracing is difficult in practice, as soil stratigraphy and chronology pose a significant challenge to overcome. A combination of thin soils and regular ploughing ensures that cultural material has lost its stratigraphic security. As material slowly erodes into terraces, there is a small chance of dateable material entering the fill. However, to utilize this, the material would need to be found in an intact deposit, or perhaps in the lower parts to the wall. Any secure dateable material relating to the formation of the terrace may provide a *terminus post quem*, while subsequent additions during the use of the terrace would represent a *terminus ante quem*. However, finding distinction between these would

be exceptionally challenging when considering the stratigraphic nature of terraces. One potential way to overcome this problem is by using Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL) dating, which allows the acquisition of absolute dates from the soil itself (see Chapter 2; Appendix 2). Although the uncertainties of soil accumulation would still apply to this technique, the use of relative accumulation profiling (Sanderson & Murphy 2010) would enable a controlled observation of this effect alongside the use of direct OSL dating. This could be achieved in two ways. Firstly, an attempt could be made to date individual terraces (Davidovich *et al.* 2012), which could be an arduous and expensive process that provides dates with very specific spatial dates. A second, novel method, is to consider terracing's effect on erosion into the valley basins. By searching for deep valley deposits, the use of OSL profiling could be used to date terracing relatively through the proxy of valley stratigraphy (see Chapter 2). Logically, the onset of terrace construction would constrain the amount of soil eroding into the valleys. By profiling a deep valley section, it is possible that the pre- and post-terrace erosion deposits could be identified and dated. In 2016, the *FRAGSUS Project* tested this method at a number of sites, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 5. Dates obtained from the Ramla Valley, Gozo and the site of Tal-Istabal, Malta, show much promise for the technique. In the lower Ramla Valley, AD 1880±16 is the date after which the degradation of the upper slope was constrained (Appendix 2). At the latter site, AD 1620±23 has been noted as the start of soil accumulation. Further samples were taken in the Marsalforn Valley, and suggest colluvial accumulation from at least 1560±240 BC and throughout later prehistoric times, but do not directly constrain the fixing of the period of terrace construction (see Chapter 5).

The two sites dated above represent the use of Globigerina Limestone and Blue Clay geological zones for terracing. Tal-Istabal, represents a continuation of the hard geology terrace construction methods, utilizing the easily worked limestone to prepare a flat bedrock surface upon which a terrace can be constructed. Interestingly, this site also contained a deep channel for water flow from a cistern and an interconnected wheel well. As such, this weight of archaeological evidence is indicative of the Knights period for production intensification – and this is further corroborated by the OSL date. Similarly, in the Ramla Valley, colonization and field demarcation in the mid-sixteenth century AD associated with the Knights of St John suggests that the Blue Clay slopes were not intensified through terracing until at least this period and well into the late nineteenth century. This is likely because of the difficulty encountered

when working with the soils on these slopes, as the plough horizon is no more than a restructuring of the parent material – a stiff, moisture retentive argillic layer. The intensification of these slopes is therefore an artefact of a drive to increase productivity during the Knights of St John and the British periods, when a significant level of investment could be made to alter this landscape.

8.7. Discussion: balancing fragility and sustainability

The Maltese archipelago can be viewed as an allegory for the Anthropocene world. The analyses of the changing environment have shown that the influence of human actions can have consequences that remain for the *longue durée*. The flourish of agricultural activity in the later Neolithic caused resounding effects to the stability of soils on the islands. Through clearance of scrub and heavily worked soils, the processes of erosion and soil loss began. Quickly, people adapted by working to improve soils using uncomplicated enriching techniques in an attempt to sustain the viability of soil. However, the need to expand agricultural zones also arose, and is possibly visibly indicated by cart ruts (Pace 2004) which have become inscribed into the bedrock. Although much uncertainty exists regarding the function(s) of the cart-ruts (Hughes 1999; Magro Conti & Saliba 2007), a common interpretation is one of short-range commodity and communication routes, likely utilizing wheeled vehicles as indicated through geomorphological investigations (Mottershead *et al.* 2017). While the haulage may well have varied in composition, its perceived existence is indicative of more intensified landscape from the Bronze Age onwards, especially considering the ruts as markers of vectorized movement towards upland areas. Equally so, the process of terracing has been occurring throughout the historic period, and probably stretches back in some form to the Late Bronze Age.

In summary, these threads of intensification would suggest a trajectory of growth throughout the prehistoric period that would have necessitated a greater output from the land. Although soil exhaustion may only be a marker of the most commonly used land, it is likely that a continually increasing population associated with the rise of the Temple Period culture was the true driving force behind the need to intensify the prehistoric landscape. It could therefore be postulated that the notable cultural change between the Temple Period and the Bronze Age was partly influenced by the degrading agricultural landscape. Through time, the population may have dropped through lower birth rates and out-migration, although

the *FRAGSUS* study has confirmed that a complete abandonment did not occur (see Chapters 6 & 11, and Volumes 2 & 3). As such, sustainability gives way to fragility. From the later Bronze Age onwards, the influx of new technologies and external interests in the archipelago allowed the population to adapt the agricultural environment once more. The adoption of agricultural terracing helped to preserve the fragile *status quo*, and is still extant in the modern era. Terraced 'anthroscapes' are an almost indelible mark on the landscape, one which states the general discontent with the natural processes of erosion. As such, they mark human intentionality to change the environment, rather than change occurring as a by-product. Crucially, in the Maltese archipelago, terracing is indicative of the *longue durée* effects of early farming practices. However, in the twenty-first century, the

Maltese Islands have managed to preserve a modest level of sustainability. Nonetheless the reliance on the land for subsistence rapidly diminished through the late twentieth century, allowing the expansion of local produce and market gardening enabled by the permanence of knowledge within folk agrarian practices. In addition to development pressures growing hand-in-hand with an increasing population, the possible abandonment of marginal coastal zone agricultural land, particularly since the mid-twentieth century (Grima 2008a), may have also had an important role to play. Together these factors could lead to a catastrophe not unlike that predicted by Bowen Jones *et al.* (1961). However, continuing rampant development may lead to a much greater anthropic erasure of the agrarian landscape, well before any widespread environmental collapse takes place.

Temple landscapes

The ERC-funded *FRAGSUS Project (Fragility and sustainability in small island environments: adaptation, cultural change and collapse in prehistory, 2013–18)*, led by Caroline Malone (Queens University Belfast) has explored issues of environmental fragility and Neolithic social resilience and sustainability during the Holocene period in the Maltese Islands. This, the first volume of three, presents the palaeo-environmental story of early Maltese landscapes.

The project employed a programme of high-resolution chronological and stratigraphic investigations of the valley systems on Malta and Gozo. Buried deposits extracted through coring and geoarchaeological study yielded rich and chronologically controlled data that allow an important new understanding of environmental change in the islands. The study combined AMS radiocarbon and OSL chronologies with detailed palynological, molluscan and geoarchaeological analyses. These enable environmental reconstruction of prehistoric landscapes and the changing resources exploited by the islanders between the seventh and second millennia BC. The interdisciplinary studies combined with excavated economic and environmental materials from archaeological sites allows *Temple landscapes* to examine the dramatic and damaging impacts made by the first farming communities on the islands' soil and resources. The project reveals the remarkable resilience of the soil-vegetational system of the island landscapes, as well as the adaptations made by Neolithic communities to harness their productivity, in the face of climatic change and inexorable soil erosion. Neolithic people evidently understood how to maintain soil fertility and cope with the inherently unstable changing landscapes of Malta. In contrast, second millennium BC Bronze Age societies failed to adapt effectively to the long-term aridifying trend so clearly highlighted in the soil and vegetation record. This failure led to severe and irreversible erosion and very different and short-lived socio-economic systems across the Maltese islands.

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