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The Cult of Hercules in Roman Malta: a discussion of the evidence

*Anthony Bonanno**

Introduction

It appears that the veneration of the divinity known in the Greco-Roman world as Heracles/Hercules precedes the absorption of the Maltese islands into the Roman commonwealth in 218 B.C. Admittedly, all our evidence belongs chronologically to after that fateful event, but its nature suggests that the divinity with attributes similar to those of the Greco-Roman divinity, namely Melqart (his Punic equivalent) was already incorporated in the religious belief system of the Maltese inhabitants, making it easier for them to absorb the new god with the old one.

Literary evidence

The clearest reference to the worship of Hercules in Malta is that by the 2nd-century AD geographer Ptolemy (Geog. 4.3.13) who places a sanctuary of Heracles (Ἡρακλέους ἱερόν) in a southern location of the island of Malta, whereas he locates another sanctuary, of Hera (Ἥρας ἱερόν), in an eastern location of the same island. The most serious problem regarding this literary reference is that it dates to almost four centuries after the Roman conquest, since the floruit of Ptolemy, the geographer par excellence of Alexandria, falls around A.D. 130-178. Moreover, whereas we have another very clear statement of the existence of the sanctuary of Juno (the Roman equivalent of Hera) two centuries earlier, one that further declares its great antiquity and international fame (Cicero, Ver. 2.4.103-04; 5.184), we have nothing of the sort for that of Hercules. Cicero, for his own purposes as prosecuting lawyer, is very generous in heaping praises on the sanctuary of Juno which the accused Verres plundered of its treasures. He states that it was held at the same

level of veneration as the sanctuary of Juno on the island of Samos, and that even the Numidian king Masinissa was aware of the sanctity of the sanctuary and did his part to show his respect for it. Cicero further states that it remained untouched (*inviolatum*) both by pirates, who regularly spent their winters in its sheltered waters, and by frequent episodes of naval warfare in the sea around the islands. In spite of all this, Verres, who was the Roman governor of Sicily for the years 73-71 B.C., had no scruples in despoiling it of its precious items.

But why is Cicero totally silent on the sanctuary of Hercules? Had there been a similar sanctuary, or temple, dedicated to Hercules, Cicero (or Verres for that matter) would not have missed it, and I do not see any obvious reason why he should simply ignore it. Since epigraphic and, possibly, numismatic evidence supports such an existence,¹ however, there is always the possibility that Cicero simply wanted to concentrate his attack on Verres' misdoings, and once Verres had targeted only the sanctuary of Juno for his spoliations, there was no scope for the prosecution lawyer to divert the attention of the jury unnecessarily to another temple. I suppose that this is a classic case in which absence of evidence does not necessarily imply evidence of absence. On the other hand, the onus of the proof of the existence of anything is on the researcher who makes the claim for its existence, rather than on the one who negates it. In this case the only way to make up for this absence in the literary evidence is to look for it in some other type of evidence.

Epigraphic Evidence

The most apparently stringent evidence for a cult of Hercules in the centuries immediately following the Roman conquest comes from not just one, but two identical marble candelabra, each carrying a dedication by two men to the divinity in question in two different scripts and two different languages, namely, Phoenician and Greek. The upper part of each candelabrum is a fusiform column decorated with alternating acanthus leaves and lotus petals, and as such does not seem to contribute to the

¹ See below.

topic under discussion except, to some extent, to the Hellenistic date of the monuments.² The part that concerns us most is the cubic base which is decorated by simple mouldings around the upper and lower edges and which carries the bilingual inscription on one of the four vertical faces.

The Phoenician inscription records the dedication by two brothers carrying theophoric names, Abdosir and Osirsamar, sons of Osirsamar, son of Abdosir, to Melqart, lord of Tyre. It is assumed, I think rightly, that the main and most important version is this one and that the Greek version below it is a translation of it, evidently intended to serve some purpose, probably to communicate the message of the main dedication to a wider audience where Greek had become a more diffused language of communication than before. It seems that the Phoenician script offers the strongest indication of a date, a second-century B.C. one,³ the style of the Greek script being generally agreed not to offer such a reliable dating.⁴

The Greek version translates the names of the dedicators into Greek theophoric ones, Dionysios and Sarapion, sons of Sarapion, and the name of the god Melqart to Heracles who is given the epithet of *Archēgetēs* (lord, leader or protector of the city). Although there are good and valid grammatical reasons for the adjective '*Tyrioi*' to be read as qualifying the dedicators in the nominative ('Tyrian' being their *ethnikon*, or place of origin), as it has been read in all previous literature,⁵ in view of the Punic version – in which 'Tyrian' is clearly associated with 'Melqart' – I

² A. Bonanno (1982). But see M.G. Amadasi Guzzo and M.P. Rossignani (2002), who imply the possibility that the candelabra might have a provenance outside the Maltese islands. On the other hand, a parallelism had been struck with the στῆλαι δύο seen by Herodotus (2.4) in the temple of Melqart at Tyre (G. Perrot and C. Chipiez {1885}, 78), a comparison rebutted by M. Szynger (1974-75), and with the third-century B.C. 'column' of Protamedes in Cyrene known as the '*agyieus*' of Apollo (E. Di Filippo Balestrazzi *et al.* {1976}, 153).

³ *C.I.S.*, 1.122, 122bis.

⁴ *C.I.G.*, 3.681 and 5753. See, for instance, A.G. Woodhead (1981), 62, confirmed by J. Prag (personal communication, 2011).

⁵ M.G. Amadasi Guzzo (1967), 15-17; M.G. Amadasi Guzzo and M.P. Rossignani (2002), and E.D.R. 112574 (http://www.edr-edr.it/edr_programmi/res_complex_comune.php?do=book&id_nr=&provinz=&land=M&fo_

prefer to see the same association in the Greek version, namely, 'Tyrioi' in the dative singular form (with an iota adscript) agreeing with Heracles, especially since Melqart/Herakles was the Tyrian protective divinity par excellence.

Archaeological Evidence

The third type of evidence that needs to be discussed is the archaeological one, but, for reasons that will become apparent further on, it would be more suitable to discuss this in connection with the possible location of the sanctuary of Hercules.

Location of the other Greco-Roman Temples

Four Greco-Roman divinities are so far documented by different sources of information as having places of worship in Roman Malta, of which two were sanctuaries and two temples.

After Heracles, mentioned, as we have seen, in the bilingual inscription on the twin marble candelabra dated to the second century B.C., but without any reference to a place of worship, the next Greco-Roman divinity to be mentioned by the textual sources is Juno. Juno, like Hercules, also absorbed through the same process of syncretism a preceding Punic divinity, this time Ashtart, whose name is documented by hundreds of votive inscriptions found in her sanctuary at Tas-Silġ.⁶ She is also, most probably, the divinity which in the locally minted coinage of Malta during the first two centuries of Roman domination is depicted as Isis/Ashtart.⁷

antik=&Bibliografia=&Testo=&booltesto=AND&Testo2=&bool=AND&ordinamento=id_nr&javasi=javascriptsi&se_foto=tutte&lang=ita)

⁶ M.G. Amadasi Guzzo (2004–2005); (2011) with previous bibliography.

⁷ E. Coleiro (1971); A. Bonanno (2005), 156-158, and C. Perassi and M. Novarese (2006), 2389-2390. The same divinity seems to have been represented by the headless marble statue wearing the same type of hairstyle and a unique and elaborate necklace on her chest. See A. Bonanno (2005), 225.

The only indication of the location of this sanctuary given by Cicero (*Ver.* 2.4.103) is that it was situated ‘on a promontory not far from the main town’ of the island of Malta (*ab eo [oppido] non longe in promuntorio*). Three centuries later, the geographer Ptolemy gives its coordinates, placing it at the east end of the island. Local historical tradition, started by the French scholar Jean Quintin d’Autun in his earliest description of Malta published in 1536, has in the last five centuries placed it in the Grand Harbour, precisely on the Birgu peninsula where an ancient pink granite column supported the roof of the chapel of Fort St Angelo. In the 1960s, however, that tradition was found to be erroneously founded by the full-scale archaeological excavations of a multi-period sanctuary at Tas-Silġ, a small hill situated at the inner end of Marsaxlokk harbour. Here hundreds of dedications to Ashtart inscribed on cooking pots, plates and other ceramic vessels – as well as others carved on stone elements – have securely identified the divinity worshipped in that sanctuary as precisely that divinity, that is, Ashtart. A handful of other ceramic inscriptions with dedications to HERA suggest the eventual syncretism of the Punic Ashtart with the Greek Hera. Since then, that sanctuary has been universally recognized as the sanctuary of Juno referred to by both Cicero and Ptolemy,⁸ even though, strangely enough, no inscriptions carrying the Latin name of that divinity have ever turned up there.

The first temple to be mentioned by a written source datable to early Roman imperial times is the one dedicated to Proserpina. It is described by a marble inscription in Latin as an ancient decaying temple that was restored by a certain Chrestion, a freedman and procurator of Augustus for the islands of Malta and Gozo. As the inscription was reported by the local antiquarian, Gian Francesco Abela, to have been discovered in 1613 on Mtarfa hill, the location of this temple of Proserpina has, since then, always been placed on the edge of the Mtarfa promontory facing ancient Melita from the northwest.⁹ According to Count Gian Antonio Ciantar,

⁸ M.G. Amadasi Guzzo (2000) (in particular p. 181, with previous bibliography).

⁹ G.F. Abela (1647), 209, and location marked H on map of the ancient town of Melita at the beginning of his volume. On p.209, Abela assigned to the same temple of Proserpina some cornices, columns, and other marble pieces, that in his times were found near the San Ċir church, close to Ġnien is-Sultan (“*nel luogo della Chiesa di S. Michele vicino al*

another antiquarian who followed Abela's footsteps in the 18th century, some marble slabs that were cut up and re-employed in the marble architectural decoration of the façade of the Auberge d'Italie (one of the headquarters of the Knights of St John) and that of Palazzo Castellania, both in Valletta, came from the same spot.¹⁰

The fourth and last Greco-Roman divinity to be recorded is Apollo whose temple was constructed (or reconstructed) in marble by a gentleman, whose name has not survived, out of his own pocket. He is described as the first citizen of the Maltese (*primus omnium Melitensium*) and was rewarded for this generous act by the erection of a monument, probably a statue, supported by a marble pedestal carrying a long Latin inscription.¹¹ The left part carrying his name is missing. The inscribed pedestal was discovered in 1747 in the grounds of the Benedictine monastery a few scores of meters inside the main gate of Mdina, but a ponderous structure encountered during a short archaeological excavation in Mesquita Square, further to the northwest, has been tentatively identified as the foundation of its Punic antecedent, possibly dedicated to Melqart or Baal Hammon.¹² This would make it the only temple so far recorded within the walls of ancient Melite.¹³

giardino detto del Rè", thus contributing to further confusion regarding the provenance of these marble architectural fragments.

¹⁰ O. Bres (1816), 351; A.A. Caruana (1882), 88, and A.A. Caruana (1899), 281.

¹¹ *C.I.L.* X. 7495; *E.D.R.* 112567 (http://www.edredr.it/edr_programmi/res_complex_comune.php?do=book&id_nr=&provinz=&land=M&fo_antik=&Bibliografia=&Testo=&booltesto=AND&Testo2=&bool=AND&ordinamento=id_nr&javasi=javascrptsi&se_foto=tutte&lang=ita)

¹² N. Cutajar (2001), 81-82.

¹³ Another inscription now housed in the Cathedral Museum in Mdina, dedicated by a certain Iustus, is generally taken to refer to the same temple of Apollo: *C.I.L.* 10.8318; *E.D.R.* 112554 (http://www.edr-edr.it/edr_programmi/res_complex_comune.php?do=book&id_nr=&provinz=&land=M&fo_antik=&Bibliografia=&Testo=&booltesto=AND&Testo2=&bool=AND&ordinamento=id_nr&javasi=javascrptsi&se_foto=tutte&lang=ita)

Location of the Sanctuary of Hercules

Marsaxlokk

As has already been noted, the bilingual inscriptions on the twin marble candelabra do not in any way reveal the location of the place of worship of Hercules. The coordinates given by Ptolemy, on the other hand, have been deemed to provide enough grounds to place it somewhere in the south of Malta. It was again Jean Quintin who in 1536 identified an extensive scatter of archaeological ruins in the Marsaxlokk area as the remains of the temple of Hercules.¹⁴ As a matter of fact, he tentatively based this identification on his interpretation of Ptolemy's coordinates ("*si modo vera e Ptolemaeo divino*"). The description that Quintin gives of these ruins which according to him spread over an area with a three-mile perimeter, however, reveals that he was in fact referring not to classical ruins, but to prehistoric megalithic remains which, with the benefit of hindsight and recent studies, we can identify with those of Borġ in-Nadur in the second major inlet of the larger Marsaxlokk harbour.¹⁵ We are not sure whether any of the surviving remains of the Roman villa some 200m. North of Borġ in-Nadur were visible in the 16th century for Quintin to include them in his presumed remains of the temple of Hercules,¹⁶ since they too included some stone blocks of relatively large format, even if not as impressively large as the prehistoric ones. Nonetheless, he was responsible, if not for giving birth to, certainly for reaffirming the deeply rooted tradition locating this ancient sanctuary at Marsaxlokk.¹⁷ Abela went one further: without any hesitation, he identified the temple of Hercules with the archaeological remains at Kasar, i.e., Tas-Silġ.¹⁸ Abela

¹⁴ J. Quintin (1536), A3 (ed. H.C.R. Vella {1980} 22-23).

¹⁵ For a comprehensive study of this site, see the collection of essays edited by D. Tanasi and N.C. Vella (2011).

¹⁶ They could have been later on, in the 19th century, as suggested by A. Bugeja (2011), 27-33.

¹⁷ For an overall treatment of this issue, see A. Bonanno (1982).

¹⁸ On the identification of Abela's *Kasar* with Tas-Silġ, see A. Bugeja (2015).

was so emphatic in his assertions, supporting them with the authority of various writers and physical finds, that a faithful transcription of his statement is in order:

“Di questo superbo edificio n’habbiamo veduto a’ tempi nostri qualche parte delle prime fundamenta, e del muro per ‘patio [sic] di poche striscie, ò file sopra terra di grosse pietre, ben lauorate, e poste insieme, che dauano ancor segno della sua ammirabile magnificenza, no[n] già di fabbrica de’ Saraceni, ma si bene d’antico Tempio de’ gentili, e di quel famosissimo d’Ercole Tirio cotanto inalzato, e celebrato da’ Scrittori (di cui à lungo discorreremo à suo luogo) concorrendo tutti, e di comun accordo, affermando i Greci, e Latini, che in questa parte di Marsa Sirocco sia stato situato, venendo quest’ opinione assai ben comprouata dalle medaglie, pezze di statue d’idoletti, e d’altre cose, minimi auanzi di quella vana gentilità, e falsa religione, quiui ritrouate sotto il Magisterio del Principe VVignacourt, mentre alcuni nell’ istesso luogo cauando, scioccamente pensauano far acquisto di ricco tesoro. E veramente ben considerate, e maturamente osseruate la qualità, situazione, e forma della fabbrica, con altre congetture, che risultano dalle cose predette, non si può lasciare di conchiudere, e con ragione, che colà non sia stato altro edificio, fuori che quello del Tempio d’Ercole, chiamato souente da gl’antichi scrittori Melitense [sic].¹⁹

It is, therefore, not surprising that, when the identical pair of candelabra with the Melqart/Heracles inscriptions surfaced in Abela’s collection, their up-to-then undocumented provenance was fixed as Marsaxlokk.²⁰ When in the wake of the 1960s’ excavations the archaeological site of Tas-Silġ became firmly established as that of the sanctuary of Juno, rather than that of Hercules, the location of the latter needed to be sought elsewhere, even though a single attempt has been made to suggest the presence of a cult of Hercules at Tas-Silġ itself, at least in conjunction

¹⁹ G.F. Abela (1647), 108.

²⁰ On the earliest documentation of the existence of the candelabra, see A. Bonanno (1982), 200-203.

with that of Juno.²¹ The conjecture of this possibility was later founded on one fourth-century B.C. Punic inscription incised on a cup bearing the name Milk'ashtart.²² Apart from that, none of the ancient sources refer to a sanctuary dedicated to both deities: Cicero referred only to the one of Juno, and Ptolemy placed the two sanctuaries widely distant from each other.

Żurrieq

Since Ptolemy placed the sanctuary of Hercules to the south of the island of Malta – as opposed to the one of Hera which he placed on its east end – it is only natural that modern archaeologists sought physical traces of it along, or close to, the southern coast of the island. One of these was the late Tancred Gouder who “speculated” whether its relics could be identified with an ancient building in fine large ashlar blocks in Żurrieq.²³ This building survives today as a beautiful, surprisingly well preserved square room, often referred to misleadingly as a ‘tower’, built of large ashlar blocks of globigerina limestone cut to fit with each other to perfection without any mortar. When it was described in some detail and illustrated by Jean Hoüel in 1787, it was already incorporated within the back garden of the official house of the Żurrieq Archpriest, as it still is.²⁴ But Hoüel noted that this square structure was part of a larger building complex of which he provided a detailed plan and elevation, and which he

²¹ H.C.R. Vella (1982), 272-276. See also F.O. Hvidberg-Hansen (1986), 182-183, and E. Lipiński (1995), 271-274.

²² M.G. Amadasi Guzzo (1993). On Milk'ashtart and the possibility of male divinity associated with Ashtart, see M.G. Amadasi Guzzo (2000), 181.

²³ T. Gouder (1978), 181-186. He also provided details of measurements and previous opinions on the structure.

²⁴ J. Hoüel (1787), 97-98. This ancient structure had already been noted by G.F. Abela (1647), 102 (“*Nell’entrata del Casale à chi parte dalla Valletta, si da à vedere un vescigio [sic] d’antichissimo edificio di grossissime pietre, lavorate ad angoli retti poste l’una sopra l’altra senza cemento...*”). This is not to be confused with the remains of a long wall with the same type of ashlar blocks (still surviving today) in Safi, since Safi is listed briefly in the following page, together with Bubaqra and Kirkop.

identified as a ‘Greek house’.²⁵ The equally well preserved Egyptianizing cavetto cornice crowning it, however, places it squarely in the local Punic architectural tradition.

Unfortunately, two attempts to explore levels below the floor by means of archaeological excavations inside and outside the structure did not seem to produce datable material, even less so evidence of a sacred site. In his account of the 1938 investigation, the author of the report, R.V. Galea, makes reference to ‘recent’ prior inspections by other archaeologists which remained unpublished.²⁶ Two further walls with the same construction technique were traced in Carmel Street on the outside, one extending for about 5m. at right angles to the other. These walls had been planned and drawn by Jean Hoüel in his 1787 publication as forming two further rooms of the same building. The ‘Greek’ cornice that crowned the top of these walls, of which Hoüel reproduced the profile, had in the meantime been hacked away in order to extend the height of the walls in modern masonry.²⁷ In 1964, an L-shaped trench was excavated against the external south wall of the square structure, but it did not reveal stratified layers, and the pottery sherds ranged from Punic to modern. However, the structure was found to stand on “stepped foundations on the edge of a vertical drop in bedrock, probably one side of an ancient quarry”.²⁸

During the same 1938 investigation, a cistern was inspected in the cellar of a house nearby.²⁹ The roofing system of this cistern – which measured 19’ x 15’6” and 22’ deep – was clearly of the ancient Punic-Roman type found in various other ancient sites in Malta. It was characterized of two flat arches, each consisting of voussoirs 1’7” thick and 2’2”-2’9” long with varying width, that supported rows of large rectangular slabs of varying

²⁵ J. Hoüel (1787), pl. 259, figs 1-2.

²⁶ R.V. Galea (1939), 2-4.

²⁷ While identifying the building complex as “pre-Roman..., probably a country-house of the Phoenician period”, Ashby (1915), 49, dates this other cornice to Roman times when, in his view, the building might still have been in use.

²⁸ C.G. Zammit (1965), 6-7.

²⁹ R.V. Galea (1939), 3-4.

width, but all c. 6' long and 1'6" thick. The description given of this roofing system fits exactly with that of an ancient cistern discovered near a Roman villa at L-Iklin in 1975, published by the present writer,³⁰ and another one in 1913 at Wied is-Sewda.³¹ Of great interest is the fact that a similar cistern was encountered by Jean Hoüel on his way from Żurrieq to Qrendi in the opposite direction.³² It had an unspecified number of arches supporting rows of large slabs 9-10 feet long and was connected to another 'six fathoms away' whose roof slabs of the same type were, instead, supported by pillars, probably like the cistern of the ancient villa at Ta' Kaċċatura, near Birżebbuġa. Even if none of these cisterns had any connection with the building described above, together with the ancient wall at Safi, the villas at Ғal Millieri and at Tad-Dawl near Ғal Kirkop, they mark an intensive concentration of ancient buildings in the area to warrant a contemporary religious building on which their inhabitants gravitated.

Furthermore, the same cavetto cornice mentioned above is indicative of a religious, rather than a domestic, structure both in the ancient Egyptian context and, in the western Mediterranean, in the Phoenician-Punic context, including the Maltese one. In fact, specimens of such cornices in Malta have only been identified here and at the sanctuary of Tas-Silġ where a double cavetto cornice was identified as originally crowning (like a capital) a square pillar at the monumental entrance of the Phoenician-Punic temple.³³ At Tas-Silġ, several individual other stone blocks carved with a single cavetto cornice (probably originally forming a line crowning some other wall) were found reutilized in later walls.³⁴ Two more specimens of stone blocks with this type of carved moulding, still

³⁰ A. Bonanno (1981), 219-220.

³¹ T. Zammit (1914), 4.

³² J. Hoüel (1787), 98.

³³ A. Ciasca (1991). See also G. Hölbl (1989), 146-151.

³⁴ G. Hölbl (1989), 150, pl.19, 2.

bearing traces of plastering, were retrieved from the fill of a Bronze Age silo pit, later reutilized for dumping human remains, at Mtarfa.³⁵

Ras ir-Raħeb

The archaeological site of Ras ir-Raħeb stands on the tip of promontory close to the edge of a precipitous sea cliff to the North-West of ancient Melitē. As such, it does not in any way correspond with Ptolemy's coordinates for the temple of Hercules. In 1647, Abela distinguished between two different place names in the area: *Gebel el Raheb* and *Ras el Cneyes*.³⁶ The first one seems to refer to the very edge of the promontory because it was known as such from the semblance of a monk (*raħeb*) given by the cliff profile "as seen from the sea by anyone passing underneath it".³⁷ The second one seems to denote the promontory projecting out on a higher terrace some hundred meters to the East where remains of a prehistoric megalithic temple still stand today. Abela in his entry for this place names Bosio and other previous writers who identified the ruins with the temple of Juno, himself preferring Quintin's location of the latter in a space between the town of Birgu and the Castello.³⁸

Temi Zammit, on the other hand, made no such distinction and applied the name "Ras-il-Knejjes" to the lower promontory where on 1 December, 1922, he noted the two upright megaliths that stand out to this very day, which he attributed to "a neolithic station of which no other trace is visible", and a spread of "courses of masonry" indicating the presence of "a large settlement of a later period".³⁹ Closer to the megaliths, a square structure of c. 170 square feet, with a door sill, had

³⁵ F.S. Mallia (1974), 51; G. Hölbl (1989), 149-150, pl.19,1.

³⁶ G.F. Abela (1647), 67-68.

³⁷ G.F. Abela (1647), 68: "*Montagna del Monaco, così detta per cagione di certa figura, che in quella somiglianza sembra quivi delineata à chiunque di sotto passa per il mare*".

³⁸ G.F. Abela (1647), 67. Among these writers was Marc Antonio Haxiak (N.L.M. *Biblioteca* ms. 15, ff. 78v.-10v. and ms. 465, ff. 39v.-71v.; see A. Bonanno {1982}, 193, n. 13, and 195, n. 25).

³⁹ T. Zammit (1924a), 5. See also T. Zammit (1922-1924), 30.

just been exposed by agricultural activity framing a floor of terracotta tiles. Apart from an abundance of pottery sherds scattered on a wide area, he also noted the presence of a water cistern close to the square structure, and speculated that the permanent spring flowing out from the cliff edge a few hundred meters away might have once been utilized by the settlement. No archaeological excavation was undertaken, and Zammit made no further conjectures on the meaning of the site.

The site was designated as a Roman building “with megalithic work” in the list of archaeological sites drawn up by Diana and Alexander Woolner in 1957,⁴⁰ only a few years prior to 1961-62 when a team of visiting British naval officers and personnel were allowed to conduct surface exploration of a building complex around the square structure identified by Zammit. No proper records of the excavation seem to have been kept and no cases of pottery have been traced in the reserve collection of the Museum Department and its succeeding agencies. But a short report was published in the Museum Department Annual Report for that year.⁴¹ The list of the more salient items recovered included: Sicilian Punic coins as well as a late Roman one dated A.D. 337-361; a small ivory plaque; some fragmentary terracotta figurines “of provincial Roman manufacture”, including two nude males, a cloaked figure, a draped woman, a small satyr head, a head with cap, and a leg; as well as two pottery attachments depicting satyr (or, rather, Silenus) masks. A more detailed typed and undated report of the excavation was submitted by Capt. David Scott, the leader of the team, attached to a letter signed by him and addressed to Dr David Trump, then Curator of Archaeology at the National Museum on 23rd March, 1962.⁴² In the letter Scott expressed for the first time the opinion that the site “was used as a **sacred site** from neolithic times up

⁴⁰ D. Woolner and A. Woolner (1957), 5.

⁴¹ C.G. Zammit (1963), 6, fig. 4, pl. 4. The author also states that a large quantity of pottery was retrieved from the cistern adjacent to the building, ranging from coarse domestic Roman to modern wares. Some Roman pots were reconstructed and for some time exhibited in a showcase in the corridor of the peristyle of the Rabat Roman Domus, along with other finds discussed below.

⁴² D. Scott (1962)

to about the 4th century A.D.”, an opinion clearly based on the presumed age of the megaliths to the dates provided by the coins.

I had visited the site on different occasions prior to 1977 when, in an article on the distribution of Roman villas in the Maltese islands, I included the site (perhaps prematurely) in the list of such villas, mainly on the basis of the presence of a rectangular block of stone with two square holes which appeared to be very similar to the typical counterweights for olive presses found on such sites.⁴³ On second thoughts, the location of the site on an exposed, windswept promontory with very little soil cover is not the ideal place for cultivating olive trees and, therefore, the stone block might not be an olive pressing device at all.

Another scholar who was of the opinion that the ancient remains on the lower terrace of Ras ir-Raħeb were those of a religious building was Frank Ventura who highlighted Ptolemy’s inaccuracies, and suggested that if one allowed for imaginary error boxes around Ptolemy’s coordinates of the Maltese landmarks and rotated the whole combination of these points and boxes clockwise around a centre-point on Malta, the same error boxes would cover the real position on a modern map with the corresponding scale, not only of the two main cities, but also of the sanctuary now identified with that of Hera/Juno at tas-Silġ.⁴⁴ The centre point of the error box denoting the sanctuary of Hercules ends up on a point at Dingli cliffs, not far from the site of Ras ir-Raħeb.⁴⁵ The author ends with a cautionary note about the futility of seeking the sanctuary of Hercules in the south of Malta basing oneself on Ptolemy. According to him Ptolemy appears to have meant to place it “on the high ground to the west and south-west of the island.”⁴⁶

⁴³ A. Bonanno (1977). I might also have been influenced by Scott’s report which also identified the same block as part of an olive press, albeit an “Arabic” one (page 2). Even Harrison Lewis (1977), 92-93, was of the opinion that the site was a country house and that the same stone block with the two square holes might have been “the base of an oil press”, though at the end he agreed with Trump that it could have “served a religious purpose instead”.

⁴⁴ F. Ventura (1988).

⁴⁵ F. Ventura (1988), 267, n.22.

⁴⁶ F. Ventura (1988), 269.

On this point, Mario Buhagiar, in an article published in 1988, seemed to be undecided.⁴⁷ In one place he found Ventura's arguments in favour of a connection with the temple of Hercules as "not conclusive".⁴⁸ Towards the end, however, he believed that one particular statuette, which had been tentatively identified by B.S.J Isserlin as representing Hercules, gave more substance to those arguments.⁴⁹

A different approach was adopted by Nicholas Vella, an archaeologist, who took stock of the figurative material recovered from the unscientific excavation of the site in 1960, as well as its suggestive topography.⁵⁰ In its location on the very edge of an outstanding promontory (reflected even in the toponym),⁵¹ Vella saw a very convenient landfall for ancient mariners plying the open sea on the lee of the south-west flanks of Malta. Out of the figurative items that he considered most indicative of a sacred place dedicated to Hercules, the most stringent one is the headless, and otherwise mutilated, very crude terracotta figurine (some 8 cm. high) representing a standing male wearing a short tunic and a cloak-like piece covering his back and secured by two elements both knotted on the front, one below the neck and the other round the waist. This arrangement vaguely recalls representations of Hercules, though no close parallels are cited. The other male terracotta figurine replicates more closely the iconography of the "Hercules in Repose" that was widely diffused throughout the Hellenistic world. The association of the other objects (such as the ivory plaque with a crouching boar engraved in low relief, and the two Silenic mask handles) with Hercules is less convincing.

Figurative items of larger size and more durable and precious materials (such as marble and bronze) have also been found in innumerable archaeological contexts of a domestic (or secular) nature, let alone more modestly sized ones and of cheaper material, like terracotta. Admittedly,

⁴⁷ M. Buhagiar (1988), 69-72.

⁴⁸ M. Buhagiar (1988), 70.

⁴⁹ M. Buhagiar (1988), 72.

⁵⁰ N.C. Vella (2002)

⁵¹ Ras ir-Raġeb, meaning 'the headland of the monk'.

several sanctuaries of the Greco-Roman world are characterized by mostly identical terracotta representations of the divinities to whom they were dedicated, or of their votaries, but these are usually found in vast numbers. So just two fragmentary terracotta figurines, even if reasonably identifiable with Hercules, are really not enough to clinch the argument in favour of the identification of the Ras ir-Raḥeb site as the sanctuary of that deity referred to by Ptolemy.

I too have found myself involved, on several occasions, with this divinity in the Maltese context, the last one being the writing of an article in which I changed the identity of the bearded divinity represented by a 'veiled' head in marble discovered by Temi Zammit in an underground chamber during his excavations of the grounds behind the Roman Domus in Rabat in the early 1920s.⁵² Zammit had identified it as Pluto (or Hades).⁵³ Its physiognomic features coincide with a wide range of representations of bearded divinities, such as Zeus/Jupiter, Asclepius and Serapis, apart from Hades. What sets it apart is the head cover which was previously identified as a 'veil', even an extension of the 'toga'.⁵⁴ A closer examination of some photographs of the head taken before it went missing in the 1980s allowed me to identify the head cover as the lion's skin worn by Hercules.⁵⁵

In spite of this identification, I do not think that its find spot allows me to suggest that the statuette to which it originally belonged had formed part of a sacred place, not even a shrine dedicated to Hercules, let alone a temple or a sanctuary in the area. I also do not think that this *simulacrum*, because of the vicinity of its find spot to the main gate of Mdina, should lend any support to the hypothesis that the sanctuary of Hercules should be identified as the same one which in Roman times became the temple of Apollo recorded by the inscription mentioned above, found inside Mdina,

⁵² T. Zammit (1924b) entry for the 24th June, 1924.

⁵³ T. Zammit (1925), 4.

⁵⁴ T. Zammit (1930), 24.

⁵⁵ A. Bonanno (2015).

a short distance from that gate.⁵⁶ It is simply impossible to reconcile such a hypothesis with Ptolemy's testimony that places the clearly extra-urban sanctuary of Hercules at a considerable distance away from the town and makes no mention of a temple of Apollo.

The dimensions of the head (maximum height: 12 cm.; maximum width: 11 cm.) would have fitted well on a statuette about 90 cm. high which would not have been out of place in a domestic context, as well as in a sacred precinct. Indeed, there is so far no indication that the archaeological context of the find, the area to the North of the Roman Domus, was other than a domestic quarter.

Concluding remarks

Where does all this leave us in our quest for the sanctuary of Hercules? In summary, whereas the existence of a sacred site dedicated to the cult of Hercules is fairly well established, even if based on a somewhat late literary source, we seem to be faced with two options for its possible location, both of them away from the main urban centre of the island, but neither of them supported by textual evidence. The Żurrieq area is characterized by remains of an intensive settlement, but no figurative (or other) evidence.⁵⁷ Ras ir-Raġeb, on the other hand, enjoys a suggestive topographic location as a prominent landfall for mariners and has produced at least two, albeit crude, small and not certain, representations of the god, as well as other small items that may somehow bear connection with him.

The scales seem to dip in favour of the latter option, but needs further confirmation which, as remarked by its proposer, can only be attained by further, more rigorously conducted archaeological excavations. It is hoped that this extremely vulnerable site will not be allowed to deteriorate further by both natural and human agency before such scientific investigation takes place.

⁵⁶ N. Cutajar (2001), shared by M.G. Amadasi Guzzo and M.P. Rossignani (2002).

⁵⁷ The reported provenance of a bronze ('metallic') statuette of Mercury from Żurrieq, illustrated in G.F. Abela (1647), 193, and declared "lost" by A.A. Caruana (1882), 114, does not add any positive contribution to the question at issue.

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