



Neighbourly ties: Characterizing local and Sicilian pottery in post-medieval Malta

Russell Palmer^a, Simona Raneri^{b,*}, Paolo Mazzoleni^c, Nicholas C. Vella^d, Germana Barone^c, Wim De Clercq^e

^a Forschungszentrum Gotha, University of Erfurt, Schloss Friedenstein, 99867 Gotha, Germany

^b Department of Earth Sciences, University of Pisa, Via Santa Maria, 53, 53126 Pisa, Italy

^c Department of Biological, Geological and Environmental Sciences, University of Catania, C.so Italia 57, 95129 Catania, Italy

^d Department of Classics and Archaeology, Archaeology Centre, University of Malta, Msida MSD 2080, Malta

^e Department of Archaeology, Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 35, Ghent University, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

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ABSTRACT

The development of post-medieval archaeology has been uneven in the Mediterranean. While major advances have been made in areas, such as the Aegean and Italy, others have garnered little sustained archaeological interest. In Malta, one of the principal barriers to the development of post-medieval archaeology has been the lack of knowledge and published findings regarding one of the most important find-types: pottery. The present study presents the results of the first archaeometric (chemical and minero-petrographic) analysis of post-medieval pottery in Malta, which sheds light on the changing ceramic relationships between Malta and Sicily during the 17th to early 20th centuries. The results demonstrate that, on the one hand, locally-made Maltese pottery remained important throughout the post-medieval period, as did pottery from the Messina Straits area. While, on the other hand, pottery from the Syracuse area can be shown to be linked to the activities of the navy of the Knights of St John.

1. Introduction

The development of post-medieval archaeology has been uneven in the Mediterranean. While major advances have been made in areas, such as the Aegean and Italy, others have garnered little sustained archaeological interest. In Malta, post-medieval archaeology is in its extreme infancy, with traditional archaeological foci almost entirely dominated by ancient and prehistoric studies (see [Sagona, 2015](#) for a recent review of earlier periods). Unlike in many parts of the world, where the study of the post-1500 CE world is an established, if sometimes marginalized, part of archaeological practice, it has until recently received little attention from Maltese archaeologists (works published since 2000 include [Buhagiar, 2016](#); [Docter et al., 2012](#); [Hunt and Vella, 2008](#); [Palmer, 2014, 2016a, 2016b](#); [Said-Zammit, 2016](#); [Vella, 2016](#)). A significant barrier to the development of Maltese post-medieval archaeology has been the lack of any in-depth study of pottery. The only post-medieval finds category to receive any sustained archaeological attention has been clay tobacco pipes, several assemblages of which have been studied and published by John [Wood \(1998, 1999, 2008\)](#). The aim of this article is to begin removing this barrier by presenting

the results of the first chemical and minero-petrographic characterization of pottery from post-medieval contexts in Malta (see [Mommens et al., 2006](#) for a rare archaeometric NAA study of Maltese pottery).

In Sicily, as in the rest of Italy, when applied to pottery studies, ‘post-medieval’ tends to have an approximate cut-off date of around 1800, with the majority of research focusing on earlier 16th or 17th century contexts ([Verrocchio, 2009](#)). Building on a growing literature concerning post-medieval Sicilian pottery (see [Arcifa and Fiorilla, 1994](#); [Caminnecci, 2012](#); [De Miro et al., 2009](#); [Parello, 2012](#)), the sherds included in this investigation extend the date range from the 17th to early 20th centuries, providing new evidence for not only the Maltese, but also Sicilian context. Furthermore, given the millennia-old history of transfer and exchange between the islands, the current research provides new evidence for the reformulations of that connection during the modern era.

2. Historical and archaeological context

The period encompassed by the pottery assemblages included in this study stretches across traditional historical periodization and the rule of

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: simona.raneri@unipi.it (S. Raneri).

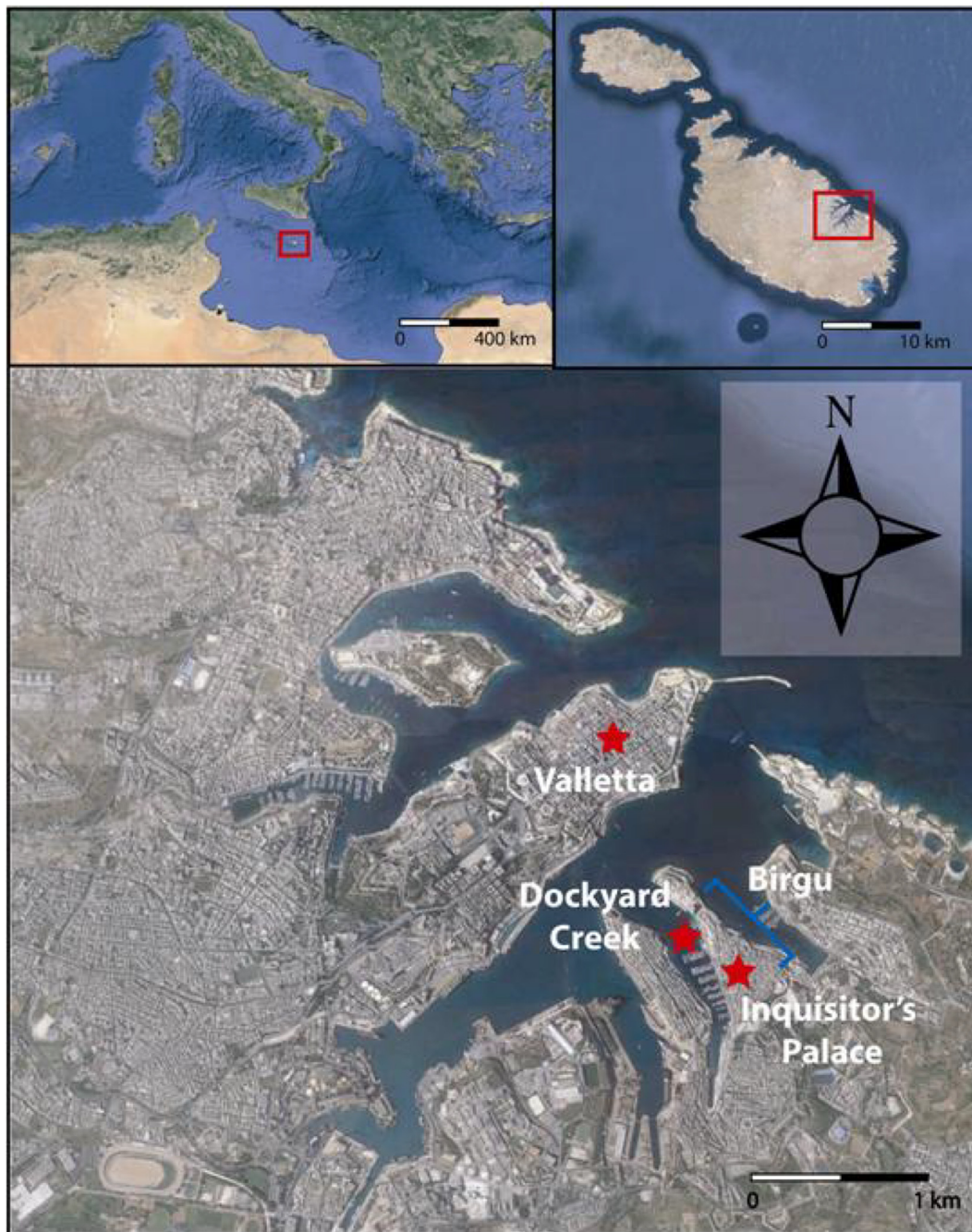


Fig. 1. Map showing the locations of Dockyard Creek and the Inquisitor's Palace, Malta (R. Palmer).

three foreign powers: the Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem (1530–1798), French (1798–1800), and the British Empire (1800–1964). Covering a period from the 17th to early 20th centuries, the assemblages have been excavated from two sites, one terrestrial and the other underwater. The former is the site known as the Inquisitor's Palace, and the latter is located in nearby Dockyard Creek, both situated on the southern side of the Grand Harbour, across from the capital, Valletta (Fig. 1). All of the assemblages are curated by Heritage Malta, without whose help and willingness this study would not have been possible.

During the reign of the Knights of St John, Malta was also home to a branch of the Roman Inquisition, which from 1574 had its headquarters in Birgu (Vittoriosa). The courtyard palace was expanded and remodelled several times during the Inquisition's residence, especially the lower levels which included a prison (Balzan, 2013; Palmer, 2016b). In

the 19th century, the site was reused by the British army, initially as a barrack and infirmary, and subsequently, after 1830, for the housing of army officers. It remained a mess house until 1906 (Gambin, 2006). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, several archaeological excavations took place in areas of the building that were being renovated, with the intention of discovering more about the architectural development of the building. The areas focused loosely on the prison block and are named after their location (Fig. 2): Cess Pit Male Prison (IPM/CPMC), Male Prison Yard (IPM/MPY), the Garden Well (IPM/GW), and a large cess pit (IPM/INQ98). A further deposit is included, which was uncovered by employees of Enemalta, the national electricity company: the Enemalta Store (IPM/ENE). All finds date from the 19th and very beginning of the 20th centuries, apart from those from the lower two strata of IPM/INQ98. Strata [IMP/INQ982] and [IMP/INQ983] have been dated primarily through their depositional context and the historic

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