



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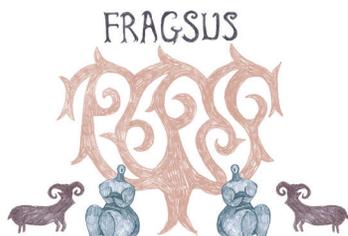
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On the cover: *View towards Nadur lighthouse and Ghajnsielem church with the Gozo Channel to Malta beyond, from In-Nuffara (Caroline Malone).*

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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
ROWAN McLAUGHLIN, MAARTEN BLAAUW, RORY P. FLOOD, CHARLES FRENCH, CHRIS O. HUNT, MICHELLE FARRELL, KATRIN FENECH, SEAN D.F. PYNE-O'DONNELL, ALAN J. CRESSWELL, DAVID C.W. SANDERSON, TIMOTHY C. KINNAIRD, PAULA J. REIMER & NICHOLAS C. VELLA		
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 CHRIS O. HUNT, KATRIN FENECH, MICHELLE FARRELL & ROWAN McLAUGHLIN	401
<i>Appendix 4</i> Granulometry of the deep cores KATRIN FENECH	421 (online edition only)
<i>Appendix 5</i> The molluscan counts for the deep cores KATRIN FENECH	441 (online edition only)
<i>Appendix 6</i> The borehole and test excavation profile log descriptions CHARLES FRENCH & SEAN TAYLOR	535
<i>Appendix 7</i> The detailed soil micromorphological descriptions from the buried soils and Ramla and Marsalforn valleys CHARLES FRENCH	549
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) CHARLES FRENCH & SEAN TAYLOR	557
<i>Appendix 9</i> The charcoal data NATHAN WRIGHT	563
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 Mġarr 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 Taċ-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.

Acknowledgements

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Firstly, the FRAGSUS Project is the result of a very generous research grant from the European Research Council (Advanced Grant no' 323727), without which this and its two partner volumes and the research undertaken could not have taken place. We heartily thank the ERC for its award and the many administrators in Brussels who monitored our use of

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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).

Appendix 9

The charcoal data

Nathan Wright

Table A9.1. The charcoal data from the Skorba (SV15), Kordin (KRD15), In-Nuffara (NUF15) and Salina Deep Core SDC.

Taxon/Site	SV15 (95)	SV15 (95)	SV15 (90)	SV15 (90)	KRD15 (77)	KRD15 (77)	KRD15 (99)	KRD15 (99)	NUF15 (41)	NUF15 (41)	SDC	SDC	Total*	
	Af	%f	Af	%f	Af	%f	Af	%f	Af	%f	Af	%f	Af	%f
<i>Quercus</i> deciduous spp.	11	10.6	10	23.3	4	3.6			14	9.0			59	13.5
<i>Quercus</i> evergreen cf. <i>ilex</i>	16	15.4	6	14.0	20	17.9			33	21.3			55	15.2
↑ Woodland Total	27	26.0	16	37.2	24	21.4			47	30.3			114	28.7
<i>Pistacia</i> cf. <i>lentiscus</i>	31	29.8	4	9.3	21	18.8			39	25.2			95	20.8
<i>Olea</i> cf. <i>europaea</i>	21	20.2	5	11.6	19	17.0	2	100.0	32	20.6			77	17.4
Rosaceae family	1	1.0			11	9.8			20	12.9			32	5.9
<i>Ceratonia siliqua</i>					2	1.8							2	0.4
<i>Cistus</i> sp.	3	2.9							4	2.6			7	1.4
<i>Rhamnus</i> cf. <i>oleioides</i>	12	11.5	3	7.0	3	2.7			4	2.6			22	5.9
<i>Crataegus</i> sp.	3	2.9	1	2.3	5	4.5			2	1.3			11	2.7
<i>Cercis</i> cf. <i>siliquastrum</i>	1	1.0							1	0.6			2	0.4
<i>Ostrya carpinifolia</i>					2	1.8							2	0.4
<i>Carpinus</i> spp.			1	2.3	1	0.9			1	0.6			3	1.0
↑ Woodland sub-dominant and marquis	72	69.2	14	32.6	64	57.1	2	100.0	103	66.5			253	56.3
<i>Tetraclinis articulata</i>	2	1.9			1	0.9							3	0.7
<i>Abies</i> sp.					2	1.8			1	0.6	5	100.0	3	0.6
↑ Conifers Total	2	1.9			3	2.7			1	0.6	5	100	6	1.3
<i>Salix/Populus</i>	3	2.9	9	20.9	14	12.5			3	1.9			29	9.6
<i>Ulmus</i> cf. <i>canescens</i>			1	2.3	4	3.6							5	1.5
<i>Fraxinus angustifolia</i>			1	2.3									1	0.6
<i>Myrtus</i> cf. <i>communis</i>					1	0.9							1	0.2
<i>Tamarix</i> sp.			1	2.3									1	0.6
<i>Betula</i> spp.					2	1.8			1	0.6			3	0.4
<i>Laurus nobilis</i> **			1	2.3									1	0.6
↑ Riparian Total	3	2.9	13	30.2	21	18.8			4	1.9			41	13.5
NTAXA	11		12		16		2		13		5		21	

Taxonomic identifications from four sites in Malta. (*Totals exclude KRD15 (99) and SDC data. ***Laurus nobilis* can also be considered a marquis taxa.

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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