Fr Emmanuel Magri SJ and the Phoenicians in early 20th century Malta[1]

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ABSTRACT. A pioneer of Maltese folklore and archaeology, Fr Emmanuel Magri SJ (1851-1907) was rather obsessed with the Phoenicians. His documentation and study of Maltese folktales had the stated aim of recovering Phoenician mythology and ancient history that — he believed — had survived in Maltese folklore (which he contrasted with the Arabic folklore). His archaeological explorations, including that of the Hal Saflieni hypogeum, still operated within a paradigm that attributed the megalithic architecture of Malta to the Phoenicians, and sought the roots of the Maltese people in the Phoenicians, with a particular opposition to the idea of Malta ever being a Greek colony. His research cannot be divorced from the cultural and political context of Malta with its "Language Question," and a political scenario divided between pro-Empire and pro-Italian political factions. This paper contextualises Magri's research in early 20th century Malta, to draw attention to the ideological frameworks within which he was operating, and how these biases coloured and conditioned his research, and the subsequent reception in Maltese historiography.

When, in 1903, the newly established Committee of Management of the Museum of Malta, was asked by the government to appoint "a competent person to supervise the exploration of the Casal Paola tombs" — that's the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum to you and me — the committee suggested Fr Magri, who by then had already established a solid reputation for his knowledge of Malta antiquities.[3]

But to understand Magri, and the "Phoenician theory" which coloured his understanding of prehistory, we need to read him in context.

Emmanuel Magri was born here in Valletta in 1851 to a legal family — his grandfather was Crown Advocate, and eventually President of the Court of Appeal. Following a solid education, including in this university building, he quit studying law — much to the displeasure of his family — and ran off to join the Jesuits.[4] To spare him hassle from his family, Magri was sent to Ireland for his two-year novitiate. Then several years of studies to the priesthood — spread between England, France, Spain and Gozo. As a priest, then, he held several administrative and academic positions ... yet somehow still found the time to study Malta's history, archaeology and ethnography.

Magri is unquestionably best know as pioneer of Maltese ethnography. He collected proverbs, publishing and commenting several in a popular series,[5] and subsequently published five booklets — in Maltese — of Maltese folktales, providing them with interesting and detailed commentaries.[6]

In 1903, when he was entrusted with the Hypogeum project, Magri found himself thrown at the deep end of archaeological excavation. So far, he had undertaken various studies, but never a major dig. Good to bear in mind that archaeology was really at its infancy worldwide, and most digs were still little better then site clearances. Magri tried to work, methodologically, according to the best practices of the time.

Yet, he was clearly working within an old paradigm. For him, I quote, "The Maltese Islands teem with Phoenician Antiquities."[7] Recognising the prehistory of Malta, and notably the late Neolithic as a separate, earlier stage, still required a paradigm shift.[8]

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[2] Pontifical Biblical Institute, Pontifical Gregorian University.
[3] National Museum of Archaeology of Malta, Minutes of the Committee of Management of the Museum, 06.11.1903.
[4] For a biography of Magri, see Mallia 1978.
[5] Magri 1900.
[6] Magri 1902, 1902b, 1903, 1904, 1905.
[7] Letter of E. Magri to E.A. Wallis Budge, 16.09.1904 (British Museum, Middle East Library, Correspondence (In) 1904, 652). Cf. Briffa 2005.
[8] See also Briffa and Vella 2021, Briffa 2009.

For Magri, this excavation could answer the question of the "Nationality of the Megalithic monuments of Malta". Writing to Wallis Budge at the British Museum, Magri notes that Perrot (author of the monumental *Histoire de l'Art dans l'antiquité*) held them to be Pheonician, more modern authors as Libyan (that is, north African), while Arthur Evans (who starting digging in Knossos only in 1900) linked them with Crete.[9]

With his clearly inquisitive mind, and quite the polymath — almost a latter-day *Renaissance man* — Magri was genuinely interested in this question. Note, though, that the question is a matter of "Nationality". This is not merely about the past, but about Malta's own identity, and it is worth contextualising in the political climate of the time.

Magri had a very clear opinion on the matter, as he also stated in the introduction to first book of folktales in 1902 — I translate: "Our forefathers who [first] inhabited these islands, as everyone knows, are the Phoenicians."[10]

Magri's entire reading of the Maltese folktales and folklore works on the presupposition that Malta's unwritten folk-lore can actually provide a resource to help reconstruct the mythologies of the Phoenician/Canaanite world — bear in mind that tablets from Ras Shamra/Ugarit was only found in 1929!

Magri was deeply convinced that through a proper study of the folktales, he could search for some sort of *Urtext* for these stories, and recover a Maltese mythology, which, in his commentaries he compared to Greek myth, and also occasionally, to the epic of Gilgamesh. For Magri, the Maltese folktales were the best possibility for recovering ancient Phoenician mythology. And Magri held these tales to be superior to both Greek myth, and Arab folklore. [11]

Modern ethnographic scholarship has long since abandoned Magri's approach, considered methodologically flawed. There is no such thing as an *Urtext* in folklore, but rather narratives that have a multiple existence, and by their very nature variants.

Of course, this applies to ancient myth too, until it is fixed in written form during the centuries. However, Magri's study remains a goldmine for the study of Maltese folklore, but — alas – not for the intention that Magri intended, though folklore still may have plenty to say on how the archaeological sites and knowledge were received in the popular imagination.

Where does this fit, however, in the context of Malta under the British Empire? Magri died in 1907, way before the *Assemblea Nazionale* and Sette Giugno riots in 1919, and before the granting of a constitution for local self-government in 1921. Yet, his world is the one that slowly built to that stage.

Malta had received a constitution that granted an elected majority in the Council of Government in 1887, a constitution that was revoked in 1903, returning Malta to a more direct Crown government. Especially since the early 1880s, Malta was in the grips of the so-called *Language Question:*[12] with pro-Italian groups (among which were often the clergy and the legal profession) defending the status of Italian from a legal and cultural point of view, and the pro-English groups for the increase in the importance of English over Italian. The issue ran way deeper than that: at stake was Malta's place and role in the British Empire.

Magri's most active period in archaeology in terms of fieldwork starts in 1903, with the setting up of the Museum Committee in 1903 under Governor Grenfell. He clearly was well connected and respected in British Government circles.

At the same time, Magri cannot be simple placed in one or other of the Maltese political camps. His family background in the legal profession, and as a Catholic priest, moreover a Jesuit of the Sicilian Province, would tend to place him in the pro-Italian camp.

[9] Same letter.
[10] Magri 1902 (KMŻ 15), 5.
[11] Magri 1902 (KMŻ 15), 18.
[12] For a thorough study see Hull 1993.

However, he clearly had a great command of English, and spent some of his first years of Jesuit formation in Ireland and England, with the first posting in Malta being at St Ignatius College, run by the English Jesuits. In this sense, he clearly had no issue with a pro-English stance either.

Yet, as Magri struggles to reconcile the results of his research with his overarching Phoenician theory,[13] his concern seems to go beyond the immediate the *Language question,* pointing rather to a very proud sense of being Maltese, with a sense of nationhood, language and heritage. A pioneer indeed, even for a nation in search of its own identity, in the context of Empire.

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[13] See, e.g. Letter of E. Magri to E.A. Wallis Budge, 13.04.1905 (British Museum, Middle East Library, Correspondence (In) 1905, 465.