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ARCHEO

ATTUALITÀ DEL PASSATO

MEGALITHIC MALTA

AN EXTRAORDINARY PREHISTORIC CULTURE
AT THE HEART OF THE MEDITERRANEAN



ARCHEO

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Treasure Island

My first encounter with Maltese archaeology goes back to 1991. Together with Alberto Dagli Orti, a photographer from the De Agostini Archive, we devoted the week of Easter to the task of producing a detailed photographic record of the megalithic monuments of the archipelago, as well as of the artifacts held at the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta. We spent an entire day underground, in the cool and damp darkness of the Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni, recording the complex succession of passages, corridors and chambers hollowed out from the island's living rock by the inhabitants who had lived here more than 5000 years ago. In the dim lamplight, we could make out the magnificent volutes that they had painted on the walls and ceiling of the sanctuary, using red ochre.

Later, in the brightly lit halls of the National Museum of Archaeology – where the permanent exhibition was being reorganized at the time – a very young archaeologist, Reuben Grima (today a lecturer at the University of Malta) opened a glass showcase to allow us a closer look at the miniature figurine of a woman reclining on her right side. It had been discovered in the early twentieth century, in one of the very same underground chambers from which we had emerged only the day before. Then, from another box, Grima carefully brought out a series of figurines carved from the Maltese limestone: they had just been discovered during the excavations (which were still in progress at the time) of a Neolithic burial site in Xaghra on Gozo, the second island of the archipelago.

Every time I have returned to Malta since, I have never failed to keep my appointment with the 'Sleeping Lady,' nowadays exhibited in a purposely dedicated room of the museum: with the passage of time, I have become intimately familiar with her unfathomable posture, and with the timeless vigil of her millenarian sleep; her message, which remains as indecipherable as the characters of some lost and ancient language, is that of a great masterpiece of world art.

In the following pages, we present our readers with a synthesis of the extraordinary phenomenon that we know as the megalithic culture of Malta: a phenomenon which, paradoxically, has remained relatively unknown among members of the broader public, who tend to associate the name of the archipelago (and who can blame them) with her equally important early modern history. Malta, a land so near and yet so far, is a destination not to be missed, for whoever wishes to learn more about the story of the Mediterranean, from prehistoric into more recent times.

Andreas M. Steiner







IN THE ISLANDS OF THE GIANT TEMPLES

THE MALTESE ARCHIPELAGO: ARID FRAGMENTS OF LIMESTONE, CLAY AND FOSSIL CORAL, LOST OFF THE SICILIAN COAST, BUT DEEPLY INGRAINED WITH HISTORY AND WITH A PREHISTORIC PAST UNIQUE IN THE WORLD, WHICH HAS YET TO BE DECIPHERED

by Andreas M. Steiner and Massimo Vidale
photographs by Daniel Cilia, drawings by Elise Schonhowd

Experts in navigation say that, although Malta and the Sicilian coastline are intervisible from their higher points on very clear days, Malta quickly vanishes from sight when a boat puts out to sea. Smoke from the eruptions of Etna would no doubt have reminded the inhabitants of the tiny archipelago that Sicily, the largest island in the entire Mediterranean, lay to the north, across no more than 90 km of open sea. Among the many mysteries that surround the Neolithic period, several are bound with questions about how the first settlers and farmers navigated across the Mediterranean, on vessels of a form we can only guess at, which we must try to imagine loaded with exhausted and morose children, piles of jars, nets, supplies and animals in cages, as well as uninvited and unwelcome passengers such as pathogens, parasites and rodents.

When some such vessel brought the first settlers to the Maltese archipelago more than 7000 years ago, it opened an extraordinary chapter in Mediterranean history. Perhaps it is no accident that on Malta, by the entrance of the western apse of the South Temple at Tarxien, two standing megaliths are covered with graffiti that, although heavily eroded by weathering, may still be made out as prehistoric boats.

THE OLDEST KNOWN REPRESENTATIONS OF BOATS?

Given that these graffiti are found in a single point of the ritual building, which dates from around the end of the fourth millennium BC, they may be among the very oldest representations of seagoing vessels known from European prehistory. While opinions are divided, and it is asserted by some that they date 'only' back to the Bron-

Opposite page:
The sun illuminating the central corridor of a megalithic temple at Mnajdra, on the island of Malta.
Circa 3000 BC.
Title background, above:
Reconstruction drawing of the colossal statue discovered in the megalithic temple at Tarxien. 3000-2500 BC.

ze Age, they fail to explain the similarity of the boats to Egyptian and Cycladic representations dating from around 3000 BC.

At the time of its first colonization, Malta was still virgin territory. Its soil cover, though not particularly deep, appears to have supported typical Mediterranean woodlands. Then as now, in a climate not very different from today's hot dry summers and mild wet winters, life on Malta threaded a delicate and complex balance, characterized by sparse water resources. In order to survive on the archipelago, the first inhabitants must have quickly learnt how to obtain water from freshwater springs and by harvesting the winter rains.

FROM CAVES TO TEMPLES

We still know very little about the earliest phases of life in Malta. Occupational levels discovered in natural caves (the most important of which is Għar Dalam; see page 10) and huts, with elegant pottery vessels, traces of meals, flint from Sicily and obsidian from Pantelleria and Lipari. Archaeological deposits dating from the second half of the V millennium BC, rich in pottery that is still similar in style to that found in Sicily, have preserved the outline of two unusually large huts, which have yielded several female figurines that are angular and stylized in form, but clearly displaying a pubic triangle that leaves no doubt that they are female representations.

During the earliest phases of the following millennium, large rock-cut tombs for communal burial made their appearance on Malta. Anthropomorphic statue-stelae, comparable to other examples from France and Sardinia, made their appearance; in

Right: Satellite image of the Italian peninsula, showing the Maltese archipelago south of Sicily.

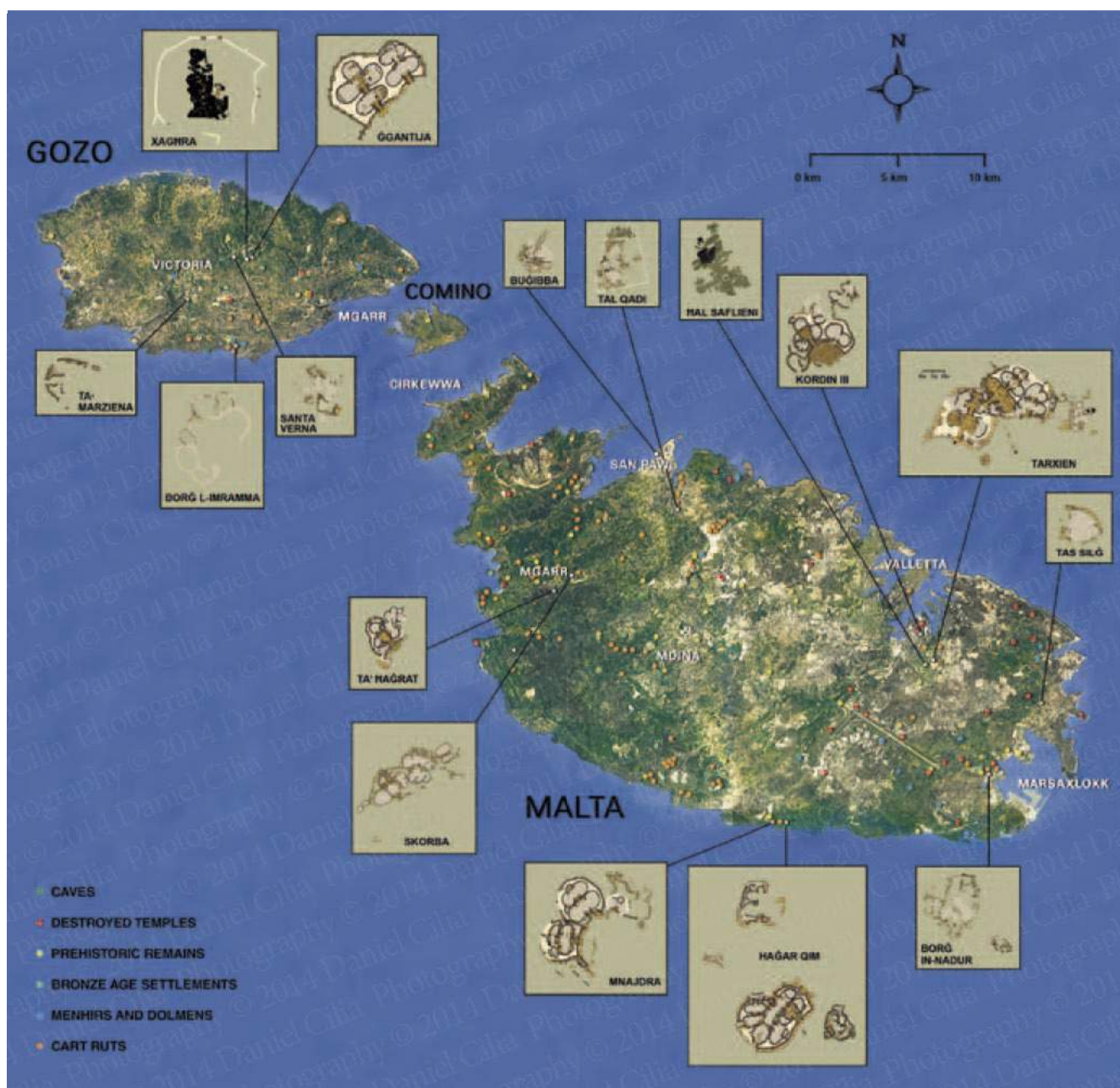


Opposite page: Aerial view of Malta from the southeast, with Comino and Gozo visible in the background.

Right: The colossal statue of Tarxien, showing what survives of the original against a reconstruction drawing of the missing parts.

*"It is still quite impossible to say whether Malta played the role of
master or disciple among her neighbours"*
(Vere Gordon Childe, *The Dawn of European Civilisation*, 1925)





this period pottery became more elaborately decorated, with linear and curved motifs as well as stylized human figures. These developments were to culminate in the explosion of the megalithic phenomenon, which in Malta is usually referred to as the 'Temple Period'. Even today, the extraordinary flourishing of these megalithic monuments remains largely unexplained. The rapid emergence of more than 30 conglomerations of these colossal and monumental buildings across the archipelago is still difficult to explain. They were built through the collaboration of hundreds of workers, in a territory measuring little more than 300 sq km in extent,

which could at the very most have supported a population of under 10,000 inhabitants, organized in different communities across the archipelago. The 'temples' of Malta are all the more difficult to explain because they are a very early example of the megalithic phenomenon; because their architectural form does not appear to have been a significant influence on the surrounding region; and because the sculptures found in them, also created between the IV and III millennium BC, do not bear any close similarity to those of other Mediterranean cultures.

The great pioneer archaeologist Vere Gordon Childe (1892-1957) wrote "It is still

The Maltese archipelago showing the location of the principal megalithic complexes.

MALTA FROM PREHISTORY INTO HISTORY

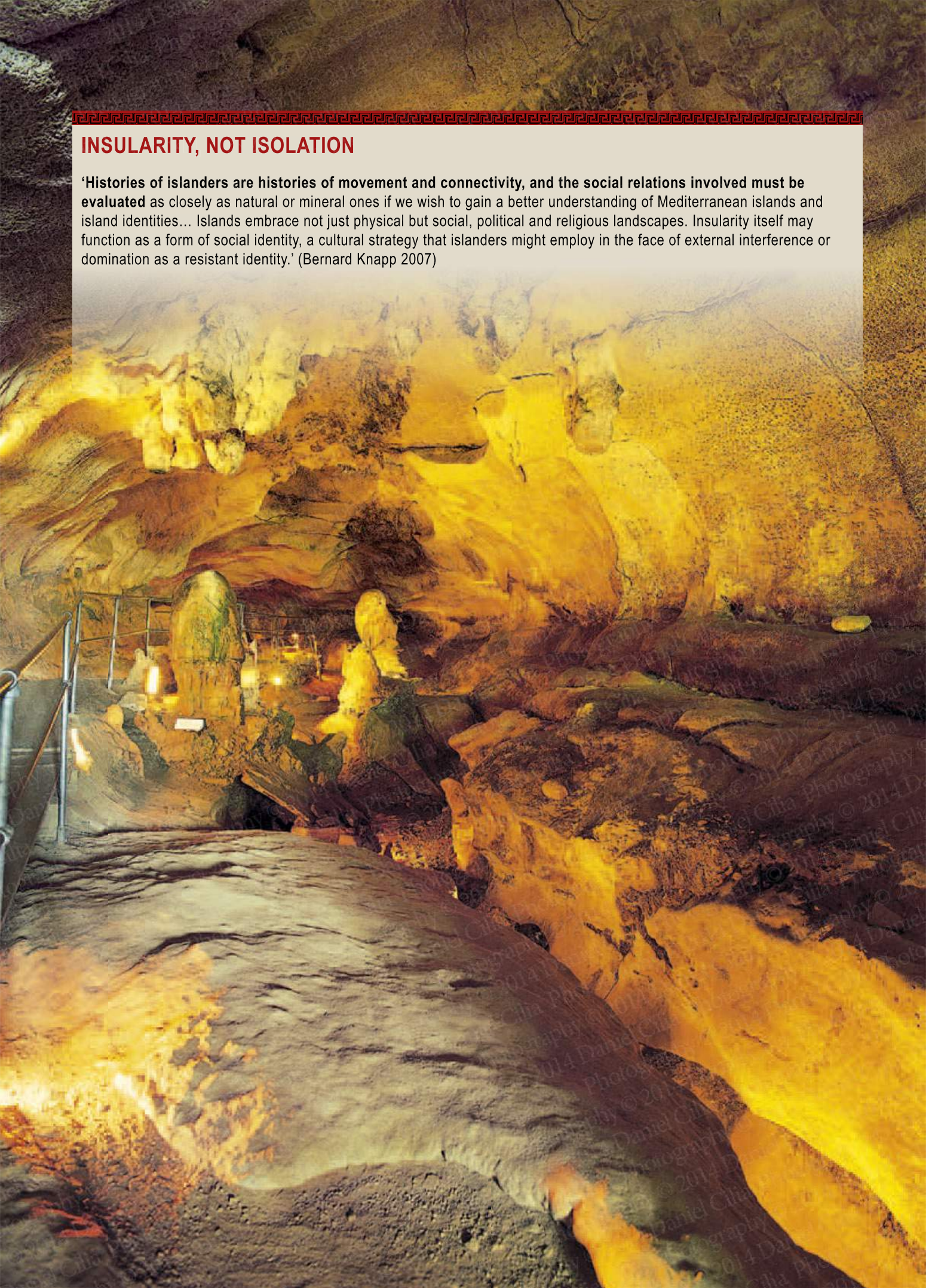
Period	Phase	Date	Key events and monuments
Neolithic	Għar Dalam	5300-4500 BC	Colonisation on boats from Sicily; Introduction of cereals, legumes and domestic animals, as well as flint and obsidian, alabaster and ochre. Pottery decoration comparable to that in Sicily, female figurines found in oval huts.
	Grey Skorba	4500-4400 BC.	
	Red Skorba	4400-4100 BC	
Late Neolithic	Ġebbuġ	4100-3800 BC	Collective burial in caves and rock-cut tombs Statue-menhirs similar to later examples from Sardinia and France.
Temple Period	Miġarr	3800-3600 BC	
	Ġgantija	3600-3000 BC	Rapid emergence of megalithic monumental architecture, characterized by apsidal buildings. Emergence of over 30 megalithic complexes and vast underground burial sites across the archipelago. <i>In Egypt, the pyramids of Giza are built around 2500 BC; in Mesopotamia, mud-brick buildings are raised; in the Indus Valley, the civilization of the same name flourishes.</i>
	Saflieni	3300-3000 BC	
	Tarxien	3000-2500 BC	
Bronze Age	Tarxien Cemetery	2500-1500 BC	Collapse and abandonment of the great megalithic complexes. Construction of dolmens. Cremation replaces inhumation; stronger links with Sicily and Southern Italy. Fortified settlements. <i>The major building stages of Stonehenge are undertaken.</i>
	Borġ in-Nadur	1700 –900 BC	
Early Iron Age	Baġirija	900-700 BC	New wave of migration, possibly from Southern Italy?
Phoenician/ Punic	Phoenician	725-500 BC	Phoenician settlement, sanctuary of Astarte at tas-Silg.
	Punic	500-218 BC	Carthaginian predominance.
Roman		218 a.C.-395 AD	Roman Conquest at the start of the Second Punic War.
Byzantine		395-870 AD	Conquest by Vandals (454) and Goths (464). Byzantine reconquest by Belisarius (533).
Arab Conquest		870 AD	The Arab conquest of Malta initiated a period of more than two centuries of Arab and Islamic acculturation.

quite impossible to say whether Malta played the role of master or disciple among her neighbours and fruitless speculations on this topic had best be omitted” (*The Dawn of European Civilisation*, 1925). The megalithism of Late Neolithic Malta, in other words, appears to have broken free of the network of shared cultural practices that characterized the initial period of settlement of the archipelago. Is this perhaps a case – as it is very easy to

imagine – of a distinct local identity emerging as a result of progressive and inevitable isolation? Scholarly opinion is divided on this point. In fact, several scholars maintain an opposing hypothesis: could the distinct island culture have been the result of a deliberate choice by the prehistoric inhabitants, to express their autonomy and difference from the cultural identities and practices of the outside world?

INSULARITY, NOT ISOLATION

'Histories of islanders are histories of movement and connectivity, and the social relations involved must be evaluated as closely as natural or mineral ones if we wish to gain a better understanding of Mediterranean islands and island identities... Islands embrace not just physical but social, political and religious landscapes. Insularity itself may function as a form of social identity, a cultural strategy that islanders might employ in the face of external interference or domination as a resistant identity.' (Bernard Knapp 2007)



ĠGANTIJA

Sometime around 3,600 BC, megalithic buildings suddenly began to make their appearance across Malta and Gozo, using large blocks of limestone that could weigh over twenty tons. The earliest phase of the 'Temple Period' is named after the monumental complex of **Ġgantija** on Gozo. **Ġgantija** (literally 'the place of giants') has a gigantic, D-shaped outer wall, with a façade formed by two concave curves, almost 40 m across, and around 30 m deep. Within this outer wall, two structures stand side by side. Each one has two pairs of sub-circular lobes or apses, placed symmetrically on either side of a monumental entrance corridor, leading to a central sub-circular apse. Research on possible astronomical alignments, in this and other megalithic complexes on the archipelago, has yielded inconclusive results, beyond a clear preference for the buildings to face a southerly direction.

Like many of the other temple complexes, in plan **Ġgantija** is vaguely comparable to the outline of an obese human form, with

the lateral apses corresponding to the limbs, and the central apse to a head. As a result these plans have an incidental similarity to the outline of the corpulent anthropomorphic figures found within these complexes (*see also image on p. 18*).

Even the proportion of the two structures – the southern one is larger than the northern – might suggest an anthropomorphic reference to the more imaginative, being vaguely reminiscent of a male and female figure. Once again, any such similarity is almost certainly incidental, an accidental result of how the site developed over time. The curved façade opened onto a vast elliptical terrace, where a large number of people could congregate to participate in the communal activities that must have taken place here. The thickness of the walls between the two buildings and within the outer wall were filled in with hundreds of tons of rubble and rammed earth.

Other buildings that appeared during the same period, such as the complex of **Ta' Ħaġrat** at Mgarr, in northwest Malta, follow

Opposite page: The Cave of Ghar Dalam, in the southeast extremity of the island. The subject of scientific exploration since 1865, the cave has yielded the earliest evidence of human settlement in Malta.

Below: The south corner of the **Ġgantija Temples (Gozo)** still stands over 7 m high. 3600-3000 BC.

"...Gozo remained an utterly private place, an island in petto – within the breast – and lucky was the man who could find the key, turn the lock, and vanish inside".

Nicholas Monsarrat (1910-1979)





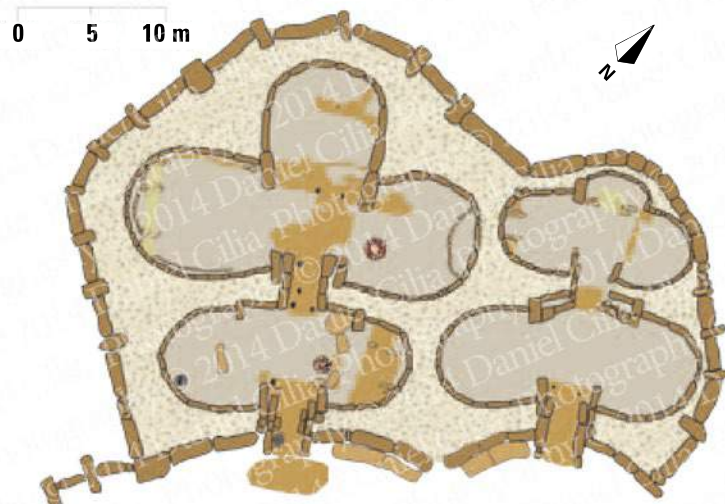
some of the same characteristics – two contiguous buildings, the larger of which (measuring around 15 m by 20 m), in this case, has only three apses, with a façade that uses blocks up to 4 m in length, and a smaller, later building that is simpler in plan.

For over a millennium, at least until the great crisis of around 2500-2400 BC, the monumental architecture of Malta continued to be reproduced, developed and transformed, to display a dramatic increase in complexity and sophistication during the course of the first half of the III millennium BC, while retaining the fundamental ingredients of sub-circular chambers arranged symmetrically around a central axis. Rather than being planned at a single moment, these megalithic buildings were transformed and developed in a succession of building episodes over many generations, held together only by the fundamental grammar of their architectural form.

MILLENARIAN MEMORY

The memory of these monuments, assembled over more than a millennium, as well as

ĠĠANTĠJA



Above: Plan and aerial view of the Ġgantija complex (Gozo): Two temple buildings composed of absidal chambers are surrounded by an external megalithic boundary wall.

3600-3000 BC.
Opposite, top: The external boundary wall of the Ġgantija Temples; **bottom:** the entrance to the North Temple at Ġgantija.



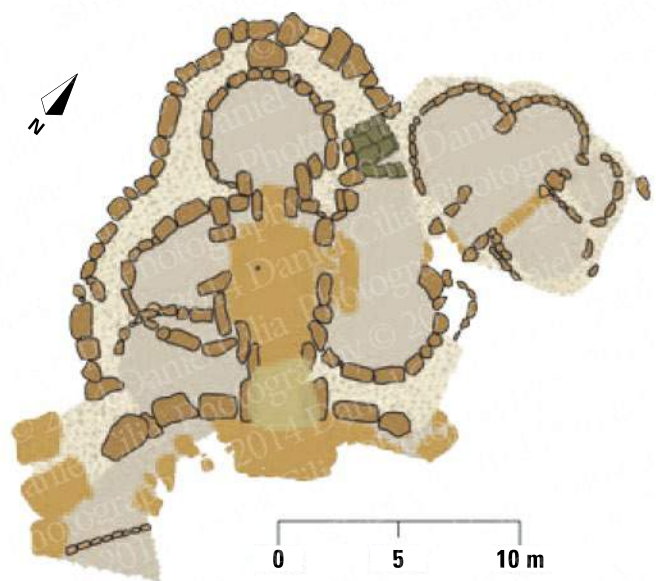


an awareness of their symbolic potency, appears to have persisted through the Bronze Age, until the Phoenician colonization of the archipelago by the 8th century BC. Following the arrival of the Phoenicians, one of the megalithic complexes, located at **Tas-Silġ** in southeast Malta, was reused as the core of the temple of Astarte (See Archeo n. 327, May 2012; also *online* at archeo.it).

It appears that between the IV and III millennium BC, the temple complexes emerged in strategic points in the landscape, sometimes being located near the summits of ridges, fords across water courses, or embarkation points on the coast. In other cases, they were very probably built near areas that were more densely inhabited at the time. Vere Gordon Childe had already observed the correlation between the principal megalithic monuments and the areas of cultivable terrain, and underlined its significance. Even in such a restricted space as the Maltese archipelago, where the geographic setting may seem relatively simple, the logic of ancient human and sacred geography is not always easy to decipher.

Whatever the motive that drove the creation

TA' HAĠRAT



Above: Plan and aerial view of Ta' Hagrat, located at Mġarr, western Malta. It is one of the smaller complexes, composed

of two adjoining buildings, the larger dating from around 3600 BC, and the smaller dating from 3300-3000 BC.

and maintenance of these extraordinary 'cathedrals' of prehistory, they reached their most impressive, if short-lived, achievements during the final phase of the Temple Period, known as the Tarxien Phase, which have been dated by recalibrated radiocarbon dating to between around 3300 and 2400 BC (during the same period, Egypt witnessed the culmination of the great age of pyramid building, while Britain witnessed the creation and elaboration of the great circle of trilithons at Stonehenge).

MNAJDRA AND HAĠAR QIM

The Tarxien Phase is well represented at the two great megalithic complexes of Mnajdra and **Haġar Qim**, built 500m apart on the southwest coast of Malta, and at the megalithic complex of Tarxien itself, located in the southeast of Malta. **Mnajdra** is made up of three temples, the 'South Temple', 'Central Temple', and the much smaller 'East Temple' – which open onto a single, large elliptical plaza, partly defined by their concave façades. The earliest of the three is the three-apsed East Temple, which has a triple threshold and some elements decorated with lines of drilled circular holes; it dates

Below: Plan and aerial view of the megalithic complex at Mnajdra, composed of three main structures leading off the same open plaza. The South

Temple and the Central Temple both follow a symmetrical, four-apsed plan, while the earlier East Temple follows a three-apsed plan. 3600-2500 BC.

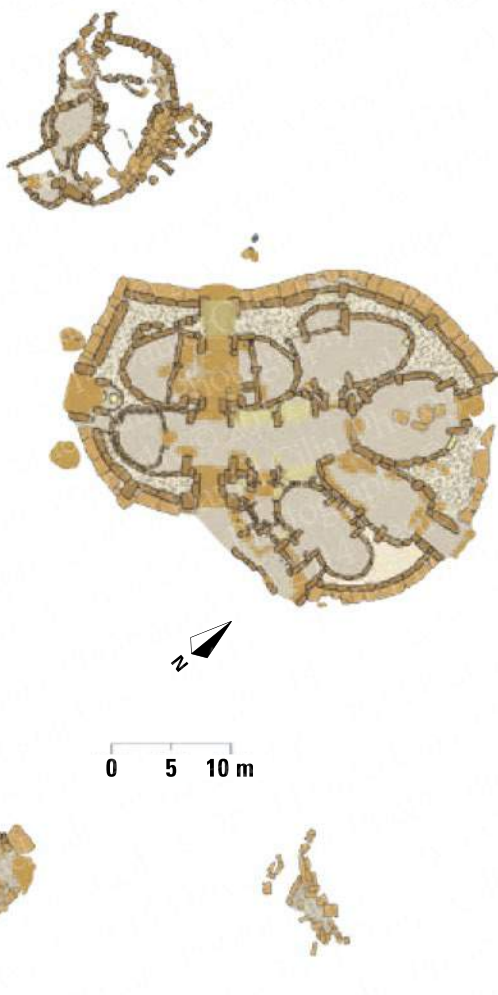






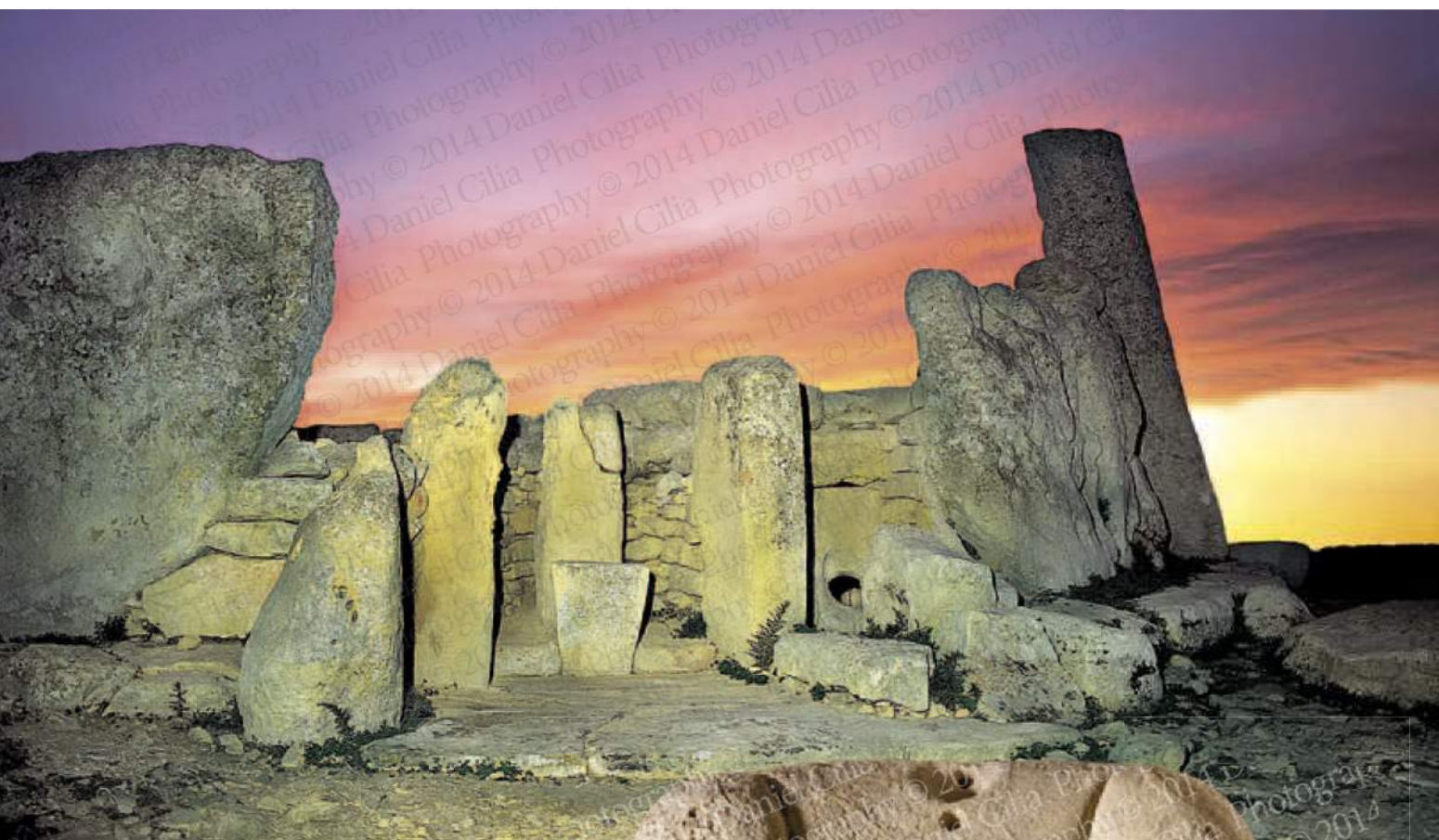
HAĠAR QIM

Double spread: Plan and views of the megalithic complex of Haġar Qim. This grandiose monument, situated a short distance from Mnajdra, is characterized in plan by a number of horseshoe-shaped chambers arranged around a central space. 3600-2500 BC.



from the earliest phase of temple building, the Ġgantija Phase, and is flanked to its north and east by the poorly preserved remains of other megalithic structures. The South Temple, which has a five-apsed plan, is far better preserved, while the adjacent Central Temple, which lies immediately to its north, is built at a slightly higher level on the natural slope, and was reached by means of a ramp or steps.

The internal spaces, defined by walls that converge gently as they rise, are linked by monumental doorways and steps, as well as small and curious communication holes, that have often been interpreted as 'oracle holes'. Two small spaces, hollowed out of the fill between the inner and outer walls, allow access from a rear entrance into the South Temple; these are referred to as 'oracle chambers'. The megalithic complex of **Haġar Qim**, located around 500 m to the east, is perhaps the most extensive of the archipelago, and was in all likelihood created and maintained by the same communities as Mnajdra. It stands on the summit of a ridge, two km southwest of the present-day village core of Qrendi, and consists in three distinct buildings. The Main Temple consists in five lobed chambers that surround a central space, which appear to have been built at different stages because of the way they are superimposed over each other.



Within the building, some chambers may only be accessed through 'porthole' doorways cut through a single megalith, while others are connected by an 'oracle hole'. The central court and the surrounding chambers contained a beautifully carved, altar-like pillar, mushroom-shaped altars, as well as a group of figurines carved in stone or modelled in terracotta, some of which show female characteristics.

TARXIEN

The megalithic complex at **Tarxien**, located near the present-day town of Paola, on the south side of the Grand Harbour, is perhaps the most complex in plan, but also the richest and most elaborate in terms of sculptured decoration and iconography. The complex comprises at least four distinct buildings, the last of which were completed even as the great age of



Top: A view of Ġallar Qim.

Right: One of several sculptures of what appears to be an obese human form discovered inside the Ġallar Qim Temples. 3000-2500 BC.

Valletta, National Museum of Archaeology.



temple-building was coming to a close, sometime around the mid-third millennium BC. Today the Tarxien Temples are surrounded by the homes of the residents of Paola and Tarxien, and have lost the landscape setting that is still enjoyed by several of the other temple complexes on Malta. The South Temple, about 30m in length, has the usual concave façade, and four internal, lobed chambers that may be reached from the central axis of the building. The Central Temple, which has roughly the same length on its main axis, is formed by three pairs of chambers, symmetrically arranged around the main axis. A third megalithic building to the east follows the earlier plan of two pairs



Top and left: Two examples of typical low-reliefs, one showing an animal frieze, and the other showing spiral motifs. Tarxien Temples. 3000-2500 BC. **Below:** Front and back view of the famous 'Venus of Malta' discovered at Ħaġar Qim. 3000-2500 BC. Valletta, National Museum of Archaeology.



THE VENUS OF HAĠAR QIM

Modelled in clay and circa 13 cm high, the figurine known as the 'Venus of Malta' was discovered in 1839, during the first excavation works to be undertaken at Ħaġar Qim. It lay in the first chamber of the complex, below a slab decorated with spiral motifs. Dating from the first half of the III millennium BC, this masterpiece of prehistoric art is quite exceptional when compared to the more typical representations of the human form found in the great temples. The 'Venus', in fact, does not follow the stereotype of the so-called '*fat ladies*', but instead displays a number of carefully observed naturalistic features. As in the case of numerous other Maltese figurines (for instance the equally famous *Sleeping Lady*; see page 24), it is difficult to determine the function of this masterpiece with any certainty – it may have been religious, ritual or symbolic.

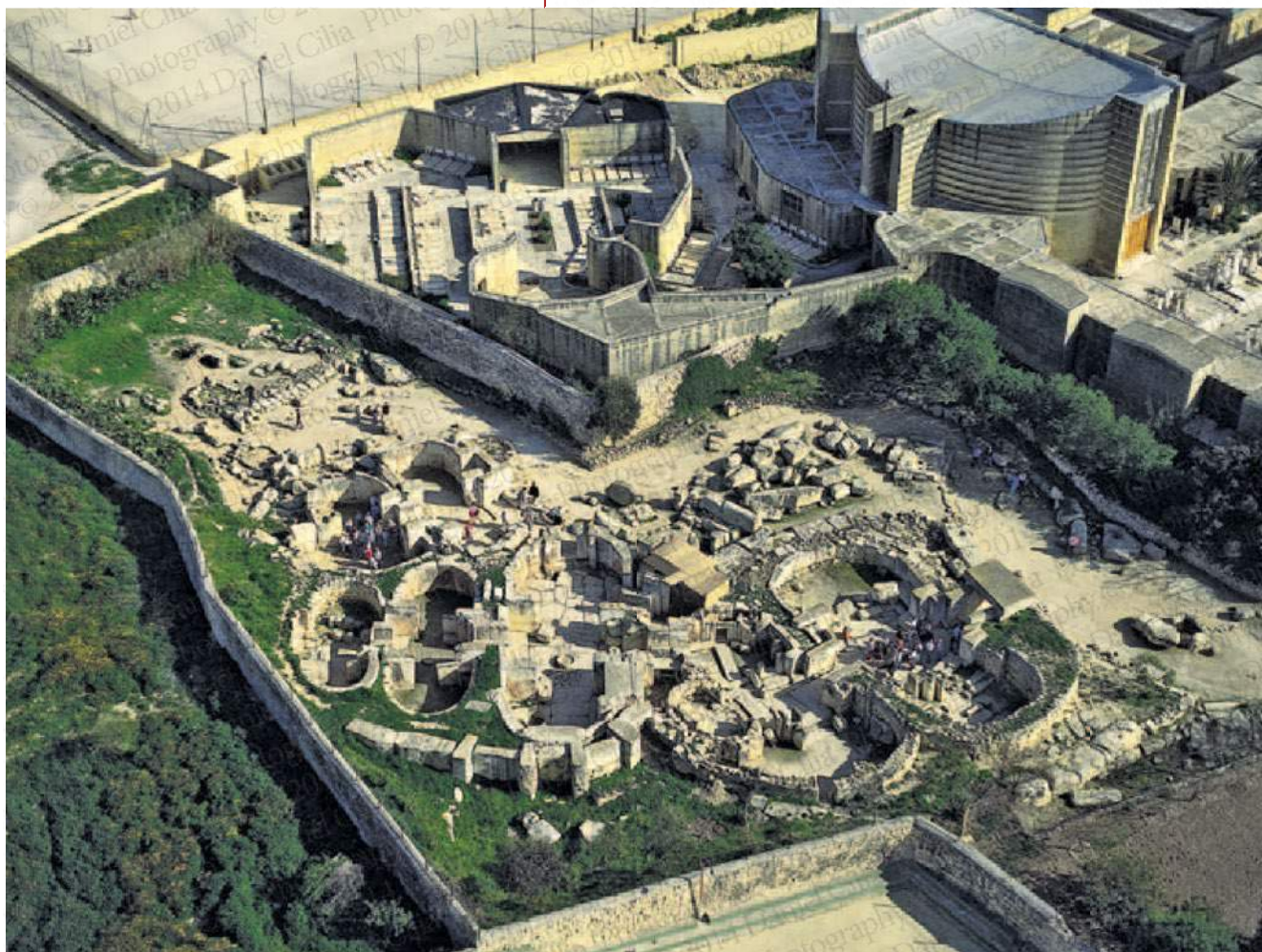
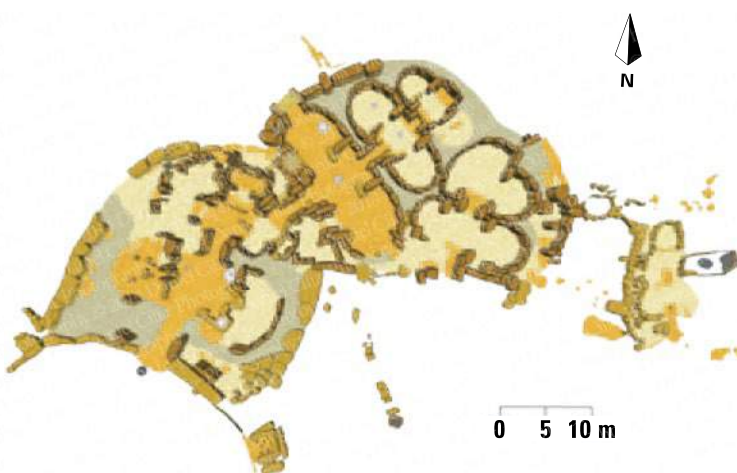
of symmetrical apses. Further east, there are the remains of at least one more megalithic building, which is the oldest, and the smallest, of the entire complex, having a five-apsed plan. The superposition of this succession of different buildings has created a single complex in which the individual building episodes may only be made out with difficulty.

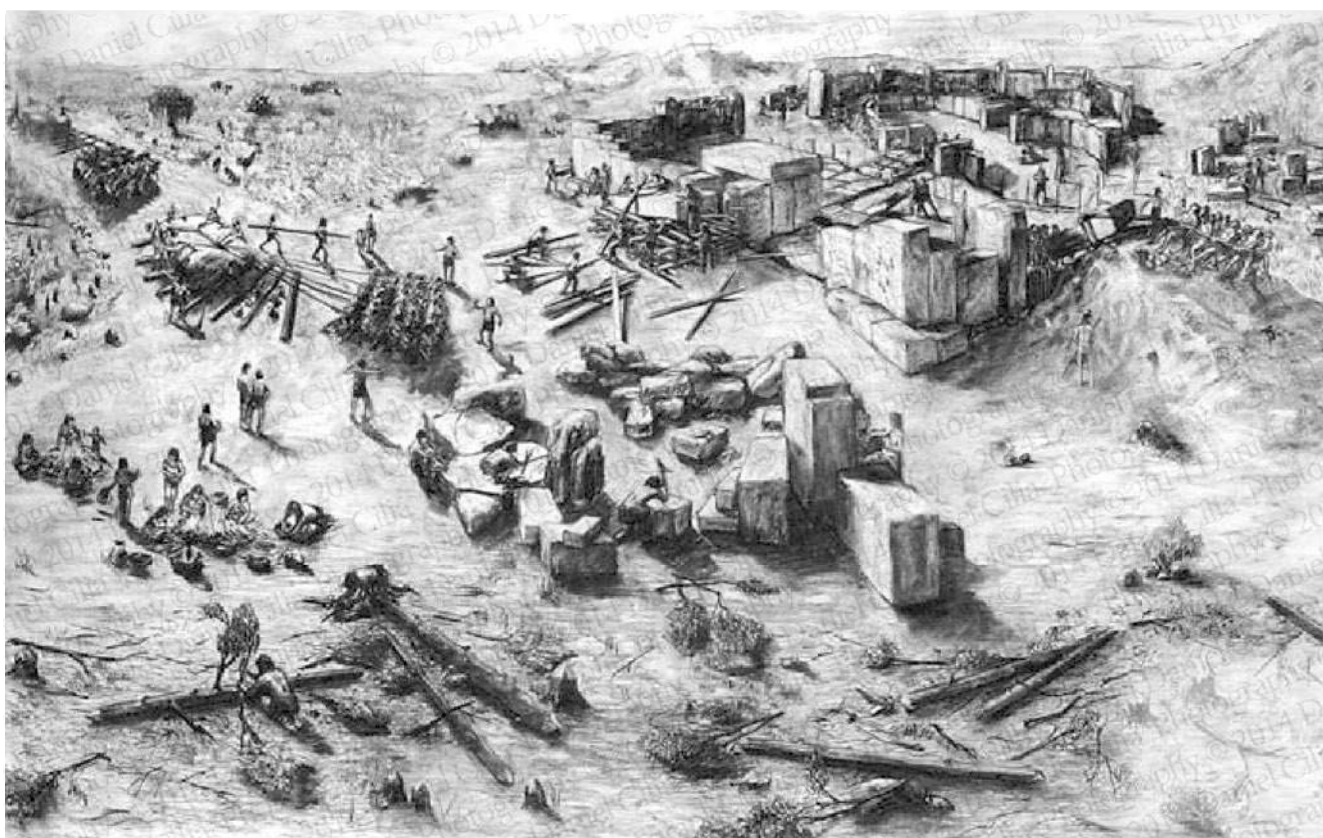
The archaeological excavations conducted at Tarxien between 1915 and 1919 revealed chambers and corridors crowded with statuettes, low-relief carvings and symbolic imagery. The most prevalent motif was that of the spiral. Another motif in the low-relief panels was that of processions of animals (goats, rams, sheep and pig), while another set of carvings show bulls and a sow that appears to be suckling thirteen piglets. One of the chambers of the South Temple contained the lower half of a colossal statue of a human form, wearing a pleated skirt, which must have originally stood some two metres high, flanked on either side by spiral decoration.

TARXIEN

Plan and aerial view of the megalithic complex at Tarxien. Consisting of at least four distinct buildings, which range in date from the mid-fourth millennium BC (at the right end of the plan) to the mid-third

millennium BC, Tarxien is characterized by very elaborate ritual equipment and carved decoration. The colossal statue of a standing human figure was also discovered at Tarxien (see page 6).





THE BUILDING AS A LIVING ORGANISM

Today the gigantic walls, partitions and thresholds of the Maltese temples have been torn open by collapses, erosion and excavation, and their interior spaces are flooded with Mediterranean sunlight. When built and still in use, however, these buildings boasted facades built in regularly coursed masonry, and ingeniously designed roofs that may have completely covered them, as witnessed by various stone and terracotta models found within the ruins, as well as a graffiti of a stylized façade on the walls of one of the temples at Mnajdra (some consider these representations to be builders' models that were used during the works). When first built, the white facades would have stood some ten meters high.

A person entering a megalithic temple was transported from the sounds and light of communal daily life, into dark and convoluted spaces dominated by curved lines, almost like the interior of a living organism, replete with imagery that was painted or carved in low relief or in the round.



Top: Hypothetical reconstruction drawing of a moment during the construction of a Maltese megalithic temple.

Above: Two models of megalithic architecture from Ta' Ħalrat (left) and Tarxien (right, partly reconstructed).

"The impression one gets, on first entering the hypogeum, is quite awe-inspiring, the dim lamplight revealing the intricacy of caves and galleries and the quaint lines of the extraordinary architecture. An air of profound mystery pervades the place and one is inclined to stop and get a general view of the honey-combed walls before he undertakes to observe the detail of the various caves and passages. When the eye gets accustomed to the half light, the curious style of architecture is at once noticed."

Themistocles Zammit (1864–1935)

HAL SAFLIENI

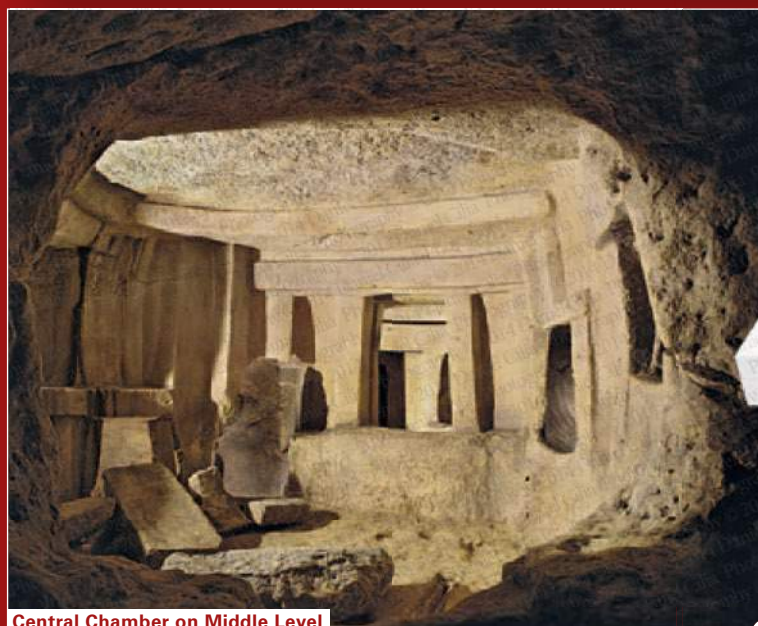
Discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum was fortunate in that it rapidly came to the attention of distinguished scholars such as Themistocles Zammit, responsible for the newly opened Valletta Museum, and Father Emanuel Magri (1851–1907). In 1903, shortly after the site was built over by modern housing, probably destroying some of the megalithic structures that marked the entrance to the site, the site was declared public property. Between 1903 and 1906, Father Magri carefully excavated the underground chambers of the complex, but died suddenly the following year, before being able to publish his records of the excavation. Today we know that the Hypogeum, which extends over an area of about 500 square metres, is arranged on three principal underground levels (known as the Upper, Middle, and Lower Levels), reaching a maximum depth of about 11 m below the present-day street level.

The Upper Level is the earliest (its origins may date from around 4000 BC), and is formed by a series of natural cavities, which were modified and adapted during the Neolithic to form a gradual descent into the Middle Level. It appears to have been conceived as a transitional space between the surface and the chambers below. The other two levels were entirely hewn



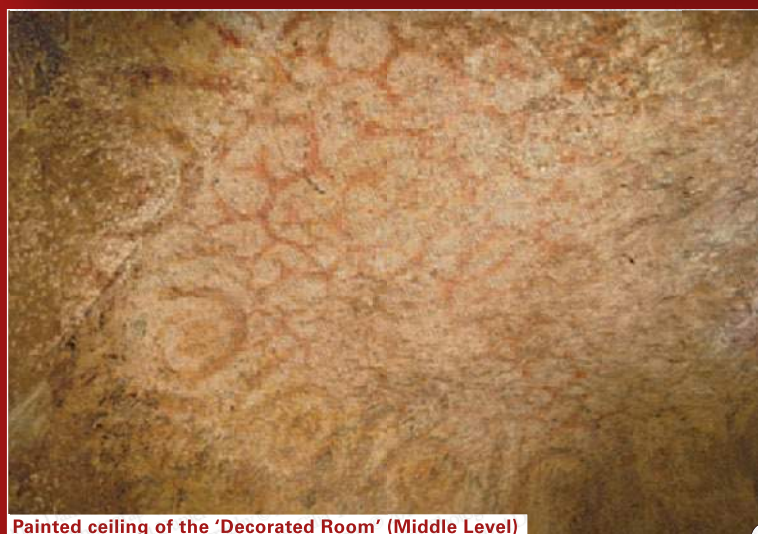
Trilithons on Upper Level

1



Central Chamber on Middle Level

2

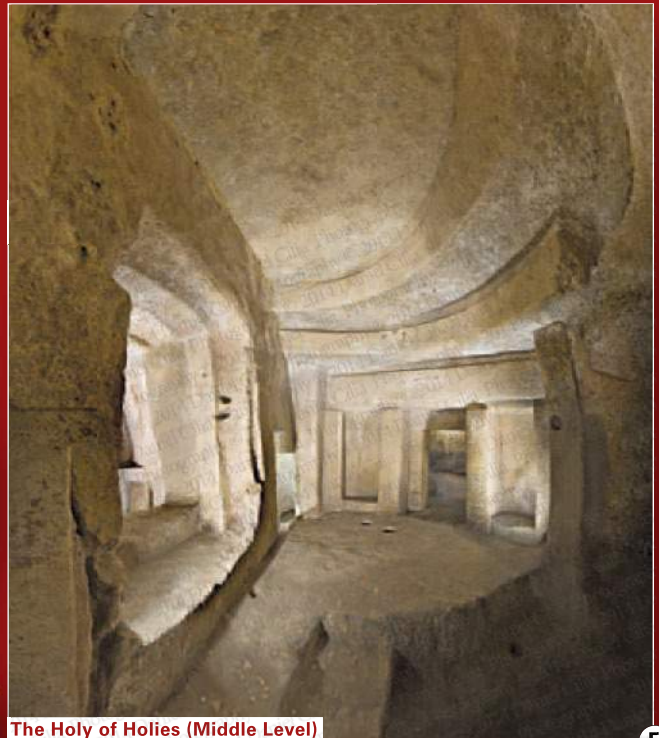
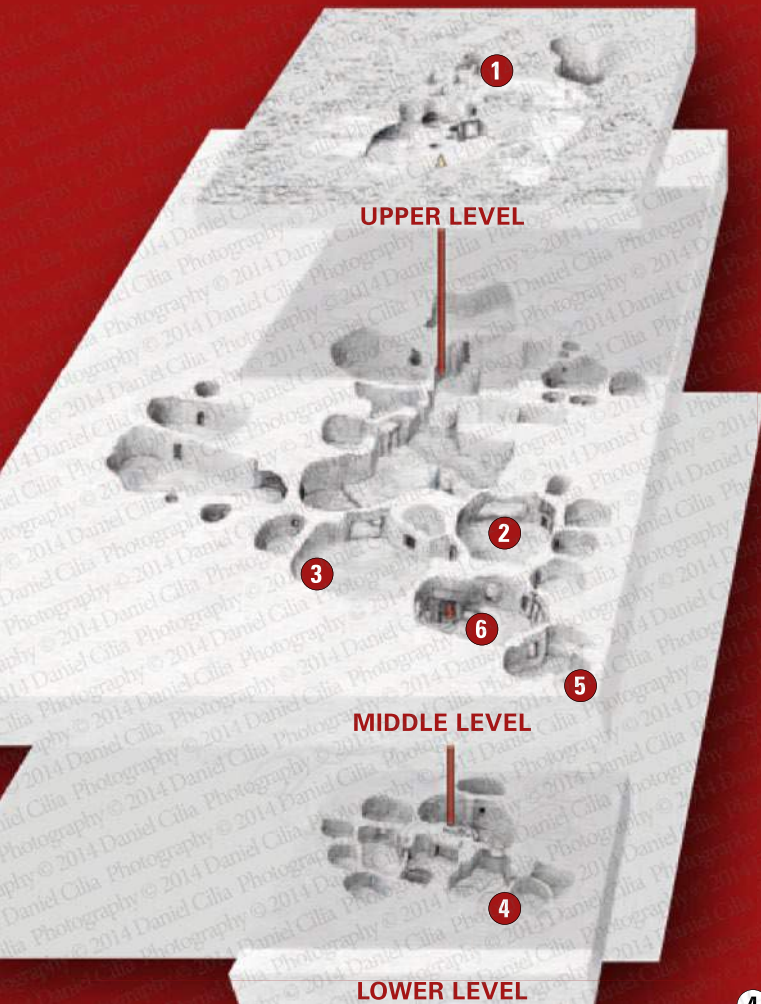


Painted ceiling of the 'Decorated Room' (Middle Level)

3

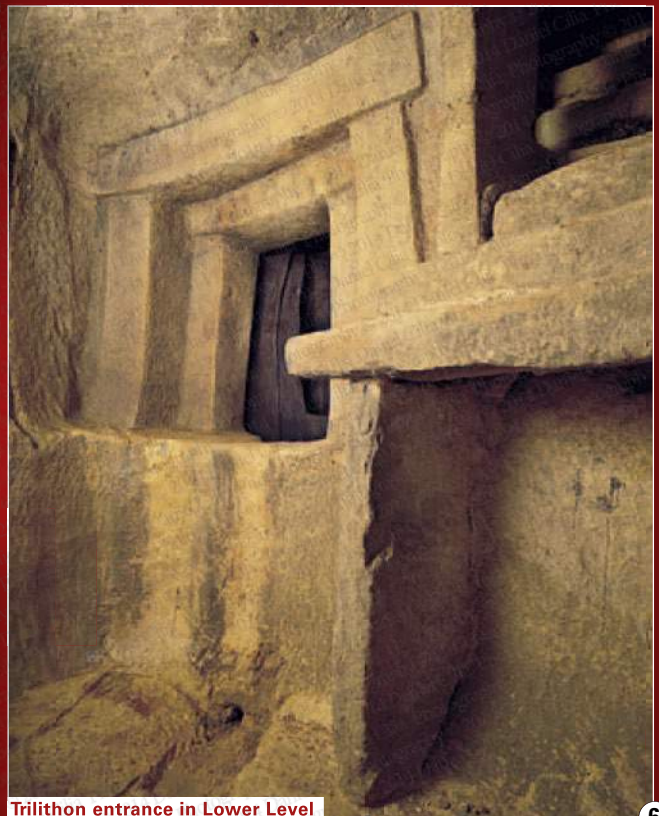
THE HYPOGEUM OF HAL SAFLIENI

The drawing below gives a three-dimensional view of the layout of the chambers spread over three levels, to a depth of over 10m, in this fascinating sanctuary/necropolis located a short distance from the Tarxien Temples. The Hypogeum is one of the most evocative sites in Maltese archaeology.



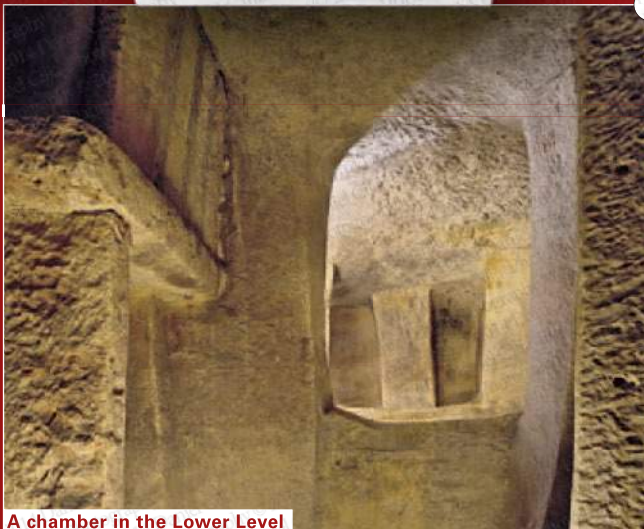
The Holy of Holies (Middle Level)

5



Trilithon entrance in Lower Level

6



A chamber in the Lower Level

4

While it is clear that the Hypogeum had a ritual purpose, many enigmas still surround it. Nevertheless, it appears safe to say that the Hypogeum was a place for mediation between the world of the living and the netherworld of the dead. The famous 'Sleeping Lady' was discovered in one of its chambers (see page 24).

THE MYSTERY OF THE SLEEPING LADY

Reclining on what seems to be a couch or a bed, the *Sleeping Lady* of  Saflieni is one of the masterpieces of Maltese prehistoric art, and as such does not have any close parallels in the Neolithic art of Europe (even though three other examples of figures on a similar ‘couch’ are known from Malta and Gozo, their appearance and execution is very different). 12.2 cm long and 6.8 cm high, the figurine portrays a woman reclining on her right side, with eyes shut, and her head resting on her right hand. Her breasts are exposed, while the lower part of her body is dressed in a long skirt with a pleated hem.

Questions about who the figurine represented, and what role it played in the ritual and religious practices of the time, can only be added to the many questions which the extraordinary remains of the Maltese Neolithic continue to provoke, and which may perhaps never be answered. Was the *Sleeping Lady* some goddess of fertility at rest? Should perhaps the fact that she is portrayed asleep suggest instead that this is a personified representation of the ‘eternal sleep’ of death?

According to the archaeologist Anthony Pace, Superintendent of Cultural Heritage in Malta, we cannot ignore the evidence provided by the context in which the statue was found: The *Sleeping Lady* as well as the other three examples of figures on a similar ‘couch’ have all been found in cemeteries, three from  Saflieni and one – representing three figures – from the Xaghra Circle (see page 29). Furthermore, the posture of the *Sleeping Lady* recalls the foetal position of many of the bodies buried at Xaghra (as inferred from the position of the skeletal remains). Rather than a place for cults of fertility and birth, this fascinating and enigmatic female figure, this masterpiece of the prehistoric world, may be a link with the dark netherworld of the dead.



The ‘Sleeping Lady’, a masterpiece of prehistoric Maltese art, was found in 1905 near the ‘Decorated Room’ in the  Saflieni Hypogeum. Circa 3000 BC. Valletta, National Museum of Archaeology.



Above: The underside of the figurine, showing the structure of the ‘couch’ on which the *Sleeping Lady* rests.



from the rock, creating artificial rooms connected by corridors, platforms and tunnels, while exploiting pre-existing natural faults and fissures within the rock. The sculptors and architects of **Hal Saflieni** transformed the living rock into decorated pillars, trilithon doorways, and corbelled ceilings, imitating the structural components of megalithic buildings raised above ground.

The asymmetrical and irregular plan of the Middle Level recalls the layout of some of the megalithic buildings above ground. It consists in a central chamber which provides access to groups of rooms which display carved replicas of mega-

lithic buildings, with vertical and horizontal elements, sometimes decorated with red ochre pigment.

The burial chambers are characterized by niches, windows, and changes in level. Other chambers have spiral motifs painted in red ochre onto their walls and ceiling, or pecked decoration reminiscent of the drilled decoration at Mnajdra. Present-day researchers are trying to understand how light reached the underground chambers, which may also help us understand how the different types of decoration in different areas were experienced.

Deeper in, a flight of steps leads down to the Lower Level, where a monumental trilithon doorway leads into a series of rooms separated by stone screens, which had once been decorated with red ochre. The burial deposit also yielded pendants, amulets, miniature axes, figurine representations of birds and animals, as well as terracotta models of the human form. The most outstanding is the famous 'Sleeping Lady' figurine, which represents a generously proportioned female figure reclining on her right side on a couch.

The archaeologist Anthony Pace writes: 'these cemeteries defined the physical boundaries of an underground world, a concept which cannot have been very different from that observed in other cultures, such as the later Kingdom of Hades in the Greek world.' On a symbolic level, collective burial of the dead in the underworld must have reinforced solidarity among the living.

The excavations conducted at the Xagħra Circle by Otto Bayer in the 1820s, as depicted in a watercolour by Charles Frederick De Brocktorff (c. 1828).

In the background, two megalithic pillars, which have since disappeared, may be seen flanking the entrance.

To the left, the Ġgantija Temples may be made out in the distance.





THE DISCOVERIES AT XAGHRA

Let us return to the island of Gozo. Here the so-called “Brocktorff Circle” at **Xaghra** was first brought to light thanks to the amateur excavation conducted at **Ġgantija** by the Governor of Gozo, John Otto Bayer, in the 1820s. The clearance works are carefully documented in a series of watercolours by Charles Frederick de Brocktorff, some of which are dated to the years 1828–1829, and which are today preserved in the National Library in Valletta. The series of watercolours also includes two of the contemporary excavation of the nearby megalithic circle which today carries the artist’s name.

The information provided by these watercolours made it possible for Joe Attard Tabone, a local amateur archaeologist, to pinpoint the location of the site. Between 1987 and 1994, a major excavation was undertaken

here by Malta’s Department of Museums together with the universities of Malta, Cambridge and Bristol.

This oldest part of this burial complex is a rock-cut tomb with two chambers, carved out during the **Żebbuġ** Phase (circa 4100–3800 BC); within the chambers, apart from the remains of 65 individuals, lay vessels full of ochre, pendants and carved bone ornaments shaped like a stylized human form, shells and stone tools. A small stone slab on which a stylized face was incised, referred to as a statue-menhir, lay near the entrance.

The excavations have established that between 3000 and 2400 BC, during the final phase of the Temple Culture, the circle was used to bury hundreds of individuals, mostly laid within caves and natural cavities, which had been modified and enlarged to make them more accessible and usable as a

View of the Xagha Circle during the excavation, with the parish church of the present day town in the background.



burial complex. A distinct section of the hypogeum had been modified into an underground space for the performance of burial rituals, with a monumental entrance and a great stone basin surrounded by the burials of the dead.

Even where the skeletal remains had not been disturbed by the nineteenth-century excavations, it was found that they were already being intensively handled, separated and re-deposited during prehistory. The total count, at the end of the project, was of around 220,000 human bones and bone fragments, representing several hundred individuals (without taking into account the bones that were lost during the nineteenth-century excavations). In several areas of the burial chambers, the human remains were accompanied by a wide variety of offerings, including greenstone



Detail of a megalithic screen found in the Xaghra Circle.

axe-amulets, miniature jars containing red pigment, pins, beads, miniature carvings in bone, as well as terracotta figurines and vases, suggesting that different kinds of offerings may have been buried with different individuals or groups. The spaces for burial, which were often separated by walls and thresholds, also yielded a considerable number of animal bones (mostly of sheep, goat, cattle and pig), shedding some light on the prehistoric inhabitants' attitudes to burial and to food.

The pottery displays fine decoration, while the carefully modelled and burnished figurines (human and animal) are among the most beautiful products of Maltese prehistoric art; several examples show traces of red, yellow and black pigment. At least one of the statues, found in fragments near the burials, must have stood more than a metre high; it represented a figure wearing an elaborate skirt, with arms held against the chest. The statue appears to have been deliberately broken, and the fragments placed around a burial together with figurines and necklaces.

Not far from the great stone basin already mentioned, a statuette of a twin seated figure was discovered. The two figures appear to be sitting on a couch. Their hairstyles are elaborate, with what looks like a ponytail on the nape of the neck. Both are shown wearing pleated skirts that appear to balloon out beneath their waistline. One of them holds a miniature figure on the lap, while the other holds a small cup-like vessel (*see box on p. 29*).

(continued on p. 30)

THE 'STICK FIGURES' FROM XAGĦRA

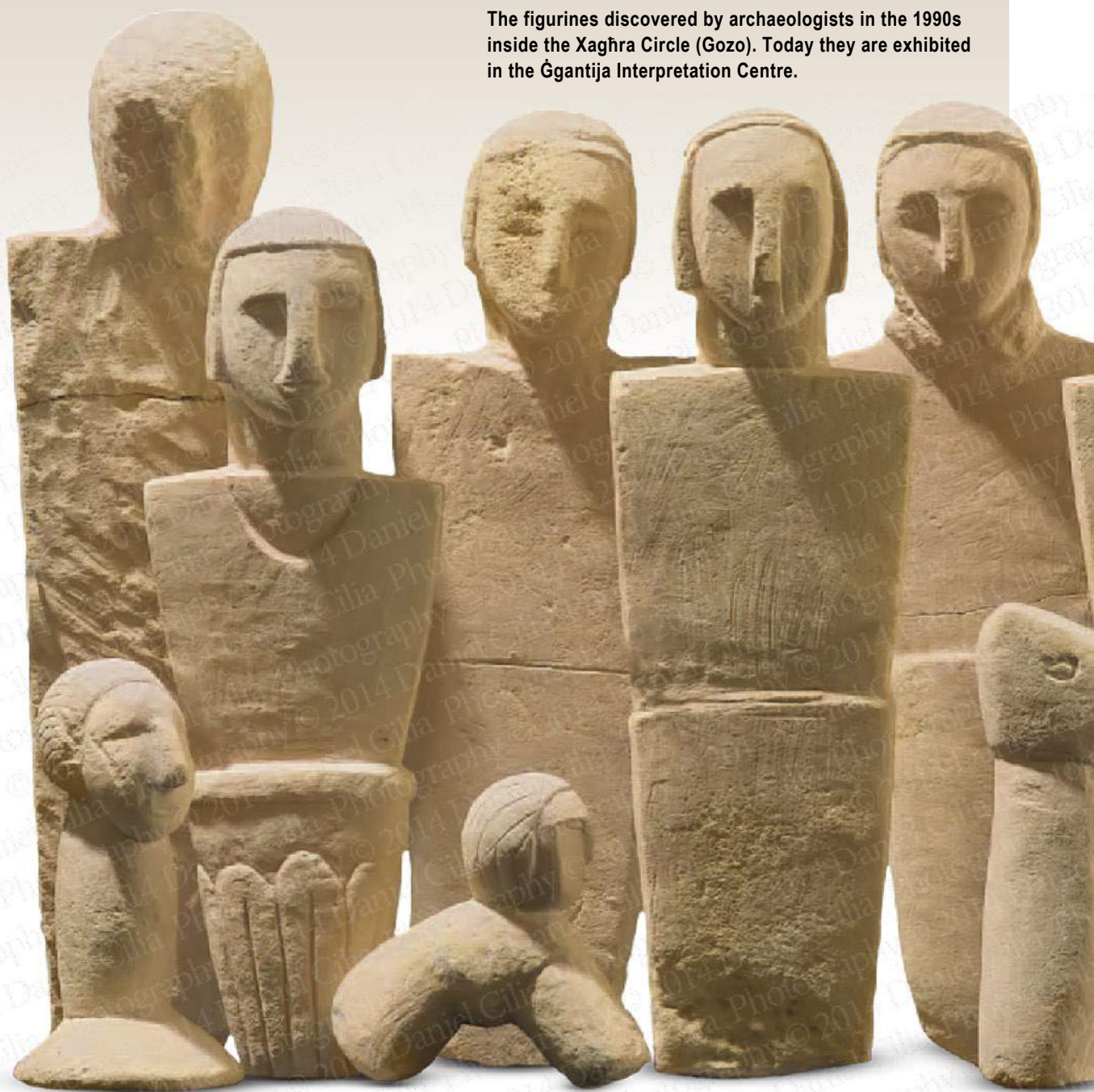
Within the Xagħra Circle, near the great stone basin, a group of nine stone figurines was brought to light, with traces of ochre on their surface, which resembled the herms produced much later in the ancient world.

The statuettes lay in a small pile, as if they had been kept in a box or sack that had been buried by the sudden collapse of the roof of the cave. Six of them, ranging in height between 15 and 18 cm, appear to be sexless, and represent heavily stylized figures; one looks unfinished. Some of them are wearing what looks like a belt or girdle, while the vertical lines on two of them are reminiscent of the pleated skirts

known from other statuettes. One appears to be wearing a diadem. Another figurine resembles a boar's head. These are quite unique objects, without any known parallels for their form and style.

As the lower part of the figurines is rather less detailed in finish, and as they cannot stand on their own, they give the impression that they may have served as portable mannequins or even sacred puppets to be handled and exhibited during funeral rituals. According to the excavators, this chamber may have been used to perform the final rites around the body of the deceased before burial.

The figurines discovered by archaeologists in the 1990s inside the Xagħra Circle (Gozo). Today they are exhibited in the Ġgantija Interpretation Centre.



Right: different views of the sculpture representing two obese figures, discovered in the central area of the Xaghra Circle in Gozo. 3000-2500 BC.



THE MYSTERIOUS COUPLE

In the early 1990s, this curious sculpture carved from Globigerina Limestone was discovered near the 'stick-figures' discussed on the opposite page, in the central area of the Xaghra Circle. The sculpture, measuring 14 x 13 x 9.3 cm, represents two obese figures that are practically identical, except for the fact that one of them is holding a much smaller figure (or child?) on its lap, while the other is holding what appears to be a small cup-like vessel. Within a short time of its discovery, the sculpture had found a place alongside the Venus of Haġar Qim and the *Sleeping Lady* of Hal Saflieni as one of the great masterpieces of Maltese prehistoric art. The couple also displays a number of very particular traits. Firstly, the two figures are seated on a 'couch' similar to that on which the *Sleeping Lady* reclines (see page 24). Furthermore, the sculpture bears extensive traces of red, yellow and black pigment, suggesting that other sculptures from Malta and Gozo may also have been coloured.

Only the head of one of the three carved figures has been found (the loss of the head is very typical of Maltese prehistoric sculptures, perhaps because they were made to permit the fitting of different heads on the same statue, or, more probably, because of deliberate damage for iconoclastic reasons).

A curious fact concerns the hairstyle of the two figures, which shows what looks like a pony-tail down the nape of the neck, particularly evident on the figure with a missing head. In terms of proportions, dress and posture, the two figures (which may or may not be female) follow the model of the larger statues (such as for example the colossal statue from Tarxien, shown on page 6).

The significance of all these statues (are they gods or ancestors? Are they leaders, shamans, or priests?) remains to this day a matter of hypotheses, speculation and conjecture.



How can we explain the immense achievements of Malta's prehistoric communities, witnessed today by their gigantic megalithic monuments and hypogea, and how can we explain the rapid disappearance of this culture sometime around 2400 BC? Vere Gordon Childe believed that the prehistoric monuments were cult places for a 'megalithic religion', managed by the heads of leading families, comparable to castle chapels in Medieval Europe. In 1973, the British archaeologist Colin Renfrew, building on some of Childe's ideas, made the comparison between prehistoric Malta and the ethnographic and historical evidence of the inhabitants of Easter Island before they came into contact with Europeans: it was suggested that in Malta, there may have been six principal settlements, of about 2000 inhabitants each, capable of coordinating their workforce through great ritual cycles supported by the ceremonial redistribution of food and drink, which may have commemorated the ancestors of their various lineages.

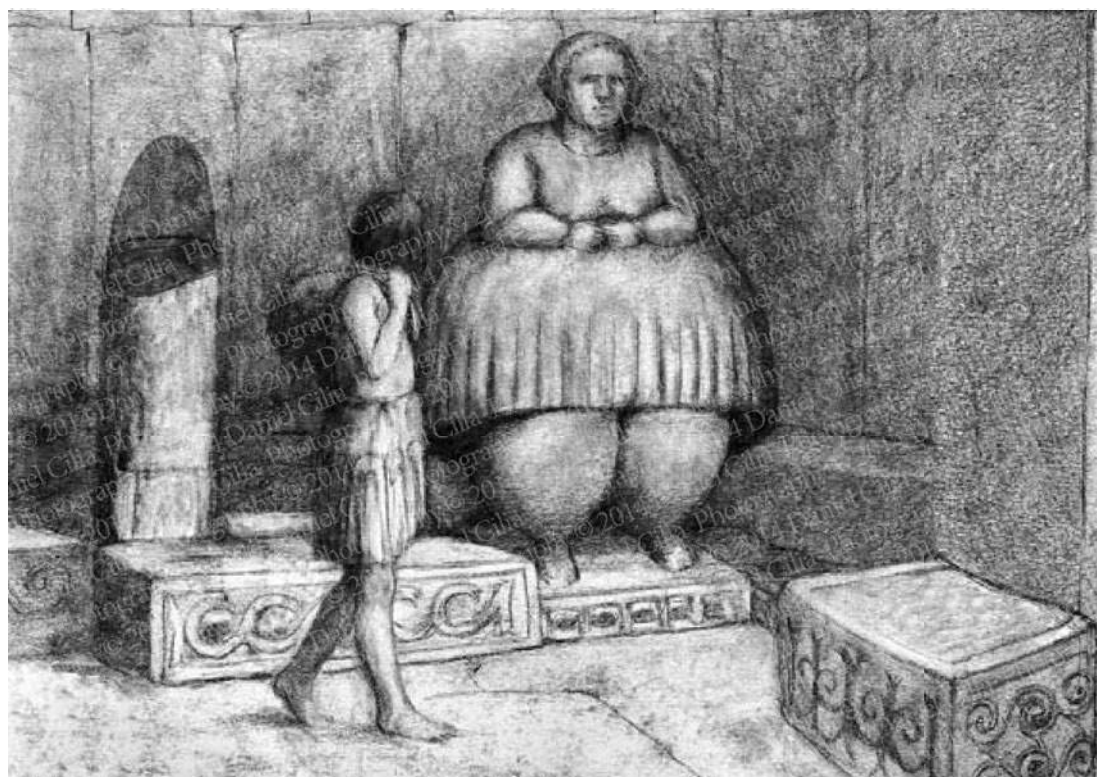
SIGNS OF CRISIS

Archaeologists who have undertaken the most recent excavations of Malta's megalithic complexes have argued that an important key to understanding this society may lie in the very manner of its collapse. They are thinking on the lines of a pro-

gressive demographic growth, accompanied by the parallel development of an increasingly complex material culture. Social tensions, and increasingly hierarchic social mechanisms to control them, may have grown hand-in-hand with the increasing scarcity of food resources – cereals, legumes, fruit and domesticated animals – in a fragile ecosystem whose ability to support a Neolithic economy was intrinsically vulnerable from the outset.

The immense monumental buildings, in very much the same way as the apparent obesity displayed by the statuettes, may have expressed the islanders' aspirations to abundance and wellbeing, during centuries of increasing scarcity and hardship; the only resource that was on the increase was that of the human work force, which could, by and large, continue to be exploited. The intensification of figurative art in the later, Tarxien Phase, buildings may be interpreted as the final expression of the traditional role played by the temples and funerary rituals in the mediation of social conflicts.

Are these hypotheses that can never be verified? Not completely. If traditional Neolithic resources were beginning to become scarcer, we may imagine that the inhabitant increasingly exploited wild resources, including marine birds, fish and shellfish. In practice, however, neither the animal remains



Hypothetical reconstruction drawing of a scene inside the Tarxien Temples, by the colossal statue sometimes referred to as the 'Great Goddess' (see page 6).

nor the human skeletal evidence from the recent excavations at the **Xaghra Circle** has yielded evidence of any such increase in the exploitation of wild resources. The results of that excavation have shown that dependence on cultivated plants and farmed animals continued to grow rather than diminish, almost right up to the mid-third millennium BC collapse, lending support to the idea that population growth may have contributed to increasing levels of economic and social stress.

RITUALS AND SACRIFICES

May we hazard a guess at what went on inside the temples? It is plausible that public processions would have stopped outside the concave facades of the great temples, and that only small groups were allowed to enter gradually into the buildings themselves. If the plans of the temples, as some have rather fancifully suggested, were a reference to the generous proportions of the anthropomorphic statues, the buildings may have themselves represented the social body of revered ancestors.

The processions of sheep, goat, pig and cattle carved in low-relief, the hollow altars within which animal bone had been deposited, together with a flint blade in at least one case, strongly suggest that animal sacrifice was practiced, probably followed by distribution of the meat and ritual feasting. A large amount of fine pottery has been found within the temples. The most common forms are shallow bowls and single-handled cups, which may have been used to scoop up liquids or for drinking. Together with the great stone basins, these cups suggest that some form of libation ritual involving liquids was practiced within the temples. Representations of various creatures (birds, fish and serpents) appear on portable



Carved pillar from Tarxien, showing a relief carving of two phalluses inside a miniature niche, and below, a low-relief depiction of fish on a megalith from Bullibba. Circa 3000 BC. Valletta, National Museum of Archaeology.

objects and on the temple walls: in these cases, it is much less clear whether these are also referring to some form of sacrifice.

A 'MOTHER-GODDESS' CULT

Statues and statuettes appear to have played a central role in the rituals practiced in the temples. The way they were used, however, remains very unclear. Notwithstanding the fact that the figurines (representations in

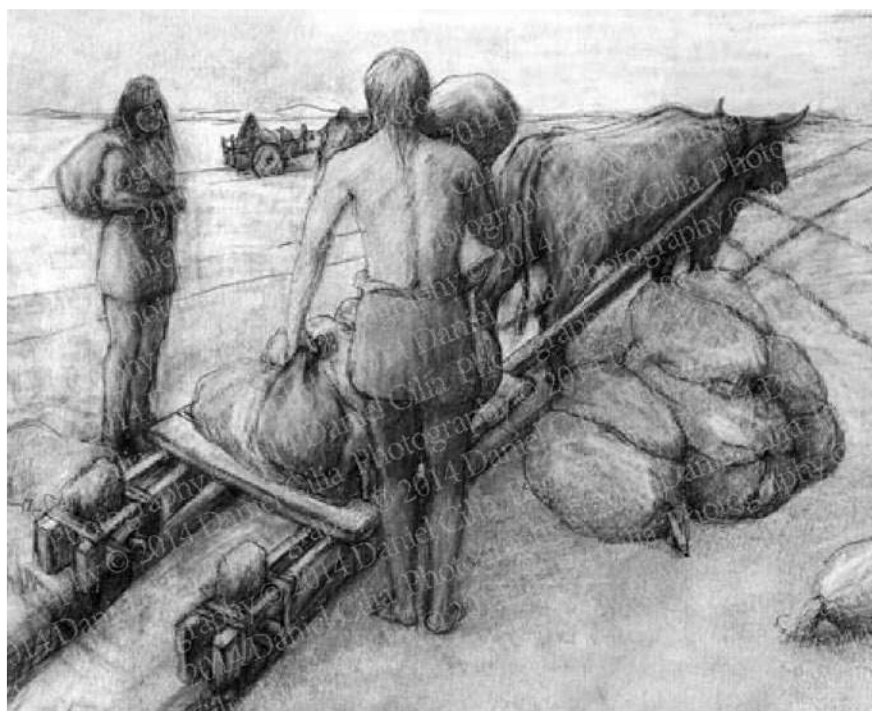


stone and clay, which may be standing, sitting or reclining) have often been interpreted as ‘mother-goddesses’, most of them do not have any overtly sexual characteristics. Although none of the statues show any incontrovertibly male characteristics, a number of phallic representations have been found, some of which are in the form of models inside a miniature niche. The larger statues, some of which have colossal dimensions, may well have been images of supernatural beings and objects of worship. The nature of the small statuettes is rather less clear. The stone figurines in the main room of the **Xaghra Circle** (see p. 28), combined with the fact that several of the carved heads have holes in their base where a cord or

THOSE ENIGMATIC CART RUTS

Among the most characteristic, and enigmatic, features of the Maltese archaeological landscape we find the so-called ‘**cart ruts**’, which form a dense network all across the archipelago (with the exception of the small island of Comino). Reminiscent of present-day railway tracks, they sometimes occur in parallel runs, and even have bifurcations which look just like a railroad switch. The ruts are typically between 6 and 8 cm deep, though depths of 60 cm have also been recorded where there are sharp changes in the level of the ground. It seems very likely that they were formed by some form of transport. Their date, however, is much less clear, and the various suggestions that have been put forward range from the Neolithic to the Roman Period. No examples have been found leading directly to any of the megalithic temples. Nor is it possible to make out some grand, overarching plan that was respected in their execution.

According to the Maltese scholar Anthony Bonanno, the cart ruts are related to quarrying activity, and may therefore trace the routes followed by ancient carts used to transport building material from quarries to building sites. A fact which lends further credence to this hypothesis is that the tracks occur in higher densities in the vicinity of the great urban centre of Mdina-Rabat, which probably reached a demographic peak during the early first millennium AD, in the Roman period. It appears very likely that the cart ruts were created across a long period of time, spanning from prehistory into the classical period.



strap map have been inserted, permitting some movement of the head in relation to the body, have prompted the suggestion that, during funeral rites, statue of ancestors and other divinities may have participated in the ritual, through their choreographed movement in the semi-darkness, perhaps even, as often supposed, providing oracular messages to those present, with portentous nods and shakes of the head.

Some scholars have suggested that the hypogea may have also been used for practices comparable to ritual incubation and supernaturally inspired dreams. They suggest that the sick and the faithful may have sometimes slept in the underground cavities, communing with the realm of the dead, to receive some guiding message in their sleep, in the same way as is rather better-attested millennia later in the Greek cult of Esculapius. Other finds from ritual sites, such as a serpent-like carving at **Ggantija**, and a serpent-like geological formation at Mnajdra, together with clay models of what seem to be different parts of the human anatomy, possibly representing pathological conditions, also seem to suggest an interest in such practices. The collapse of the megalithic complexes by around 2400 BC is followed by the appearance of new forms of funeral monument – primarily that of the dolmen – and the appearance of copper ornaments and weapons, new developments probably related to contacts with a wider world. During the course of the second millennium BC, new settlements appeared across the archipelago, showing a shift in preference towards more defensible sites, some of which were even heavily fortified (**Borġ in-Nadur** Phase, circa 1500-900 BC). The huts, with their elliptical plan, resemble those found in Sicily and the Aeolian islands from around the same period.

AFTER THE MEGALITHS

Some archaeologists have described this period as a long hibernation that culminated, in the early Iron Age, in the settlements of the **Bahrija** culture along the western coast of Malta. The archipelago appears to have experienced a further intensification of contacts with the outside world from the VIII century BC, when it entered the Phoenician sphere of influence, politically as well as economically. Malta was now part of a new network of maritime routes connecting Lebanon, Cyprus and the coast of North Africa to Sicily and Sardinia. By the

end of the VIII century BC, a permanent Phoenician settlement is witnessed by tombs from that period, some of which contained typical sarcophagi with a human form, pottery comparable to that found in the Levant, precious objects made of gold and ivory, and above all, the ritual use of the sanctuary of Astarte at **Tas-Silġ**, overlooking Marsaxlokk Bay, in the southeast end of Malta. The central chamber of the Phoenician sanctuary was probably built upon, or made use of, one of the megalithic monuments built during the Neolithic. It is tempting to suggest that this is a case of persistence, or recurrence, of cults associated with a great goddess of fertility, particularly when one recalls the anthropomorphic statue that was found he-

Opposite page, top: a hypothetical reconstruction drawing of transportation along one of the many Maltese 'cart ruts'. Below: Aerial view of the intricate complex of 'cart ruts' near Buskett, known as 'Clapham Junction', because of their resemblance to the busy railroad hub in south London.

FROM THE BYZANTINES TO THE KNIGHTS OF SAINT JOHN

In 395 AD, following the division of the Roman Empire into its western and eastern halves, the Maltese archipelago came under Byzantine control; not a very effective control, it would seem, because in 454 AD, the islands were taken over by the Vandals, and a decade later, by the Goths. In 533 AD, the formidable Byzantine general Belisarius reconquered Malta, together with other territories which had been taken over by the Vandals, and the archipelago remained in Byzantine hands until the Arab conquest of 870 AD. For more than two hundred years, Malta became a part of the Islamic world. The Arabs merged its administration with that of Sicily, and breathed new life into its agriculture (olives, oranges, lemons, and cotton), while investing heavily in irrigation systems; even today, the language spoken in Malta is closely related to Arabic. In 1127 AD, **Roger II brought Malta firmly under the control of the Norman kingdom of Sicily: Malta now shared the convoluted political destiny of the latter, passing from Norman hands to the Swabians, Anjevins, and eventually the Aragonese**, falling under the Spanish crown in 1479. In 1522, Suleiman the Magnificent (1494-1566) expelled the Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem from the island of Rhodes. The Emperor Charles V of Spain (1500-1558) granted Malta to the Knights, in a cunning move that turned the island into a bulwark against Ottoman attempts to make inroads in Italy. The knights took possession of the island in 1530. This gave rise to a new chapter in Maltese history, popularly referred to as the period of the Knights of Malta. Although for all intents and purposes the Order of Saint John ruled the island as a sovereign state, it technically remained a vassal of the Spanish viceroy of Sicily.

In 1565, the Maltese and the Order of Saint John were the protagonists of the famous siege of Malta, during which they successfully repelled the Ottomans who attacked in vastly superior numbers. Nowadays, the Order is known as the Sovereign and Military Order of Malta. From its headquarters in Rome, it coordinates numerous humanitarian missions, particularly in areas hit by conflict or natural disasters.

SHELTERING THE TEMPLES

Since the spring of 2010, the two great complexes of **Ħaġar Qim** and **Mnajdra** (declared **UNESCO World Heritage** in 1992) have been covered by large tensile membrane shelters, in order to protect the megalithic remains from the rapid erosion that was being caused by exposure to the elements, which was all the more acute because of their proximity to the sea. Before the clearance of these monuments commenced in 1839, both complexes lay largely buried, and therefore protected from the elements.

A Scientific Committee appointed to make recommendations for the preservation of the temples put forward proposals in 2000 for the better conservation and interpretation of the site, in accordance with the guiding principles laid down by UNESCO. Public opinion about the intervention was deeply divided during its execution, but rapidly embraced the result once the project was completed. I have visited **Ħaġar Qim** and **Mnajdra** repeatedly since the 1980s, and again following the completion of the shelters. My overall judgement is a very positive one: the great 'roof', far from being just an intrusive, and therefore disturbing, element, is also performing a crucial function that is arguably ancient: It has given back the megalithic chambers some of that sense of calm collectedness and silent intimacy that they had lost over time (we must recall that the monuments were originally roofed), and which resonates with the intentions of the original temple builders.

Present-day tourists, who often arrive in a noisy and irreverent hubbub, find themselves drawn into a mood of respectful concentration as they step beneath the shelters to explore the megalithic chambers. The bottom line, as **Daniel Cilia** (the photographer responsible for the images that illustrate this article, who has a profound awareness of present-day issues in Maltese archaeology) pointed out to me, is that the new structures are not in physical contact with the ancient monuments and are fully reversible, so that whenever they are no longer considered necessary, they may be dismantled and removed.

Andreas M. Steiner



re, dated to the early III millennium BC. In the centuries that followed, Carthage emerged as the foremost Phoenician colony in the western Mediterranean. It appears to have drawn Malta into its sphere of influence, distancing it from the Phoenician homeland in Lebanon. The great Mediterranean metropolis of Carthage was shifting its energies further west, in the direction of the Iberian peninsula. In Malta, the period when it was primarily under Carthaginian influence, known as the Punic period (roughly V-III century BC) is witnessed by the contemporary phases of use of the sanctuary at **Tas-Silġ**, which show the cult of Astarte being linked to that of Hera; by imports and coins from the Greek part of Sicily and from Ptolemaic Egypt; by the remains of several farmsteads; by the sanctuary at **Ras il-Wardija** on Gozo; and by countless rock-cut tombs that dot the island, particularly around **Rabat** and the **Grand Harbour**.

SAINT PAUL COMES ASHORE

The Punic period came to an end in 218 BC, at the start of the Second Punic War, when Roman troops under the command of **Titus Sempronius Longus** had no difficulty in overpowering the 2000-strong garrison deployed by Carthage to defend the archipelago. During the Roman period, urban life in Malta continued in the main town of **Melite** (on Malta, on the site of present-day **Mdina** and **Rabat**) and in another town at the centre of **Gozo** (on the site of the present-day urban centre of the island, also known as **Rabat**).

In the area of **Mdina** and **Rabat** on Malta, a richly-decorated aristocratic residence was discovered, dating from the first century BC, with a peristyle of **Doric pillars** around a

The Ħaġar Qim Temples below the protective shelter, catching the first rays of the morning sun.

Opposite page: The main entrance to the **National Museum of Archaeology** in **Republic Street, Valletta**.

Opposite, below: **The Sleeping Lady** in her showcase in the **National Museum of Archaeology**.



central courtyard, and floors finished with splendid polychrome mosaics. Precious mosaics also decorated the II century AD baths at Ghajn Tuffieha, not far from the bay of the same name, witnessing the comfortable, even leisurely existence enjoyed by some wealthy family in what had become a peaceful backwater of the Empire.

Over twenty villa sites are known across the archipelago, from which the surrounding territory was intensively cultivated. The best known of these is probably that at San Pawl Milqi (II century BC–IV century AD), fully equipped for the pressing of olives and the production of olive oil. Ancient literary sources have also recorded that Roman Malta had a flourishing textile industry, a rich source of coral, an abundance of fish and well-appointed commercial harbours. *The Acts of the Apostles* have recorded how in 60 AD, Saint Paul was shipwrecked on the shores of the island, then rescued and hosted by a wealthy leader.

The mainly Christian catacombs of Saint Paul in Rabat, created between the IV and VII century AD, bear witness to the presence of a thriving Christian community into and beyond late antiquity.



THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN VALLETTA

A good way to begin a journey of discovery of Malta's ancient remains is to visit the **National Museum of Archaeology**, which is housed in a beautiful historic building in the heart of **Valletta**, where Malta's principal archaeological discoveries are displayed, including the 'Sleeping Lady' and the 'Venus of Malta'.

National Museum of Archaeology

Valletta, Auberge de Provence, Republic Street

Open daily 0800-1900

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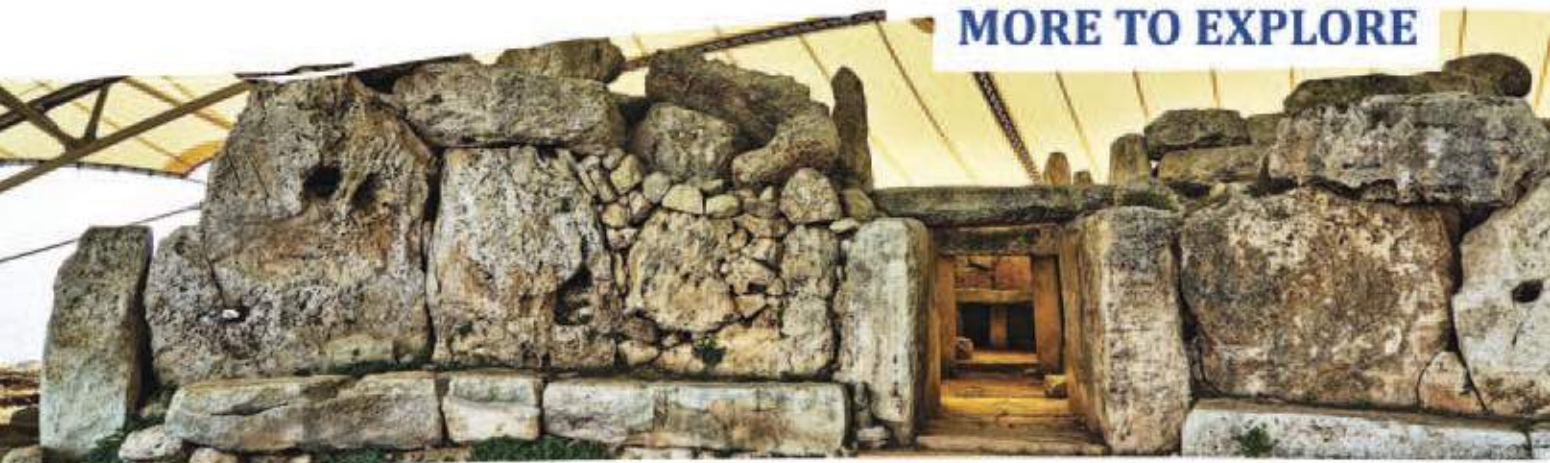
<http://heritagemalta.org>

The new **Ġgantija Interpretation Centre** on Gozo houses an exhibition of prehistoric discoveries from the second island of the archipelago.

To visit the archaeological sites (particularly the Hypogeum of **Hal Saflieni**, where the number of visitors is strictly limited and advance online booking is essential) you may refer to **Heritage Malta** (www.heritagemalta.org) and for more general information to the **Malta Tourism Authority** (www.visitmalta.com).

'Archeo' thanks Dominic Micallef (MTA) and Reuben Grima (University of Malta) for their invaluable collaboration.





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