

# Monuments in an island society: the Maltese context

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## Introduction: the study of island societies

Island societies have been the focus of two principal lines of archaeological theory: the processes of initial colonization (Cherry 1981) and the transformations of social hierarchy (Renfrew 1974). Both these themes have been heavily influenced by ethnographic studies of the Polynesian islands, the supposed laboratory of island development for the disciplines of biogeography and social anthropology. It is the second line of enquiry that is considered here. This is a topic where monuments have been generally considered as correlates of social hierarchy.

The more specific aim of the present paper is to assess the aims and results of recent fieldwork (started in 1987 and still in progress) on a recently neglected area, the prehistoric megalithic monuments of Malta or, more specifically, the smaller island of Gozo (Fig. 1). The wider aim is to undertake this assessment in the light of a broader study of island societies, building on the theme covered by Evans over ten years ago (Evans 1977). In addition, it is hoped to enrich and question the simple models of social hierarchy employed up to now by exploring the insights of network analysis in island societies (Boissevain 1974) through the assistance of access analysis in the study of architectural plans (Hillier and Hanson 1984). Such analyses provide alternatives to the Hawaiian chiefdom-based model which appears too simplistic for a discussion of the full complexity of the Maltese evidence.

## The study of prehistoric monuments in Malta

Prior work on the prehistoric monuments of Malta is almost without exception a study of temples. Early descriptions of the monuments of Malta date back into the sixteenth century (Evans 1971: 3–5), although the first of significance was that of Houel (1787). The excavation that followed in the early nineteenth century left little record except from the artists who happened to be present. The work of Brochtorff is of particular relevance since he left two views of a megalithic circle that carries his name and which is now being re-excavated as the focal part of the current field project on Gozo. At the time of Brochtorff (c. 1820–5), there was scant interpretation of the monuments and it is clear that early accounts did not even acknowledge their prehistoric antiquity.

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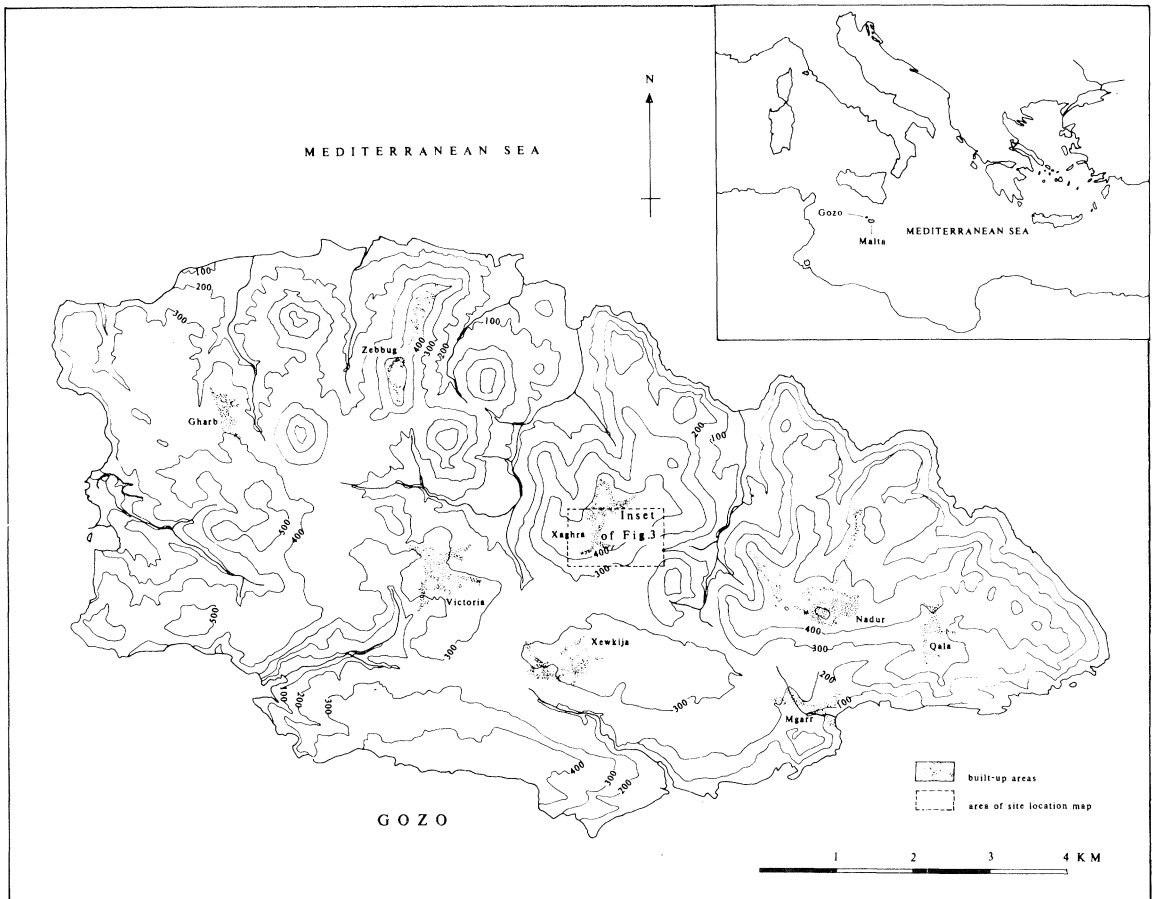


Figure 1 The island of Gozo. The Mediterranean setting. Location of Figure 3.

The first excavation reports of importance date to the first part of the twentieth century. A major series of monuments were examined both above and below the original ground level, thus establishing the complexity of the monumental remains on the islands. In the early part of the century, the work of Themistocles Zammit covered the two important excavations of Hal Saffieni and Tarxien; and Thomas Ashby and T. E. Peet reported on other sites in the islands. Between the world wars Zammit continued his work at smaller temple sites.

These excavations were placed in a much more coherent framework by the first systematic ordering of the material by John Evans in the 1950s (Evans 1953; 1971), achieved through cross-dating with the Sicilian sequence, even though stratigraphic information was incomplete. The framework was radically modified by a new phase of stratigraphic fieldwork in the late 1950s and early 1960s which added to the complexity of the local sequence and provided the first radiocarbon dates (Trump 1966) that allowed the proper expression of the antiquity of the Maltese monuments (Trump 1963; 1966; Renfrew

1972). Although antiquity has been demonstrated, more radiocarbon dates and stratigraphic relationships are still needed to explore the details of the development of the Maltese temples. Revised chronological schemes are weakly grounded without these extra data (*pace* Anati 1988: 13–17).

Theoretical explanation of the monuments was for long hampered by chronological uncertainty. Most early scholars considered them Phoenician. It is therefore remarkable that Fergusson, famous for his general studies of megalithic architecture recognized their uniqueness and placed them in the pre-Roman period (between the Trojan and Punic Wars), out of step with his scheme for other megalithic monuments in Europe (Fergusson 1872: 427). His interpretation was otherwise typical of the time in seeking an external explanation for their origin, although he was forced to choose the one unresearched local area, North Africa because of a lack of parallels elsewhere (Fergusson 1872: 426). Evans, writing before radiocarbon dating (Evans 1953: 580), was still inclined, in common with many other scholars, to seek an eastern origin of the Tarxien ceramic style, even though there were no imports.

At the end of the fieldwork phase in the 1960s, the radiocarbon revolution confirmed a strengthening view by Evans, Trump and others that the Maltese temples were a local development and must therefore be seen in terms of the elaboration of a local cultural tradition. It was Evans and Trump who set out the typological framework for the development of the Maltese temples, as an increasing elaboration of complexity: a simple subterranean burial monument transferred above ground as a temple, elaborated and then in turn transferred back underground as a burial monument (Evans 1971), though the use of tombs (with some increase in complexity) continued parallel to this.

In a series of articles in the 1970s, pressing home the message of independent social development, Renfrew developed his models of social hierarchy principally around the monuments of Wessex and Malta (Renfrew 1973; 1974; Renfrew and Level 1979). Put succinctly, these ideas saw the temples as rival centres of power, the foci of competing social groups (Renfrew 1973; Evans 1977: 23) motivated by the stresses of high population density. The implication of the XTent model was that the largest monuments on Malta and Gozo came to dominate their own islands, on the principle that large temples were able to control increasingly large territories. Bradley (1984) has been one of the few to challenge these ideas by suggesting divergent and convergent ritual and funerary ideologies, fluctuations in monumentalization and internal conflict underlying the cultural transformation at the end of the Temple building period.

### **Prior assumptions in the study of Maltese monuments**

The underlying assumption behind previous interpretation of the Maltese monuments (with the exception of Bradley (1984)) is the presence of an increasingly centralized hierarchy that could not be sustained and led to collapse. This assumption can be criticized on two grounds; the first theoretical, the second factual. Firstly, was the social order constituted in this hierarchical manner? Is the (Polynesian) chiefdom the most appropriate model for 'middle range societies', that is, those societies on the gradient between simple agriculturalists and states? Secondly, the assumption of hierarchy expressed in the form of

centralized power ignores certain aspects of the distribution of Maltese temples. The temples typically do not appear as isolated monuments but frequently in groups (often pairs), sometimes clumped closely together, sometimes less closely associated (Fig. 2). The existence of paired monuments was first noted by Fergusson (1872), has been recalled but not explored by Renfrew (1973: 168) and further emphasized by Trump (1981: 137). However, little has been made of it. This is surprising since this spatial pattern alone suggests elements of intra-group competition as well as inter-group rivalry.

### The current project

The present Anglo-Maltese fieldwork project was established in 1987 to investigate the development and (traditionally conceived) demise of the Maltese temple building populations. Work has been directed not at the temples themselves, the focus of almost all fieldwork since the last century, but on three separate themes: funerary ritual and skeletal remains, settlement archaeology and environmental reconstruction. The island of Gozo (Fig. 1) was chosen as the principal focus because of its smaller size, the relative lack (although major threat) of modern development, the relative neglect of research and the presence of a key cluster of temple and related structures (including the Ggantija temple) on the Xaghra plateau (Fig. 3).

The first work in 1987 concentrated on a small domestic group at Ghajnsielem Road (Malone et al. 1988) and an already known funerary complex not far from the Ggantija temple, commonly known as the Brochtorff circle (Figs 4A and B). The work at Ghajnsielem Road rapidly confirmed the disparity of scale and investment of time and resources (already indicated by work at Skorba (Trump 1966) and stressed by Bonanno (1986)) between the ritual structures of the fourth and third millennia BC and the domestic structures of the same period. In the place of megalithic architecture, limited drystone, mudbrick and polished plaster were employed for a pair of domestic huts.

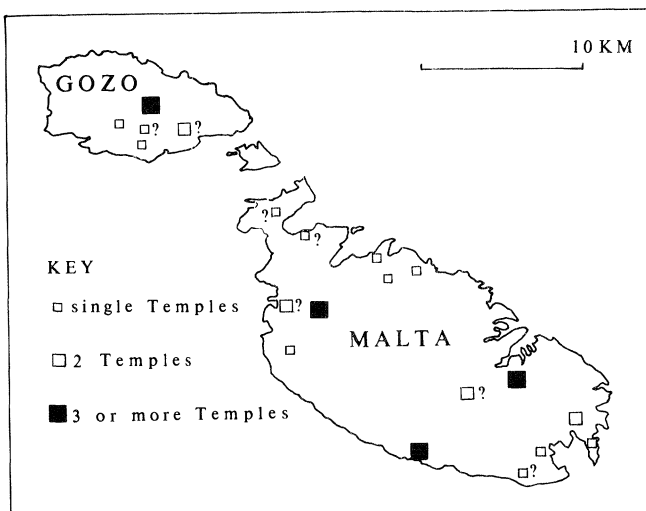


Figure 2 The location of temple clusters on the islands of Malta.

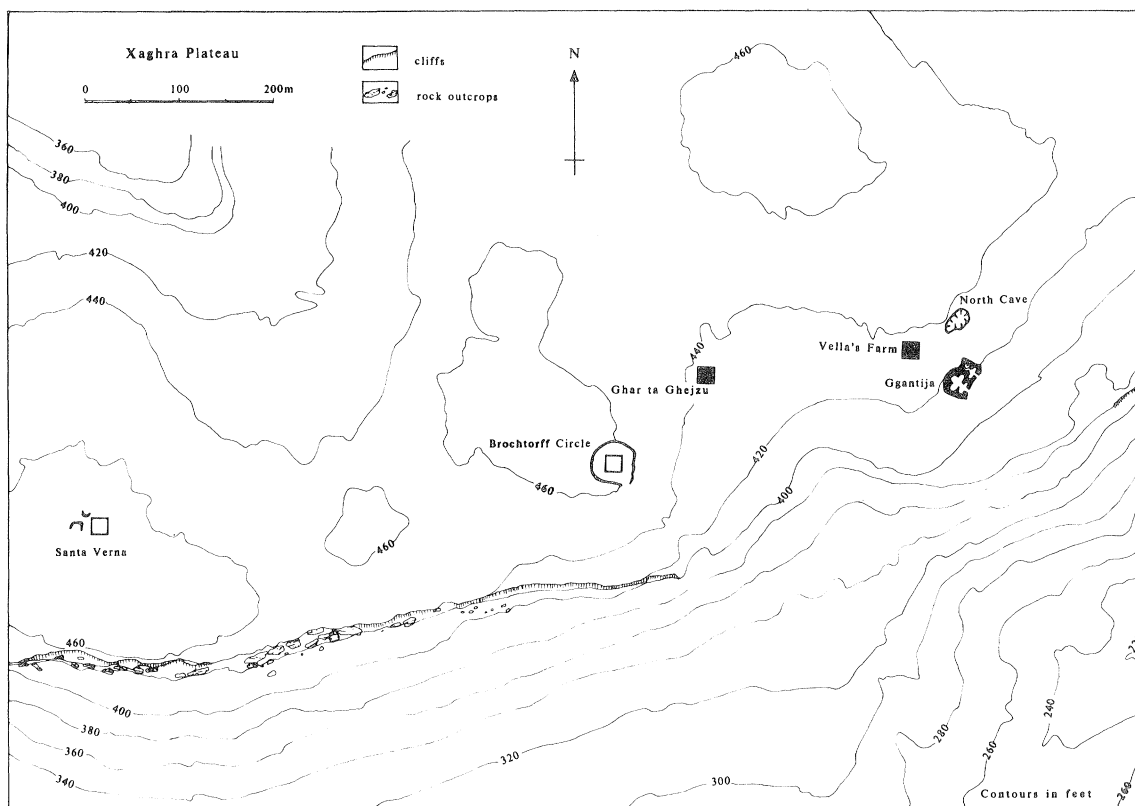


Figure 3 The topographic arrangement of monuments on the Xaghra plateau.

The work at the Brochtorff circle, still under way in 1990, is investigating the mortuary component of Maltese ritual during the period 4100–1500 cal. BC. The Hal Safieni hypogeum has, until recently, represented the only continuous mortuary sequence on the islands over the same period. Unfortunately, although Evans has suggested (see below) a very plausible chronological framework, the original evidence has been so badly treated that there is little possibility of reaching greater certainty. The Brochtorff circle is offering the opportunity of reconstructing a sequence from the Zebbug (pre-Temple building) (4100–3800 cal. BC) to the Tarxien Cemetery (post-Temple building) (2500–1500 cal. BC) period, with the added advantage of being placed in close proximity to at least two temples (Ggantija and Santa Verna) and other associated ritual areas.

A further component of the project (not further considered here) is to place these monuments in a human and physical landscape. Field survey should be able to establish the nature and intensity of land use and the scale, material elaboration and distribution of non-ritual activity (if this can be disembedded from the social). Environmental indicators, principally snails, but possibly also pollen, should be able to give an idea of the impact of man on the landscape, thus giving an ecological context for the society that built these monuments. Preliminary work confirms earlier analysis that the landscape was very

rapidly cleared of its climax vegetation (C. Hunt and P. Schembri, pers. comm.), producing the potential for major ecological stress, provided population levels were sufficiently high.

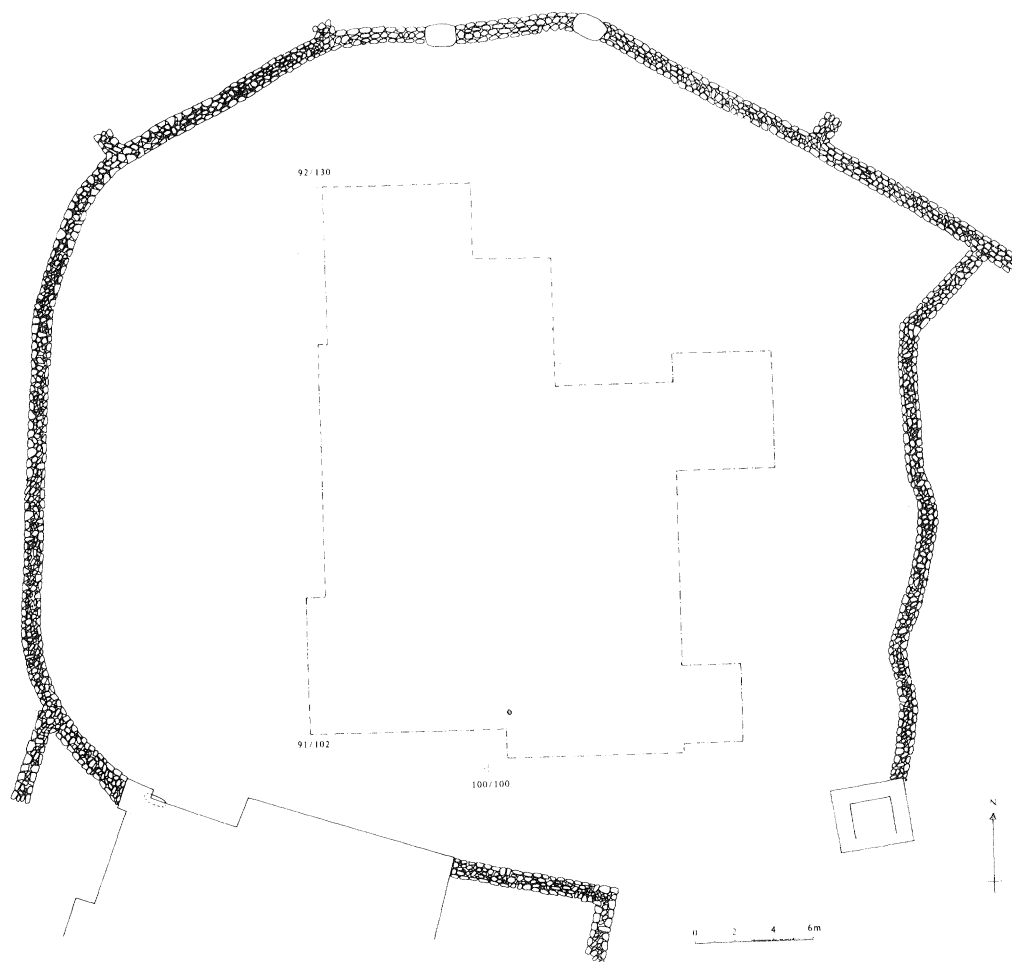
### **The material culture of dense networks**

Dense social networks are a characteristic of the rural component of small modern island communities (Boissevain 1974). These are conditions largely related to the demographic scale of the communities involved, and do not assume any similarity in social structure. Renfrew (1974: 77) has assessed the upper limits of the prehistoric population of Malta to be between 1,000 and 2,000 for each temple group. These demographic levels are substantially below the 3–4,000 person threshold established by Boissevain (1974: 124), where network relations become more diffuse, less personal and where the moral authority of kinship is replaced by impersonal hierarchy. It is highly probable that the personal networks of prehistoric Malta had these same dense characteristics, that is, they were intensely personal, involving no more than two intermediary links, particularly in the context of political interaction. Alliances were necessary for the maintenance of social cohesion, although the scale of the society in prehistoric Malta was sufficiently small to maintain the major contacts at a very personal level.

An intense network of this nature could have allowed prominent individuals to collect personal factions in support of their cause, recruited on the basis of broadly similar but rival ideologies. Under these conditions, cycles of intra-group and inter-group rivalry, played out through material culture, would have become highly visible. Each community could have required a number of locations readily visible to other factions where this intra-communal and inter-communal rivalry was executed. Some of these locations could have had greater long term success and earned a greater succession of material improvement. It is thus wrong to assume a uniform scale of complexity for all monuments in each ceramic and/or chronological period, even if more complex buildings might be generally found in later periods, because of their historical development. This reconstruction of prehistoric Maltese society places much less stress on centralized control, and much more on the cultural continuity of intra-group competition, where rivalry was focused materially on monuments.

This pattern of rivalry might also place the cessation of massive expenditure of effort on conspicuous material culture in a less calamitous perspective. Behaviour of this type would, by its very nature, have short and long term fluctuations that simply expressed the current level of social rivalry. A change in the intensity or mode of expression of that rivalry would be detected as a major change in the archaeological record and not necessarily signify a replacement of the local population. It would signify a transformation of the social order but not its disintegration.

A technique exists to measure the modification of temple and funerary architecture through time. Access analysis (Hillier and Hanson 1984; Foster 1989a; 1989b) is generally attached to a body of theory about the relationship of social ideology and the organization of space, but here it is used descriptively (Fig. 5). ‘Justified access maps’ of buildings, by a simple classification of access points (lines) and enclosed spaces (circles/triangles – the



notation used here for fully enclosed spaces and niches respectively), show the steps a stranger must take on entering a building to reach its various compartments. The method allows us at a glance to see the changes in architectural form at points in time which, even if they cannot be precisely measured, do have a stratigraphic order that can be established from the building stages of the monuments. A further analysis not yet undertaken here would be to analyse the context of each enclosed space by studying decorative art, portable artefacts and the nature of the enclosed space.

If the model of fluctuating phases of rivalry outlined above is correct, two effects might be expected: a) an overall increase in complexity over time while material culture was articulated in this way; b) the presence in individual ritual structures of stratigraphically ordered phases of accretion of spatial complexity. Complete replacement of structures might be expected of a centralized society where more power can be mobilized at phases of major social transformation. Remodelling and embellishment of the existing forms, primarily by addition and insertion, might be expected of cycles of more temporary authority.

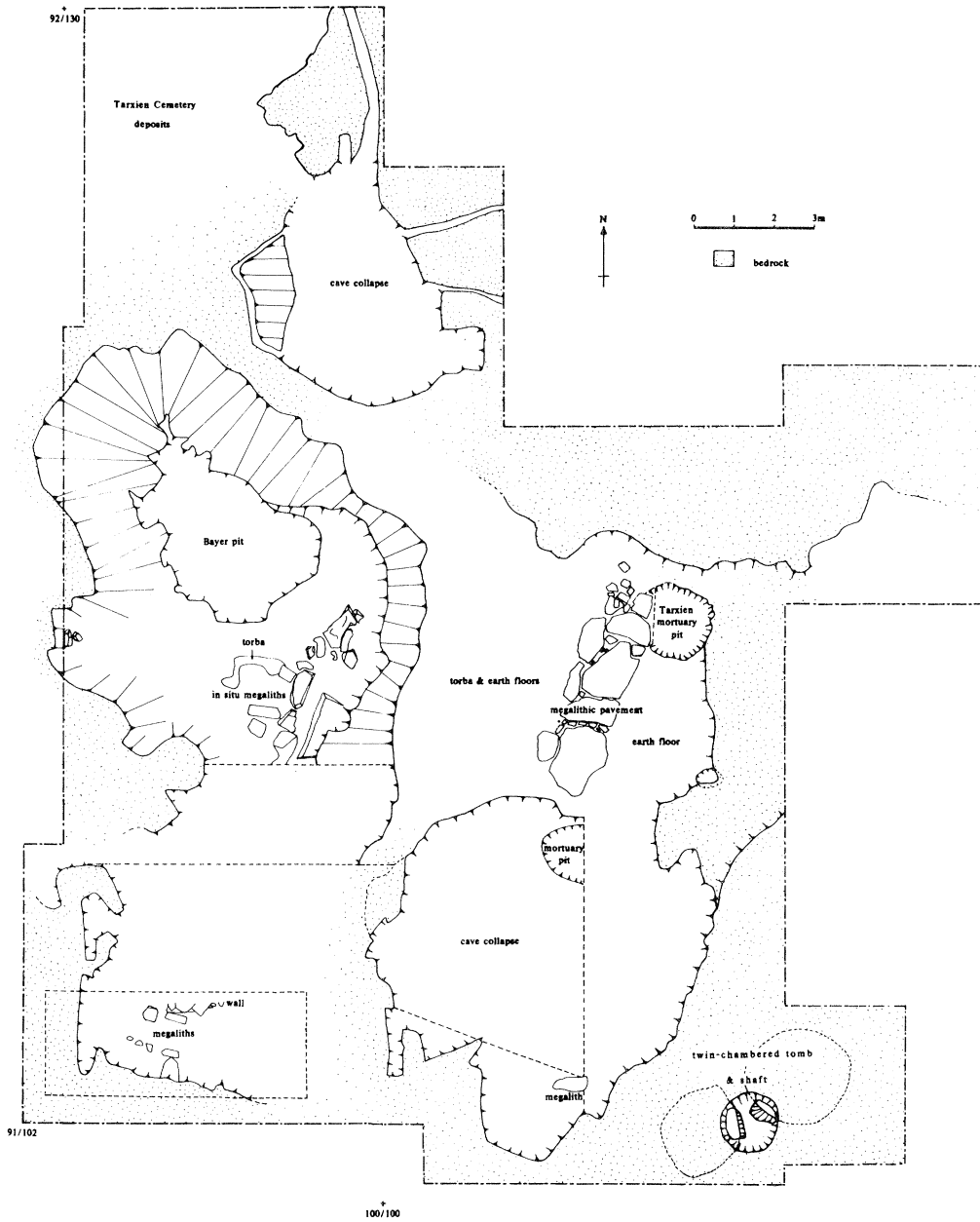


Figure 4 A (facing page): The Brochtorff circle. Extent of excavation in 1989. B (above): Prehistoric features at the Brochtorff circle. Excavated during 1987, 1988 and 1989.



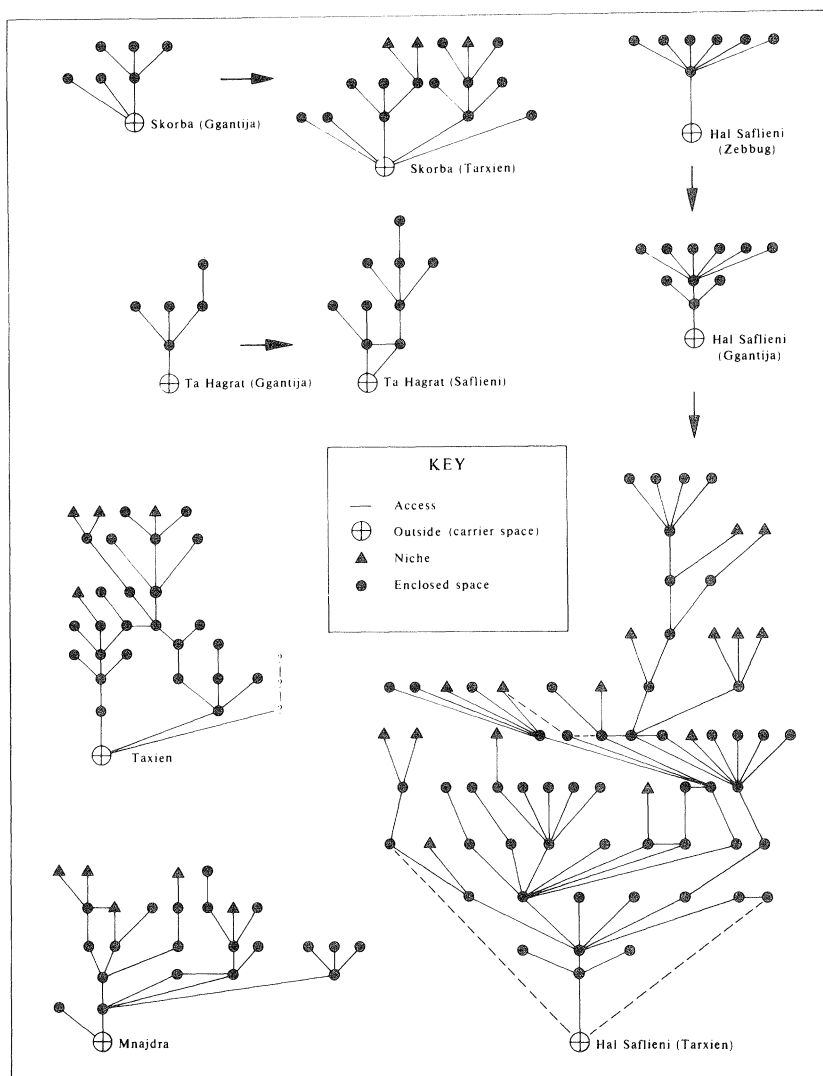


Figure 5 Access diagrams for Skorba (between Ggantija and Tarxien phases), Ta Hadrat (between Ggantija and Saflieni phases), Tarxien, Mnajdra and Hal Saflieni (a tentative reconstruction between Zebbug and Tarxien phases). The very tentative dating evidence for Hal Saflieni is based on the important work of Evans (1971: 59) which re-evaluated the old excavations. The firm points that Evans established were that the upper levels of the hypogeum were associated with Zebbug, Ggantija and later pottery and the lower levels contained purely Saflieni and Tarxien pottery. One possible sequence based on this framework is given here. Key: Open circles: outside (confined space); filled circles: enclosed space; triangles: niches. The lines joining these symbols indicate access routes.

### The formation of a parallel programme of monumentalization and competitive emulation

The broad pattern of the development of Maltese monumental ritual has been recognized elsewhere (Evans 1959: 84–134; Trump 1981). It takes two forms: funerary and temple. In the preceding millennia of prehistoric occupation of the Maltese islands, the ideology was very similar to that of the rest of the southern central Mediterranean. In the late Neolithic, Malta was part of the exchange system that circulated greenstone axes, obsidian and fine pottery (e.g. variants on Serra d'Alto and Diana, known locally on Malta as Grey and Red Skorba) and shared the ideology of communal rock cut tombs of the early Copper Age (locally named Zebbug) (Malone 1985). By the Late Neolithic, the contexts where fine Diana/Red Skorba pottery was found had become almost exclusively ritual, as is the case at Skorba.

The Zebbug period (4100–3800 cal. BC), however, established a major ideological cycle exclusive to Malta that was to last for about 1500 years. It is from this point that ritual began to diverge into two discrete contexts, based on funerary and temple sites. The Red Skorba (4400–4100 cal. BC) shrine at Skorba appears to have been embedded (spatially and conceptually) in a domestic context. The temples and burial places of the Temple building period (3600–2500 cal. BC) were spatially and conceptually quite distinct. The two major burial complexes of the Temple building period at Hal Saffieni and the Brochtorff circle both have their origins in the Zebbug period. Many of the major temple sites date back to this period when ritual sites were not separable from the domestic. This has been most conclusively shown at Skorba and Ta Hagra. The evidence for other sites, based on simple counts of surviving diagnostic sherds from early excavations, is more difficult to assess but suggestive of the same pattern (Table 1).

### The funerary component

Hal Saffieni remains the most extensively explored funerary complex of the Temple building period. Three phases of development can perhaps be disentangled from the poorly preserved records of the excavation at the beginning of this century. The first

Table 1 Sherd numbers from old excavations recorded by Evans (1971); (for data on Skorba see Trump 1966).

Period	Sites					
	Ggantija	Tarxien	Mnajdra	Hagar Qim	Ta Hagra	Kordin
Zebbug	22	15	4		1006	12
Mgarr	2	2	1	1	200	32
Ggantija	145	212	34	2	200	164
Tarxien	83	1652	700	71	660	351
Tarxien Cemetery	60	300	2	2	6	2
Borg in Nadur	2		2		13	3

underground constructions appear to have been a simple Zebbug tomb very similar in form and location (on the crest of a hill) to the examples at Xemxija, involving no more than two levels of access (if niches are included in the analysis) (Fig. 5); the primary underground space comprised chambers of c.2m in diameter at 1–3m below the ground. This space was gradually extended by accretion during the Temple building period with the addition of a megalithic structure above ground and the excavation of additional levels below ground. In the Tarxien period, it is highly probable that there was a peak of activity with the embellishment of the central rooms of the underground hypogeum, carved in the style of the temples above ground and painted in ochre. At this final stage the depth (more than 10m from the surface), number of units of space (almost 70) and the complexity of the access (11 levels) to the monument suggests that some principles of differential exclusion of members of the community may have been put into operation.

### The temple component

The details of the temple cycle are also difficult to establish because, with two exceptions (Zammit 1930; Trump 1966), the temples have had a similarly unfortunate history of excavation. However, a more robust stratigraphic sequence can be established (based on information in Evans 1971) for four sites (Skorba, Mnajdra, Tarxien and Ta Hagraat (Mgarr)) and the access diagrams analysed (Fig. 5). At Tarxien, the first small temple, with two levels of access and six units of space, was constructed in the Ggantija phase. A pair of temples were then placed to the west in the early Tarxien phase and then a final temple inserted between the two in the latest Tarxien. The final stage is highly monumental, with eight levels of access and twenty-eight units of space, but the process by which this was reached combined not only the construction of increasingly elaborate structures, but also accretion (Fig. 5). A very similar sequence can be followed at Mnajdra. The oldest temple appears to be a small structure to the east. To the west a pair of much larger and deeper (in terms of access) temples were subsequently added and then internally modified. Ta Hagraat and Skorba appear to show that this same process was also occurring at the smaller end of the scale. At Skorba this can be explored in most detail because of its recent excavation. A relatively simple Ggantija period structure (with two levels of access and 6 units of space) was increased in complexity by accretion into a three level structure with sixteen units of space. The more theoretical reading of the access diagrams and the increased compartmentalization of space suggest that in the final Tarxien stages, exclusion of access to some individuals may have become an extra principle in the rivalries of the community. This principle is perhaps most apparent at the West and Middle Temples at Tarxien where doors have been barred and sections blocked off.

This pattern of cyclic accretion and addition of blocks of architectural space was accompanied by a parallel development at the broader regional scale: that is, the growth of monumental structures in clusters. This occurs in too many locations to make it coincidental: the three Kordin monuments, the two monuments at Mnajdra and Hagar Qim, the monuments at Skorba and Ta Hagraat and most importantly for the current analysis, the Xaghra plateau on Gozo (Figs 2–3).

### The Xaghra plateau

At Xaghra, in the centre of the island of Gozo, there is a cluster of monuments and possible settlement areas placed on a well defined plateau between 420 and 460 feet above sea level (Fig. 3). The major monuments are strung out in a line from east to west on the lip of the plateau overlooking the major internal flat bottomed valley of the island to the south. These consist of the Ggantija temple, North Cave, Vella's Farm (megaliths), Ghar ta Ghejzu, Brochtorff circle and Santa Verna. All involve megalithic constructions but vary in their function and use.

The recent discoveries of mortuary ritual at one of these monuments, the Brochtorff circle, confirm the process already outlined for the Maltese mainland, although it is not yet possible to illustrate this with access diagrams. At least one Zebbug tomb, with two chambers entered by a single shaft, was cut into bedrock at the beginning of the ritual cycle and at least fifty individuals were successively placed in the two chambers (Fig. 4B). The last insertions in the western chamber belong to the later Ggantija phase. Finally in the Tarxien phase, a peak of activity again took place. Although insertions of bodies in the extensive natural caves on the site almost certainly started earlier, the site was probably given a monumental aspect only in the Tarxien phase, the final phase of the Temple building period. A megalithic pavement on the approach to the burial areas was almost certainly laid down at this moment. Deeper in the monument, the entrances to natural cave galleries were flanked by megalithic blocks. A subterranean temple-like structure, recorded by the artist Brochtorff and located in the form of partially fallen blocks during excavation, and the stone circle around the site may well have been constructed at this same stage. At least some of these deep natural caves were filled with bodies that are now disarticulated perhaps as a result of post depositional effects.

The Brochtorff circle is positioned centrally to the cluster of monuments on the plateau and close to the crest of the hill. This burial monument appears to have acted as a focus to two possibly rival temple factions within the local community. Both these temples appear to have had a long period of use. The building sequence of the Santa Verna temples is difficult to establish; excavators found disordered megaliths, a succession of *torba* (beaten, pounded and polished limestone powder) floors and an extensive rubbish deposit. The Ggantija monument, although showing less evidence for accretion than some of the monuments on the Maltese mainland, shows distinct phases of construction. The final appearance of the monument dates to the Ggantija phase, but this can be sub-divided into at least two phases (the construction of the two separate adjoining temples) followed by the building up of the platform in front of the temples in the Tarxien phase. The size of the Ggantija monument suggests that the sub-section of the community that constructed the Ggantija temple was more successful than that which constructed the Santa Verna temple to the west. Ggantija is one of the largest temples on the Maltese islands and contains the largest single blocks of stone.

The other monuments and caves associated with the Ggantija temple suggest that the temple itself was periodically cleared, during its use, of the material culture of ritual consumption and the refuse placed in partly natural and partly prepared locations. The North Cave and the Ghar Ta Ghejzu monument both yielded considerable quantities of pottery and storage vessels and some animal and human bone. The Ghar Ta Ghejzu cave,

located between the Brochtorff circle and the Ggantija monument, was filled with an exceptionally large quantity of pottery of the Ggantija phase. The North Cave was of the form of a smaller rock cut tomb excavated out of the limestone and filled with pottery dating mainly to the Tarxien, but also to the Ggantija periods. The Santa Verna site was also associated with a midden deposit (Ashby et al. 1913: 110).

The finds within the temples themselves also offer clues to the nature of this ritual consumption. The offering bowl was the most common pottery form (Trump 1981: 130). At Kordin III a communal quern was discovered with the rubbing stone still *in situ* (Ashby et al. 1913: 42; Evans 1971: 73; Trump 1981: 137). Instruments for grinding grain were especially common amongst the finds from the Tarxien temples (Bonanno 1986). A rivalry of consumption was played out within these temples.

### **Conclusion: contrasting patterns of temple, burial and settlement**

The ritualization of temple and burial contrasts powerfully with the relatively low level of expenditure of effort (although some considerable skill) by the community on the settlements so far explored. The temples and burial places provide a seemingly unified contrast. Most of the monuments have their origin (even if not monumental) in the Zebbug archaeological phase. Most seem to be continually expanded and embellished reaching a climax in the Tarxien phase. In this same final Temple building phase there is evidence that some principles of exclusion began to operate. The increasingly 'deep' structures were more clearly divided and barred off at the openings to selected recesses. However, there is at least one contrast. The focus of burial within monumental structures is much more unified. There appears to be only one monumental structure within a community. In contrast, the temples appear to provide rival locations for ritual display, even if single locations do appear by the Tarxien phase to have had a relative monopoly. This current pattern may be no more than a product of archaeological visibility and research. It is the aim of the current project to examine this pattern by wider field survey and remote sensing.

The Maltese evidence has a wider relevance. It is a case from a pre-state society of a long cycle of ritual where two contexts of ritual share a parallel course. There were over a thousand years of development before the intensification of this ritual. This contrasts with the short-lived cycles of display recently recorded in societies developing in a complex world system that includes state societies (Cannon 1989). This wider comparison leads us to a further specific question that is crucial for the archaeological development of Malta. The end of the temple building period has been seen as a calamitous socio-political break by most scholars. Evidence is now accumulating that although the ritual practice and the material culture changed dramatically, the break may not have required a replacement of population (although not all the present authors are agreed on how far to stress this point). Evans (1984: 496) has noted the apparent early signs of Tarxien Cemetery material culture in the late Temple building phase. There is also evidence for the continued use of Temple ritual sites after the Temple building phase that amounts to more than squatting, most particularly at Tarxien (a temple) and the Brochtorff circle (a burial complex), even if some of the evidence can be interpreted as the results of iconoclasm.

An alternative explanation for the demise of the temples can perhaps be envisaged if the entire sequence from Zebbug to Tarxien Cemetery is seen together. The rivalries within communities were initially played out in the clusters of temples established by each community. In the Tarxien phase, these rivalries were, for an extensive period, directed increasingly towards the most prominent temple and burial complex of each social group. The patrons of the most prominent temple attempted to take advantage of success and introduced principles of exclusion of access, facilitated by the deepening architectural complexity of the temples. In the Tarxien Cemetery phase, a new ritual expression was adopted that eliminated the need for massive monumental construction and instead concentrated ritual investment on cremation cemeteries (that masked rivalry) and dolmens (that promoted the individual without the assistance of more than the immediate kin group). The need to mobilize communal resources in the rival display, expressed in temple building, was thus ended.

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## Abstract

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### Monuments in an island society: the Maltese context

The paper presents an alternative view of the social forces behind the construction of the Maltese temples, in the light of new evidence from recent excavations. Access analysis and the social anthropological theory of networks in island communities are introduced as aids in the analysis of the parallel programme of funerary and temple architecture in the Maltese islands that had its origin in the late fifth millennium cal. BC and came to an abrupt end in the mid-third millennium cal. BC. It is suggested that intra-community rivalry could have provided the mobilization of resources for the phases of construction of the temples and that centralized social forces need not have been as important as has been suggested in previous work. In this light, the end to temple construction need not be seen as a major social collapse, but as the end of one means of fighting with material culture.