

Insularity and the Emergence of Complex Social and Religious Systems in Prehistoric Malta: The Artistic Indicators

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Fig. 1
The first seven stone headless statuettes of enigmatic corpulent personages discovered inside the Ħaġar Qim temple complex.

Fig. 2
Ten specimens from
a group of terracotta
anthropomorphic figurines
with monstrously inflated
lower bodies, from the
subterranean cemetery of
the Xagħra Stone Circle.

Malta is striking by its diminutive size and its inversely proportional cultural achievement in prehistory. Two distinct phases in Maltese prehistory were extraordinarily articulate in figurative representation: the last phase of the Temple (or Late Neolithic) Period, the *Tarxien* phase, and the first phase of the Bronze Age, the *Tarxien Cemetery* phase. It is the first of these two artistic expressions that forms the object of this short paper.

The *Tarxien* phase (3000-2500 BC) saw the climax of an explosive expression of religious thought and activity in the complex megalithic cultic buildings above ground, that we seem to have no choice but to call 'temples', and in underground collective cemeteries with their own architectural complexities. The same religious thought expressed itself also in a rich repertoire of figurative sculpture in stone (such as the stone statuettes from the main Ħaġar Qim temple complex, representing the characteristic corpulent figure of this culture, Fig. 1), in fired clay (such as the seated figurines with monstrously inflated lower bodies from the Xagħra Circle in Gozo, Fig. 2), and in animal bone (like the group of human busts carved on cow metatarsals from the same Xagħra Circle, Fig. 3).¹

In the same way that we are forced to call the Maltese intricate megalithic structures 'temples', we have no choice but to conclude that the message imparted by this art is of a religious nature, that it reflects a world view and a religious belief system connected with it. Both constitute a most extraordinary achievement of a specially endowed prehistoric community. What that religious belief system was all about is what we wish to know. Short of being able to read the minds of our prehistoric ancestors, we have to content ourselves with educated speculations. Because of its figurative and visual nature, however, art brings us the closest possible to the reality of things.

There does not seem to be a well-defined dichotomy between the religious iconography in the art of the temples (at the service of rituals of life) and that of the cemeteries (serving rituals of death).² The opposite seems to be the case. The architecture of the temples is replicated in carved solid rock in the Ħal Saflieni subterranean cemetery. Similar corpulent figures appear in both temples and in the ceremonial areas of the cemeteries. They reflect a world view that encompassed the sphere of the living as well as that of the dead. We also cannot ignore the abstract symbolism of the multitude of variations of the spiral motif engraved on the flat surfaces of the stone architectural furniture of the temples (such as the score of different variations of the spiral motif from the *Tarxien* temples, Fig. 4), or painted in red ochre on walls and, in one room, the roof of the Ħal Saflieni Hypogeum. Similarly, incised or scratched pottery, where the spiral is restricted to a volute, occurs in both contexts.

We definitely cannot claim these Maltese representations to be at the origin of Neolithic art; far from it. Created between 3000 and 2500 BC, this corpus of artistic expressions was preceded by the artistic representations of all the Pre-pottery Neolithic and early Neolithic cultures of the eastern Mediterranean (such as Göbekli Tepe, Nevalı Çori, Çatal Hüyük, Haçilar, Jericho and Munhata, to mention just a few). Nevertheless, these symbolic creations are original, fresh and





spontaneous, without any apparent comparable precedents, but at the same time mature, consummate and self-confident. If we look for immediate (or distant) sources of inspiration we do not find them. There is nothing, anywhere, which can be said to be the direct forerunner of this art.

The closest parallel in cultural development to the Maltese one in a more or less contemporary culture, and one that is spatially not too far removed, and with resulting similar artistic iconography and style, is to be found not in Sicily, next door, the island with which Malta had its most intensive connectivity, but further afield, in the pre-Nuragic art of Sardinia, especially in the so-called '*idoli di stile geometrico e volumetrico*'.³ These figures are said to be functional in their scope, that of making the image express the needs and aspirations of both individuals and the community. Some of the figures were deposited inside domestic huts; others were deposited in tombs. According to the late Giovanni Lilliu, for decades the doyen of Sardinian prehistoric studies, the latter served as a 'psychopompic divinity', intended to accompany the deceased to a regenerated life in the world beyond.⁴

These '*idoletti*', in their corpulent, volumetric treatment, recall the corpulent statuettes from Tarxien and Ғaġar Qim and the clay figurines from the Xagħra Circle cemetery, especially in the treatment of the small hands and feet, contrasting with the inflated body (Fig. 1-2). The diadem worn by one from the group of stone plank figurines from the Xagħra Circle (Fig. 5) in some respects recalls a much more refined and complex diadem worn by the 'female' statuette from an equally funerary context, namely, hypogeum no 386 in Cuccurru s'Arriu in Cabras.⁵ Of interest is the fact that this statuette was held in the right hand of the deceased person. As in the Maltese funerary context, red ochre played an important role. In the same tomb ochre was used to sprinkle both the corpse itself and the grave furniture.

But even this close parallelism in contemporary Sardinian art should not lead us to rash conclusions of close relations. Be that as it may, can we at least compare and contrast these symbolic figurative expressions in order to investigate whether there are any common elements in the cognitive thought processes? Continuity and regeneration in the biological cycle of birth, life and death appear to be frequently recurring themes in human existential behaviour - the first one (continuity) through the cult of the ancestors and the myths of origins, the second one (regeneration) through overtly sexual representations and sexual initiation rites. In this respect cultural anthropology and ethnographic records can be of assistance, even though we have to grapple with the whole theoretical argument about the validity of analogy in this field.⁶

It would be interesting, for example, to make a thorough comparison between such figurative representations of Çatal Hüyük and pre-Nuragic Sardinia, and those of the Maltese temple culture in the two most dominant fields: those connected with rituals of life and death. Not to seek any connection between them but to trace any parallel or common religious ideological traits and social stimuli. But this is not the right place for such an exercise.

Fig. 3
Miniature figurines with
human heads carved from
animal metatarsals, from
the subterranean cemetery
of the Xagħra Stone Circle.

Fig. 4
Two stone screens with
elaborate spiral decoration
carved in low relief,
from the Tarxien temple
complex.

In the Maltese case, it seems that if we want to find the causes that brought about this symbolic art we have to look for three things: a) mind-sets capable of conceiving the right ideas; b) the right expressive dispositions for artistic media; and c) the catalysing social and spiritual forces. In the absence of any hint of outside influence or inspiration we have to look for these within the constricted space of this archipelago of roughly 320 km², within a small agricultural community of between 5000 and 10,000 heads.⁷

The more I ponder on this whole issue the more I find myself convinced that a) and b) could only be materialized and amalgamated by one and the same human agent, the 'artist', that person who first conceived the 'idea' which needed to be turned into a physical reality and who had the intellectual disposition and physical dexterity to express that idea into a physical, visual representation.⁸ The figurative repertoire, however, is so rich and varied that, even if we tried, we could never really ascribe it to a single artist. After the initial creation, therefore, the visual representation could be repeated, with possible modifications, by other artists/craftsmen. Up to 1987 we could speak of a general homogeneity of religious symbolism in the artistic expressions in both Malta and Gozo. Things looked slightly different after the excavation of the Xagħra Stone Circle on Gozo between 1987 and 1994. The figurative representations yielded by that extraordinary underground cemetery were so varied, ranging from a half-life-size stone statuette of the typical corpulent figure,⁹ through the group of hand-held plank-shaped figurines (Fig. 5), to the miniature heads carved on tiny cow metatarsals (Fig. 3),¹⁰ that we cannot speak any more of one artist or craftsman. By the end of the *Tarxien* phase there must have been several persons capable of carving and modelling anthropomorphic figures of different typologies, and they were probably active separately in the two major islands of the Maltese archipelago.

But what were the catalysing forces that brought about this phenomenal outburst of artistic production? In the previous paragraph I hinted that these were social and spiritual forces. I do not exclude forces of some other nature, but these two seem to be the most determining ones.

Given the archaeological context of the finds, it is imperative that we exclude the modern concept of art for art's sake, artistic expression as a result of the artist's inner urge to create art for their own satisfaction. This is art at the service of the community: an expression of religious ideas, of a set of commonly shared beliefs gravitating around the community's *Weltanschauung*, possibly involving rites of passage of which the ultimate one was that from life to death.

In the first place it should be noted that all the late Neolithic expressions of plastic art were produced in the *Tarxien* phase (3000-2500 BC), which marks the climax of the *floruit* of the Temple culture. As many as 160 anthropomorphic objects have been traced and illustrated,¹¹ apart from many spiral reliefs and zoomorphic representations. The archaeological records imply that all the figurative items were discovered in *Tarxien* phase chronological contexts, even in those cases where the structure itself could have been initially built in previous phases. In the latter cases, the structure would have still been functioning with the same original purpose



Fig. 5
A set of stone figurines
with plain bodies and
human heads (apart from
one with an animal head),
from the subterranean
cemetery of the Xagħra
Stone Circle.

when the figurative items were inserted. Consequently, this corpus of art manifestations appears as an apparently sudden outburst, without a proper evolutionary trajectory, in contrast with the temple architecture which does show a certain linear development.

The Social Catalyst

Also by the *Tarxien* phase, possibly earlier, the social set-up of the temple culture had become a complex one. The architecture of the temples presents many indicators of such complexity.¹² Although we do not have any hard evidence of how this ranked society was organised, and on what criteria, Colin Renfrew's theory of a chieftain society has so far not been effectively challenged.¹³ On the other hand, the temples stood out so potently in the prehistoric landscape (as opposed to the humble and perishable domestic architecture) that they must also have served as the seat of power, both spiritual and temporal.

It is at this stage that a compelling need arose for artistic expression at the service of this complex society (possibly in reciprocal rivalry among separate communities), and an artist, or several artists, emerged to satisfy that need.¹⁴ As opposed to pottery production, which already had a history and a linear evolution, plastic art seems to have arisen out of nowhere. The first artist may possibly have been a newcomer from outside, or may have been exposed to other artistic developments outside Malta, as John Robb seems to imply;¹⁵ but we have nothing to show it. Whatever his origin and background, this artist created a new set of artistic formulae which show no influence from outside, and which were taken up by other artists (whether under his tutorship or otherwise) who developed those formulae even further.

The Religious Catalyst

But even if the physical driving force behind the rise of Malta's megalithic art was a societal one, the ideology which inspired it was, to all intents and purposes, of a non-secular nature. This may be more obvious in the mortuary sphere, in particular the large subterranean collective cemetery inside the Xagħra Stone Circle. Here, a set of rituals were followed in the disposal of the dead, which engaged the attention and participation of the living.¹⁶ Objects were buried with the dead, thus being removed permanently from circulation. Amulets were probably worn in life for some magical purpose and then buried along with their owners.¹⁷ The clay corpulent figurines, found in a great number in an area reserved for burial of children and women (Fig. 2), given their size and cheaper material, could have been playthings buried with their young owners or images of 'companions' for the afterlife;¹⁸ but their corpulence and ambiguous gender likens them to the stone corpulent statuettes of the temples (Fig. 1).

The cache of six stone figurines with flat, plain bodies and without limbs, remains problematic (Fig. 5). Some see in it a shaman's kit.¹⁹ It might have been intended to be so, but there is no



Fig. 6
One of the stone figurines
from the Xagħra Stone
Circle, still in the initial
stage of carving, compared
to one of Michelangelo's
unfinished 'Prisoners'.



doubt that the set is an unfinished work, and its completion was probably interrupted by an unexpected event, possibly the collapse of the cave roof. In my lectures over the last decade I have repeatedly highlighted the importance of this cache of sculptures as a unique example of a prehistoric set of sculpture by the same hand in different stages of completion. They present an interesting oeuvre with great potential for the study of the artistic cognitive process, as well as the technique for the physical execution of that same process. I have compared them to the unfinished "Prisoners" and a second, also unfinished, *Pietà* of Michelangelo (Fig. 6). As for the creator of this oeuvre, in terms of a sculptor of several distinct pieces (some being incomplete), I would even venture to suggest, albeit with some hesitancy, that we are facing here the Michelangelo of the Mediterranean Neolithic.

The religious nature of the driving ideology is almost as obvious in the temple structures above ground. I am refraining from being categorical on this because a degree of doubt, no matter how small, still lurks in our collective mind as to the real purpose of these buildings; attempts have in fact been made in the past to project them as princely palaces.²⁰

In view of the occurrence of similar architectural devices and identical sculptural iconography, as well as the use of red ochre, in both subterranean communal cemeteries and above-ground temples, I think that one can make a better case for the practice of an ancestral cult in the latter structures, rather than of a mother goddess one. Apart from the fact that the characteristic statuary shows no interest in revealing its gender; so that these images, which to my mind probably represent ancestors, could be either male or female, or both. Besides, the ethnographic record has shown that ancestors and the mythology surrounding them provided a better and more effective instrument of social cohesion; and social cohesion was of the essence in a society which was under stress. What is certain is that the religious ideology was phenomenally powerful, enough to keep the community busy building temples and supporting an elite that controlled their life to some degree.

Photography

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Notes

- 1 All the figurative works referred to here and in the rest of this paper, apart from the spiral reliefs, are magnificently illustrated in I. Vella Gregory and D. Cilia, *The Human Form in Neolithic Malta* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2005).
- 2 A. Bonanno, 'Rituals of life and rituals of death', in D. Cilia (ed.), *Malta before History* (Malta: Miranda Publishers, 2004), 271-287.
- 3 G. Lilliu, *Arte e Religione della Sardegna Prenuragica: idoletti, ceramiche, oggetti d'ornamento* (Sassari: Carlo Delfino, 1999), 12-30.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 188-189.
- 6 J.D. Lewis Williams, 'Wrestling with analogy: a methodological dilemma in Upper Palaeolithic art research', in D.S. Whitley (ed.), *Reader in Archaeological Theory: Post-Processual and Cognitive Approaches* (London: Routledge, 1998).
- 7 Estimates by D. Clark, 'Building logistics', in Cilia (ed.), *op. cit.* (2004), 367-377, and C. Renfrew, *Before Civilization: the radiocarbon revolution and prehistoric Europe* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), 155, respectively.
- 8 The possibility for the idea to be conceived by a different person and then communicated verbally to the artist for execution is very remote.
- 9 Over 60cm in height. Unfortunately, it survived in more than thirty fragments widely dispersed inside the natural cave system. For a graphic reconstruction see C. Malone, 'The large Temple Period standing figure', in C. Malone, S. Stoddart, A. Bonanno and D. Trump (eds), *Mortuary Customs in Prehistoric Malta: excavations at the Brochtorff Circle at Xaghra (1987-94)* (Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2009), 283-289.
- 10 For the whole range see C. Malone, A. Bonanno, D. Trump, 'Figurative sculpture', in Malone *et al.*, *op. cit.* (2009), 282-312.
- 11 Vella Gregory and Cilia, *op. cit.* (2005), 184-193.
- 12 A. Bonanno, 'The rise and fall of megalithism in Malta', in K.W. Beinhauer, G. Cooney, C.E. Guksch, S. Kus, *Studien zur Megalithik/The Megalithic Phenomenon* (Mannheim/Weissbach, Beier & Beran, 1999), 99-112.
- 13 Renfrew, *op. cit.* (1973), 147-166.
- 14 See A. Bonanno, 'The artist in prehistoric religious ritual: servant or master?', in A. Pace (ed.), *Maltese Prehistoric Art: 5000-2500 bc* (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 1996), 53-58.
- 15 J. Robb, 'Island identities: ritual, travel and the creation of difference in Neolithic Malta', *European Journal of Archaeology* 4, 2 (2001), 175-202.
- 16 For a reconstruction of such a ritual, see C. Malone and S. Stoddart, 'Conclusions', in Malone *et al.*, *op. cit.* (2009), 361-384.
- 17 A. Bonanno, 'Apotropaia: prehistoric and ancient amulets from the Maltese Islands', *Treasures of Malta*, Vol. VIII No. 2 (Easter 2012), 10-18.
- 18 Vella Gregory and Cilia, *op. cit.* (2005), 78, Fig. 55-67; A. Bonanno, 'In search of an identity: the anthropomorphic representations of megalithic Malta', in D. Fenech, V. Fenech, J. R. Grima (eds), *Lino: a tribute* (Festschrift in honour of Lino Spiteri) (Malta: P.E.G. Ltd, 2008), 66-67.
- 19 S. Stoddart, A. Bonanno, T. Gouder, C. Malone, D. Trump, 'Cult in an island society: prehistoric Malta in the Tarxien period', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 3:1 (1993), 11.
- 20 G. Lilliu, 'Malta', in J. Thimme *et al.*, *Frühe Randkulturen des Mittelmeerraumes* (Baden-Baden: Holle Verlag, 1968), 89-139; *id.*, 'Rapporti architettonici sardo-maltesi e balearico-maltesi nel quadro dello ipogeismo e del megalitismo', in *Atti del XV Congresso di Storia dell'Architettura, Malta, 11- 16 settembre 1967* (Rome: Centro di Studi per la Storia dell'Architettura, 1970), 99-172.