

# EXCAVATIONS IN GOZO 1987-94

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**F**ew tourists can visit the Maltese Islands without becoming aware of the Neolithic Temples. Images of the great megalithic structures are used to great effect by the media and tourist agencies to convey the antiquity and mystery of early Malta, and to that end, such images have dominated archaeological thinking about ancient Malta as well. For two centuries archaeologists have been aware of the temples, and until recently, of little else of the early inhabitants of the islands. Temple size, construction and inexplicable mystery have traditionally been used to demonstrate the highly individual nature of early Malta. Undoubtedly these interests have a validity in the exploration of the prehistoric past, but they are not the only, or indeed the most useful means of studying the islands. Thus when we and our colleagues David Trump and Anthony Bonanno were invited by Tancred Gouder of the National Museum to design a research plan for new archaeological fieldwork, we decided to concentrate our efforts on the unstudied burial rites, landscape and settlement of prehistoric Malta. Gozo was chosen as the focus of study because of its manageable size and less developed landscape and lack of prior archaeological research.

Research priorities were soon directed toward urgent rescue work of two sites which we excavated. One was a remnant of a Temple period house on the road to Ghajnsielem. Here we uncovered half of the ground plan of an oval house with mud-brick walls and torba floors, only the second domestic structure of the Neolithic temple period to be excavated. Unfortunately, few finds were associated, and it appears that the inhabitants of the house had been meticulous in cleaning and rubbish disposal. There is nothing archaeologists like better than an ancient rubbish heap, because therein lies the economic and often the social evidence of a lost society.

The second site was the circle at Xaghra, long suspected by local amateur archaeologist Joe Attard, to be the site portrayed



Fig. 1. Limestone statuette of two seated figures one holding a smaller figure on its lap.

in the series of paintings and drawings by Charles Brochtorff, (housed in the National Archive) which show an "excavation" in progress in about 1825. The site was threatened by speculative development and although saved for posterity by the intervention of Dr. Tancred Gouder of the National Museum of Malta, it seemed a suitable site to explore. We made a series of Geophysical studies of the buried deposits with French, Spanish, Italian and Scottish colleagues which indicated that there was a large cavity in the centre of what, even today, is a remarkably circular field.

We opened a number of trial trenches into the surface plough soil of the field and found the rock edge of the cavity. After several seasons (each of a month or more) with a growing team of young excavators from Europe and Malta, about a thousand cubic metres of rock and later deposits had been removed to expose the buried site. Unlike any site yet explored in Malta, the "Brochtorff Circle" as it is now known has slowly emerged as a series of ruined natural caves. The rock roofs of the caverns had collapsed in antiquity, in spite of attempts to prop them up with megalithic stones, and the caves had been entirely filled to ground surface. Explorations in the 1820s by Otto Bayer, the Lieutenant Governor of Gozo, had clearly emptied out a good deal of the central cavern, and had disturbed an unknown quantity of archaeological deposit. This cavity too, had been refilled to the ground surface.

Throughout the fill we found remnants of early activity, thoroughly disturbed through a combination of natural and human processes. The remnants consisted of pottery fragments, flint, chert and obsidian and occasional polished stone axes, shell ornaments, and great numbers of broken human bone. Only in the final 50-70cm of deposit did we find intact deposits, left as they had been placed by prehistoric man 4500 years or more ago.

The base of the caves (we excavated two adjoining caverns) was not flat and smooth, but instead presented a moon-scape of hollows, ridges and different levels, carved out millennia before by water action. Neolithic man had then modified the interior of the caves with the construction of rough walls and steps closing off side niches. There had been standing megalithic stones forming altars and a fine screen of smoothed megaliths partly enclosing a deep carved hollow containing



Fig. 2. Five of the nine schematized cult figurines.

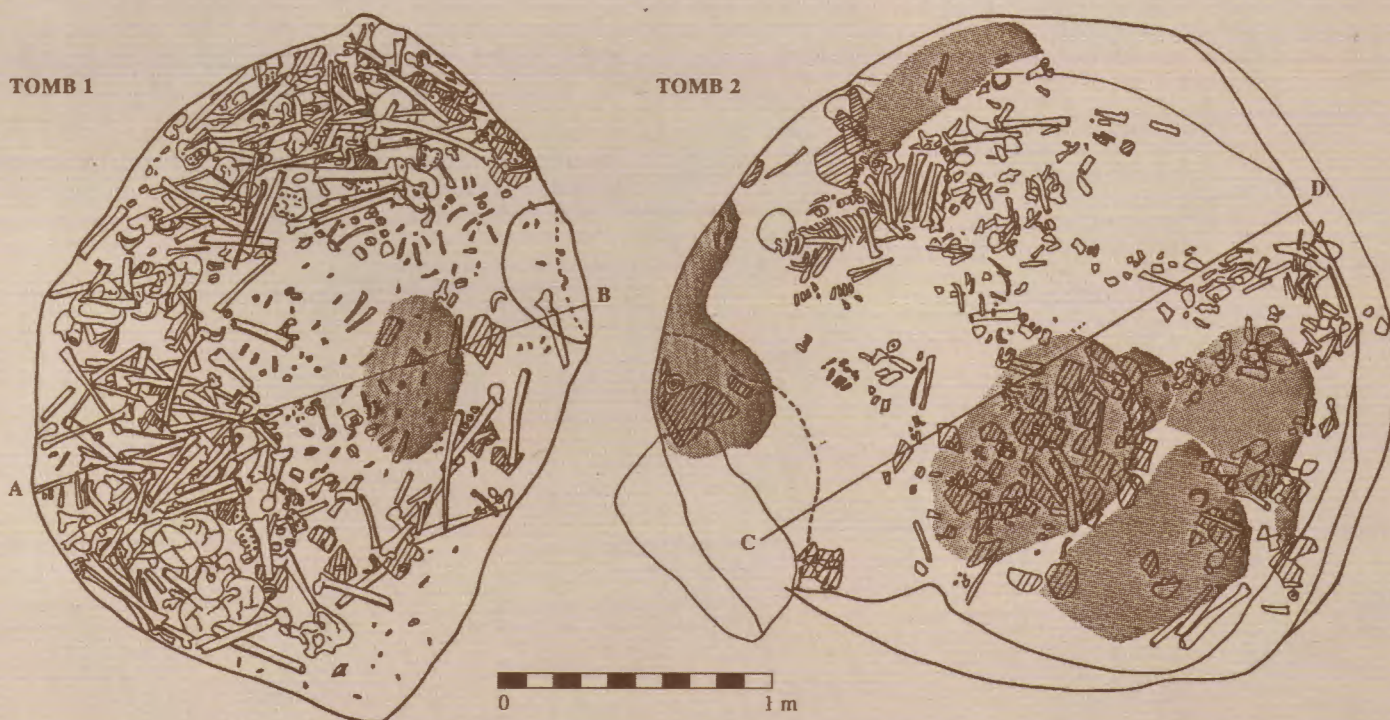


a large stone bowl. Within the individual niches and hollows there were dense concentrations of human bones, many partially articulated, and representing successive generations of burials from the nearby community of Xaghra and perhaps all Gozo. Few bodies had remained intact, because the burial rite had been communal and collective which is typical of many contemporary societies in the Neolithic Mediterranean. Each new burial in the site involved the disturbance of earlier ones, with bones and skulls pushed to the sides and generally tidied up, thus it is not surprising that perhaps as few as 20% of the bones were still semi-articulated. Some of the most intact burials lying at the base of the deposits, some 5m below the ground surface, also had simple Neolithic grave goods. These included a few complete Tarxien period offering bowls, shell and bone beads and pendants, flint and chert blades, polishing stones, and in one particular hollow, a number of small clay figurines of the familiar corpulent form. These finds were all exciting, because they provided the first secure context for them. Early finds, most indeed of the magnificent material housed in the National Museum, come from early work on the temple sites and Hal Saflieni, where workmen noted down almost nothing of the finds' location, and in consequence, we can understand little about their significance or meaning.

At the Brochtorff Circle, every find is located to the nearest centimetre on a three dimensional grid, and thus it should be possible to relate minute finds to their original context, such as beads of a necklace around the neck of an actual individual. The most spectacular discoveries are generally thought to be the group of nine cult figures which were found in tight bundle beneath the fallen cave roof near a megalithic altar. Six figures are schematic oblong figures with carved heads in varying stages of completion. Some have the skirts and belts similar to some of the familiar figurines in the National Museum. The carved faces are unparallelled and surely must be contenders for some of the most accomplished art in ancient Europe. The other major find, and one that seems to be getting more than its fair share of publicity is the small stone carving

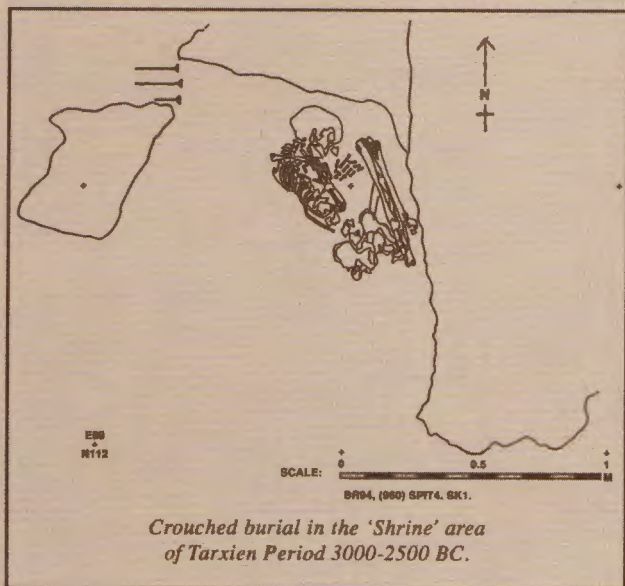
of two seated figures on a bed. Again the standard of carving is very fine, and added to this is the polychrome finish, suggesting the figures had been coloured with red ochre and black carbon. This figure was found close to the cache of nine, beside the stone bowl. This central area of the main cave appears to have been some sort of shrine where the greatest density of complete burials have been found together with the ritual and cult figures.

The nearest structural parallel to the Brochtorff site is of course the unique and magnificent man-made construction, the Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni. Yet, this site was carved from soft Globigerina limestone, and enlarged several times to deeper and deeper levels to accommodate the corpses of generations of Neolithic Maltese. It was estimated, on the basis of admittedly, the bones from one chamber only, that Hal Saflieni might have contained as many as 7000 burials. At Brochtorff, we believe we may have recorded as many as a thousand, but in scattered and broken form. Study of this mass of material takes great skill and experience and vast amounts of research time. Each bone must be cleaned, and then sorted and identified. Records are made of size, age, physical condition, diseases and trauma, so that eventually we should be able to provide a complete analysis of this early Maltese population. However, it takes time and money, and the latter in particular, is not plentiful, so our researches will take many months as the bone specialists work through the material. Yet, the end result will be far more important scientifically than all the figurines put together. Almost no prehistoric cemeteries in the Mediterranean have been subjected to the level of care and analysis that has been invested in the Brochtorff Circle, so the results will be important at not only the local Maltese level, but internationally. The broken bones may hold more clues about the figurine worshipping temple builders than can be obtained from artefacts and monuments alone. The Brochtorff Circle revealed an unexpected cave of death that offers us a first secure glimpse at how the early Maltese perceived death and the afterlife, and how the early art might have assisted them in their beliefs.

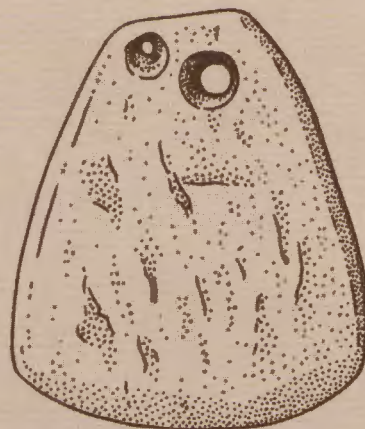


Human bones at the base of the Rock Cut tomb of Zebbug Period (4000-3700 BC). (Shaded areas are Red Ochre).

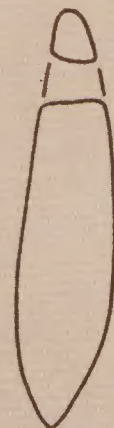




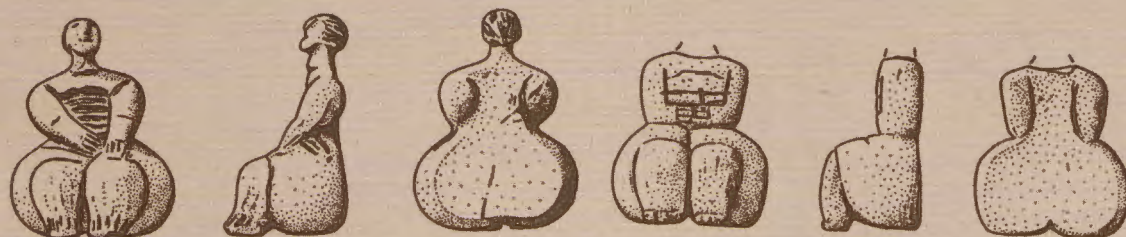
*Crouched burial in the 'Shrine' area of Tarxien Period 3000-2500 BC.*



*Greenstone Axe-Amulet*



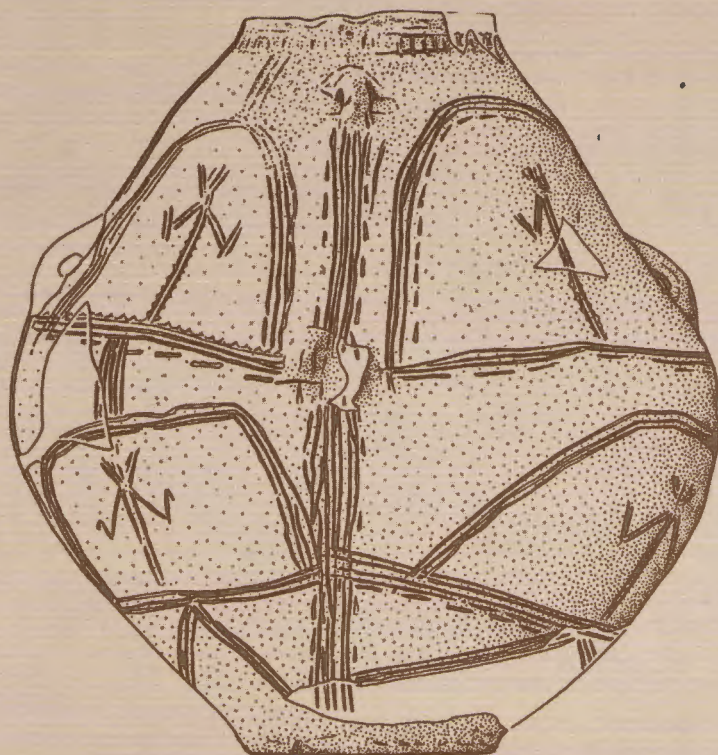
*Carved bone phallus*



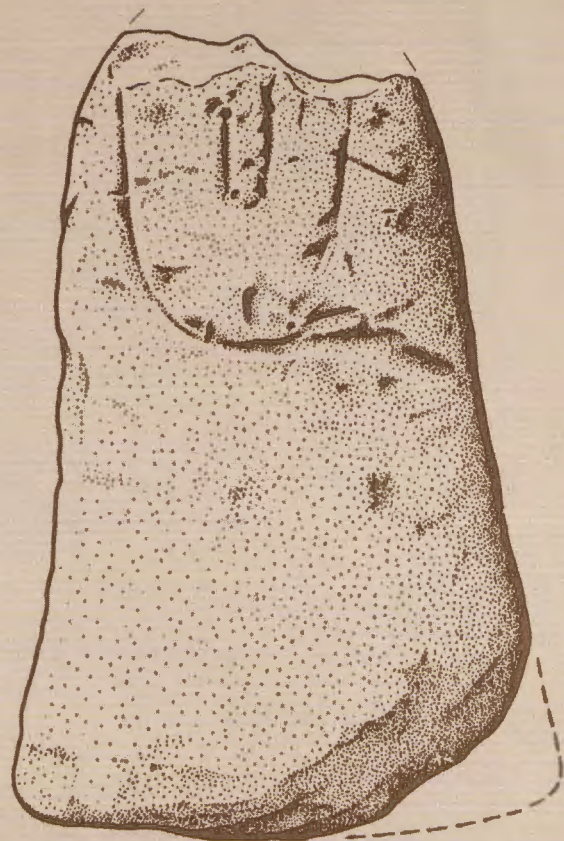
*0 4 cm*



*Clay figurines*



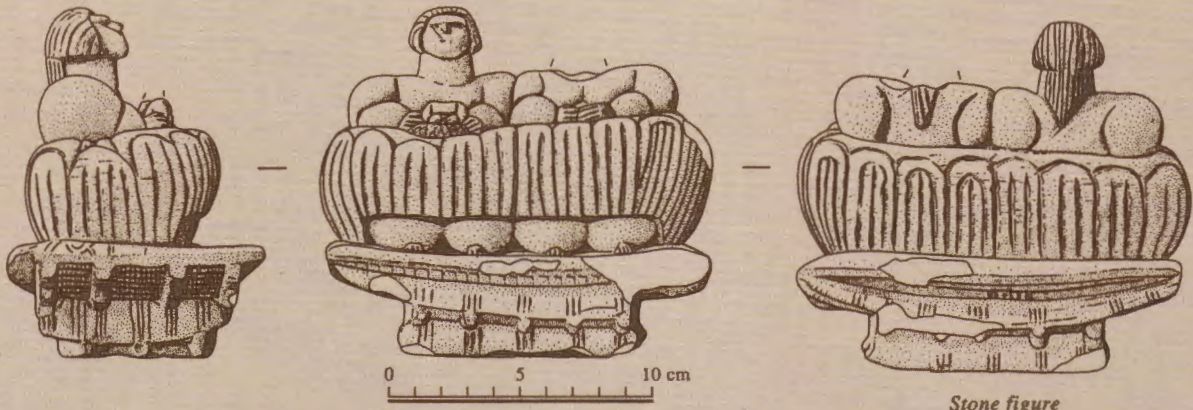
*Zebbug jar from rock cut tomb*



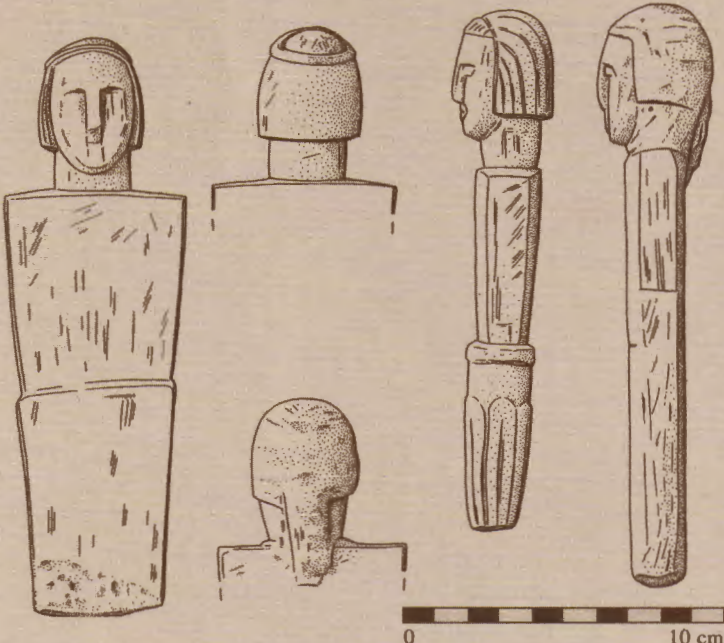
*0 10 cm*

*Stone Zebbug stele/statue from rock cut tomb*

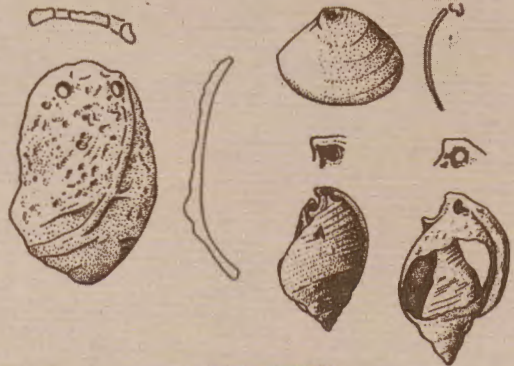




Stone figure

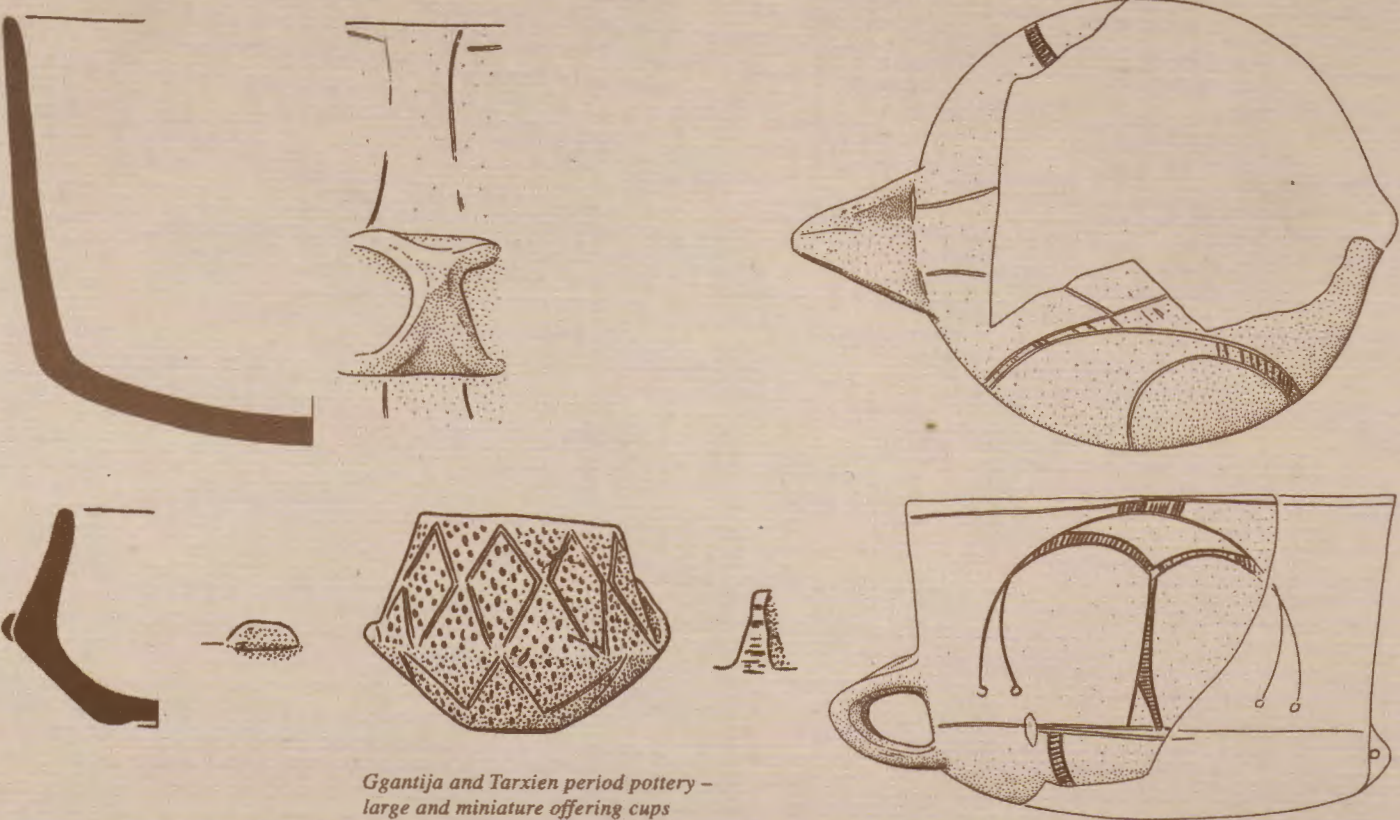


Front, side and back views of three of the stone cult figures



Shell pendants

All drawings by Stephen Ashley



Ggantija and Tarxien period pottery - large and miniature offering cups