

The Archaeology of Collectivity

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Cognitive Design Processes: the case of Maltese prehistoric funerary sites (4000 - 2500 BC)

The present contribution addresses patterns in the long term development of Maltese prehistoric funerary sites during the period spanning 4000 - 2500 BC. The period in question saw the development of a series of central sites in a number of strategic locations across the Maltese archipelago. Site development followed at least three major trajectories: social/ritual, funerary and domestic. The former two categories assumed a monumental character having a primary focus on architectural design. Monumental characteristics, whether above or below ground, increased the survival chances of the more extensive and prominent sites so that these now dominate the archaeological repertoire of the period. By comparison the third category of settlements, domestic remains tend to be less conspicuous. Following previous research (Pace 1992), the present study tentatively suggests that as one of the principal trajectories in monument development, the evolution of Maltese Late Neolithic funerary sites followed a single long term cognitive process that brought cultural collectivity into sharp focus. Cognitive design processes were critical for the survival, elaboration, extension and social reproduction of collective belief systems which, in the case of funerary rituals, were expressed in the deliberate structural expansion and elaboration of central cemeteries. As an important cultural phenomenon, cognitive design processes embodying notions of the collective would have encompassed several features, traces of which may still be evident in the archaeological record and ancient prehistoric landscape. A selection of these features will be examined in a contextual framework built around evidence of chronological stages in the development of funerary sites, and the close ties relating these developments to site location patterning of megalithic 'temple' structures.

The archaeology of collectivity

The social dimensions of collectivity embody a complex range of material and non-material aspects. Group cohesion, interaction, social organization, conflict, shared identities and other elements of human behaviour are synonymous with the basic tenets of social-cultural evolution. Collectivity has often been eclipsed by temporal dimensions and historical narratives which traditionally emphasized events, specific transformations, general behavioral processes and historical personalities. The Annales historians, popularly represented by Ferdinand Braudel and his

followers, have been instrumental in revising this long established trend by advancing multi-facet concepts of the past which, among other elements, include a number of perspectives that de-emphasize historical events and promote collective social dimensions.

Like many other social sciences, prehistoric archaeology has directly or indirectly attached varying degrees of importance to collectivity. The discipline has done so independently of the Annales school for in many ways, the nameless character of prehistoric material culture has allowed no safer explanatory perspectives than those that dealt with collective dimensions. Gordon Childe's epoch-making synthesis of European prehistory (1925-1957), entrenched as it was in diffusionist thinking, structured interpretations of human behaviour along broad generic lines such as 'cultures' (based on typological groups of ceramic and other material remains) or migratory processes that gave rise to culture change. During the 1960's, the New Archaeology emerged as the first major reaction to Childe's framework but ironically, the new movement felt more at home with social models that were based on collective human and natural processes that could be framed in a generalizing scientific terms. It was indeed only in recent years that some Processual thinkers have consciously moved away from earlier positions held by New Archaeologists to address notions of the individual in prehistory and, more importantly, cognitive processes (Renfrew, 1985), in an effort to complement the advances made previously by Post Processual thinkers in these fields (Hodder 1991).

As a cognitive phenomenon, collectivity cannot be explained solely by mere processes, traditional diffusionist frameworks or structured sets of symbols alone, in spite of the various merits of these interpretive frameworks. In the realm of symbolic meanings the task of explaining collectivity becomes even more difficult especially in the domains of ideology, religious beliefs, rituals, the ceremonial, style, language and social identity. In almost all these cases, recourse is frequently made to the more material aspects of cultural phenomena. For ultimately, symbolic meanings form part not only of material culture, but also of how this develops through time. But from a purely material point of view one might expect to archaeologically illustrate change that may have occurred in deliberate stages leading to a final state or objective. Such a forward-looking exercise, having constant reference to past and contemporary cultural experiences, would therefore assume features expected of a design process.

In the case of Maltese prehistory, deliberate collective objectives based on material and non material requirements have been suggested with regards such communal endeavours as architectural engineering and megalithic construction, which involved social organization as well as careful planning and design (Renfrew 1973). A sense of collective aims has also been suggested in the case of temple site location and the possible establishment of artistic conventions (Pace 1996).

In the case of Maltese Late Neolithic mortuary practices, the idea of collective beliefs and customs is illustrated by several multiple inhumations taking place in the same burial space over a number of generations. It is suggested that this form of burial was deliberately elaborated to encompass larger social groups. This process required the physical expansion of existing centralized cemeteries such as the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, in order for collectivity to be symbolically extended. Rather than resorting to multiple rock cutting of smaller tombs which may have cumulatively required more resources, central burial grounds became major ritual focal points. Although caves such as that discovered at Bur Meghez were some times utilized for burial some central cemeteries, notably the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum and the Xaghra Stone Circle, were in addition lavishly decorated with elaborate stone work, megalithic structures, carvings as well as paintings. As has been suggested previously (Pace 1992), this process may have been accompanied by an abandonment of smaller burial sites. The multiple stages involved in this long term process were coincided with, and were closely paralleled by, the emergence and development of surface megalithic structures.

The study of Malta's prehistoric funerary monuments and chronological evidence

The historical discovery and study of Malta's prehistoric funerary monuments is critical for our understanding of the chronological stages involved in the development of this unique long term burial custom.

The study of Malta's prehistoric funerary remains began by accident with the discovery of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum in 1902. The discovery came at an important juncture in the study of Malta's past. Virtually a few months before, almost all the available literature that dealt with Malta's past seemed to be unacquainted with the term 'prehistory'. The concept of a human past that predated long established historical and biblical periods had gained widespread acceptance during the second half of the nineteenth century. The word *préhistorique* had in fact entered French usage during the 1840's (Bahn P, 1996), while in 1851 the Scottish scholar Daniel Wilson had coined the term

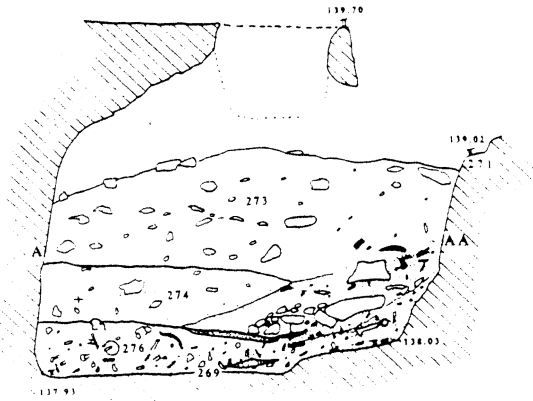
'prehistory' for the first time (Daniel G & Renfrew C 1988; Chippindale C 1988).

But in Malta it was not until 1901, when Albert Mayr placed the archipelago's megalithic remains squarely in a prehistoric rather than the then accepted Phoenician-Punic interpretive framework (Mayr 1901, 1908), that the real antiquity of prehistoric monuments began to gain acceptance. Up to well into the nineteenth century, Malta's past beyond Classical and Phoenician antiquity was still understood in ante-diluvian frameworks of obvious biblical origin. In his 1902 pronouncement on the newly discovered Hypogeum, the learned A A Caruana could find no chronological slot, other than the Middle Ages, in which to place what he felt was an odd looking catacomb (Caruana A A 1903). Caruana may have been unaware of Mayr's reading of the antiquity of the archipelago's megalithic remains and it was not until Sir Temi Zammit's work and first chronological frameworks of his early archaeological writings that the idea of prehistory became an established academic concept in Malta.

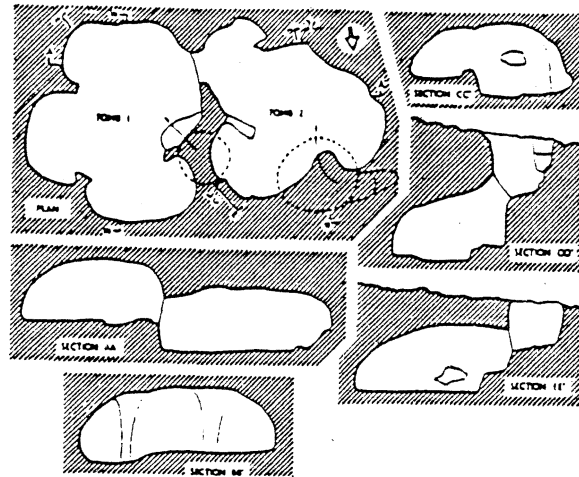
The clearing of the Hypogeum left many unresolved problems especially after Fr Magri SJ, the first excavator of the site, died unexpectedly in Sfax leaving no clear indications as to whether or not site reports had ever been drawn up. Sir Temi Zammit took over the remaining works, publishing a report in 1910 (Zammit 1910). This publication and that of his colleague N Tagliaferro (1910), provide critical circumstantial evidence for the dating of the various underground levels at the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum (Evans 1971).

Shortly after concluding his work on Hal Saflieni, Zammit came across a number of small prehistoric tombs which served to illustrate the importance of funerary aspects of Maltese prehistory. The first was a small chamber tomb that came to light in 1910 during trenching works at Buqana (MAR 1910-11). During the following year, a more extensive burial site was encountered during quarrying operations at Bur Mghez (Tagliaferro 1911). In 1915, Zammit excavated the Bronze Age cremation cemetery at Tarxien (Zammit 1916). Some years later after the momentous Tarxien excavation results, a series of discoveries were to augment Malta's repertoire of prehistoric burial sites. These all consisted of small rock cut chamber tombs. The first to be discovered was that found in 1926 at Nadur in Bingemma (MAR 1926) followed in the same year by the accidental unearthing of a similar chamber tomb at Xaghra on Gozo (MAR 1926-27). Zammit's last excavation involving a prehistoric tomb was that carried out at Busbesija where a chamber was exposed after winter rains (MAR 1928).

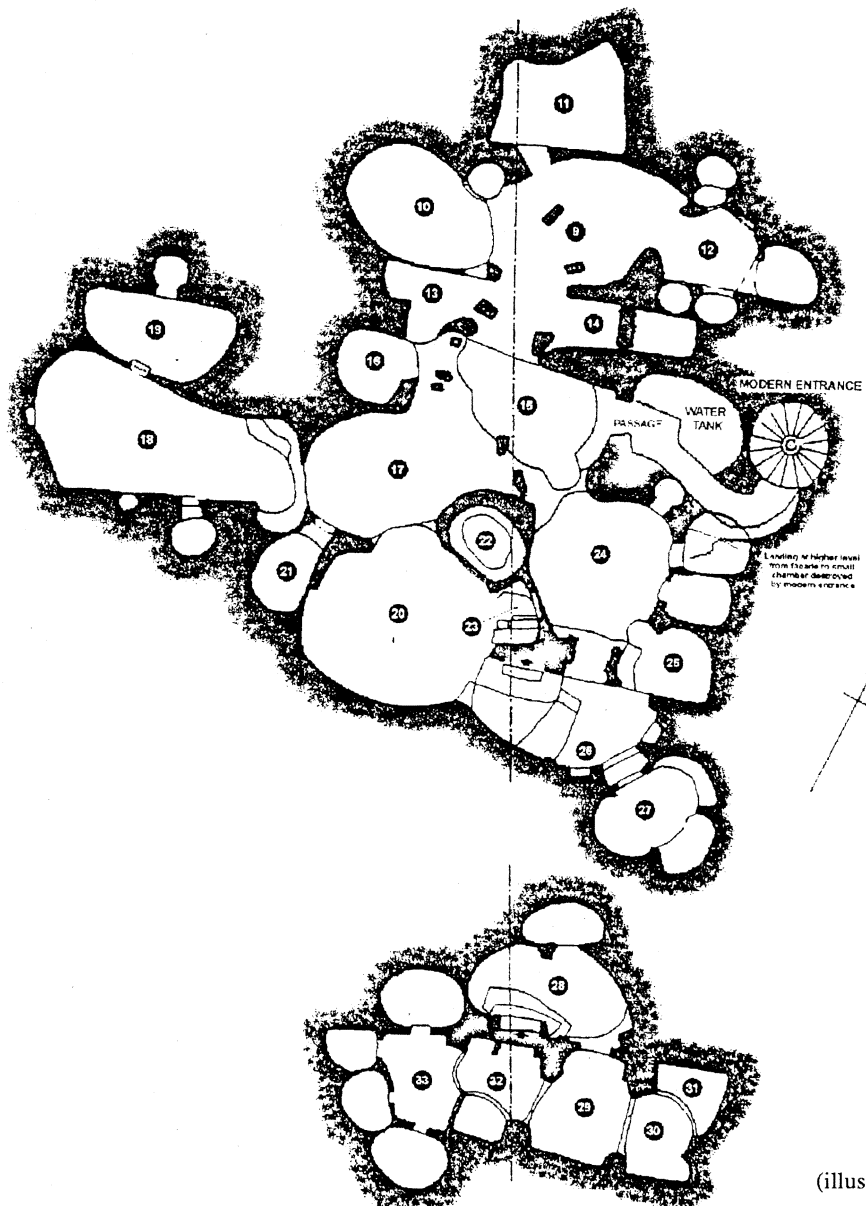
Zebbug tomb



Xemxija



The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum



(illustrations after Evans 1971)

Hal Saflieni : middle and lower stages

After the Second World War, interest in prehistoric burials was rekindled with the discovery of the Ta' Trapna tombs at Zebbug in 1947 (Baldacchino J G & Evans, 1954), the unearthing of the Ggantija 'North Cave' tomb in 1949 (MAR 1949-50) and the excavation of the six tombs at Xemxija in 1955 (Evans 1971).

The last major prehistoric burial site to be excavated was the Xaghra Stone Circle on Gozo (Bonanno et al, 1990) which has proved to be the most fruitful in spite of the clearing operations that had been undertaken by Otto Bayer during the nineteenth century. In general, the site still conformed to the established chronological framework.

With the exception of the excavations of the Tarxien Cremation Cemetery (Zammit 1930) and the Xaghra Stone Circle¹, almost all of the above discoveries came about by accident as a result of which, very little information actually survived beyond ceramic remains, cultural objects and some human remains. Prof. J D Evans conducted a ceramic shard count and evaluation of remains coming from these burial sites, thus providing the basis for the following chronological framework (Pace 1992).² The Xaghra Stone Circle ceramic finds conform to the general patterns indicated in the table and so have been included therein.

Site	Phase						
	GhD	Zb	Mg	Gg	Tx	TxC	BN
Buqana		-	-	-			
Busbesija				-			
Bur Mghez				-	-	-	
Hypogeum		-	-	-	-	-	
Nadur							
Bingemma				-			
Xemxija			-	-	-		
Tarxien		•	•	•	•	-	
Ta' Trapna				-			
Gg North Cave				-			
Xaghra Stone Circle		-		-	-	-	
Xaghra				-			

Key
 - Ceramic remains
 • Temple period & function
 GhD - Ghar Dalam; Zb - Zebbug; Mg - Mgarr; Gg - Ggantija
 Tx - Tarxien; TxC - Tarxien Cemetery; BN - Borg in-Nadur

Patterns in the development of mortuary facilities

As illustrated elsewhere (Pace 1992), the chronological table and the accompanying distribution maps suggest a number of interesting dynamics. Available evidence suggests that the development of funerary monument

typology occurred over a three stage period before being replaced by cremation rituals during the Early Bronze Age (c.2500 BC). As argued, this development may have been directed towards a visible extension of collectivity through the enlargement of central cemeteries or even the use of large burial facilities such as caves.

The three stage development first saw the introduction of the earliest rock-cut chamber tombs during the Zebbug Phase (4100 - 3800 BC). Recorded evidence shows that these monuments consisted of simple chambers that were accessed through a shaft. The Ta' Trapna (Zebbug) burials may represent an alternative form of grave which may have consisted of rock-cut hollows. The Xaghra Stone Circle tombs show that collective burial was an established custom.

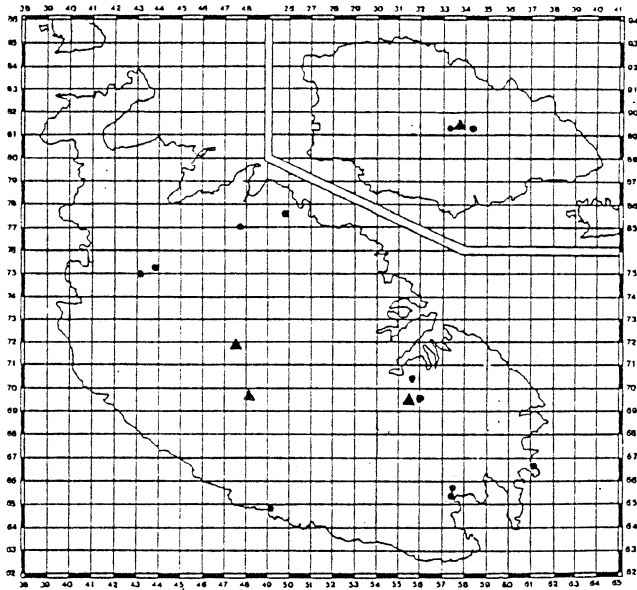
The second stage can be comfortably dated by ceramic remains to around 3600-3000 BC, the Ggantija Phase. This period saw the emergence of megalithic building complexes, following what now looks like a sudden wave of construction that spread across the entire archipelago. It is in fact from the Ggantija Phase that the highest number of cemeteries has been recorded. It is also highly significant that the geographical distribution of burial sites was at its peak during this important Phase. While a number of simple rock-cut chamber tombs were still in use, a preference for larger facilities may have prevailed as suggested by the creation of the upper level of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, the use of the Xaghra Stone Circle, Xemxija I, II and V as well as Bur Mghez cave. Of particular interest is the linking of burial space provided by Xemxija I and II which were coupled by means of an interconnecting hole.

The third and final stage in the development of burial site typology occurred during the Tarxien Phase. This stage was again to see a second wave of megalithic building with existing structures being altered, expanded and elaborately embellished. A similar expansion took place in the central cemeteries among which were the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, the Xaghra Stone Circle and Bur Mghez. Unlike the first two sites, very little is known of Bur Mghez. It seems that this cave still offered a large enough space for extended communal burial rites. In the case of the Hypogeum the cemetery was deliberately extended beyond the upper level (Ggantija Phase) where older burials remained intact (Zammit 1910). The site was elaborately embellished with superb rock carvings and ochre paintings. A similar elaboration seems to have occurred at the Xaghra Stone Circle where well crafted megaliths, a monumental entrance and several internal ritual features were incorporated in the site. The site was enclosed by a extensive megalithic wall that has now been superseded by a modern rubble wall which,

'TEMPLE' PERIOD CERAMIC SITE LOCATION PATTERNING

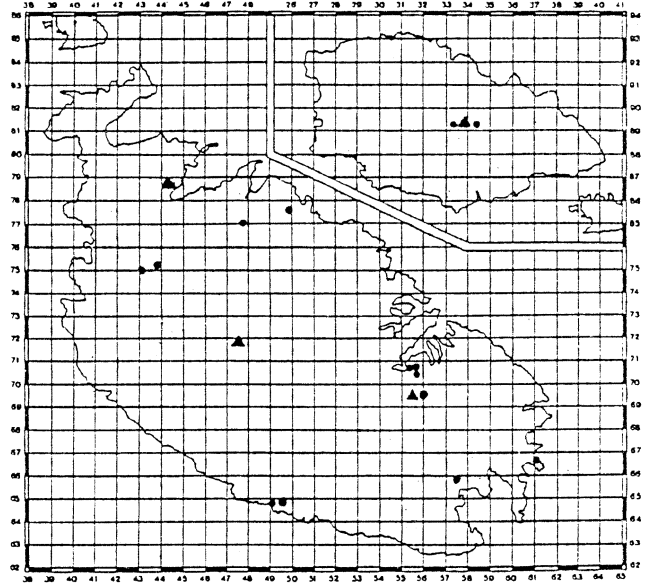
Distribution of ceramic remains from consecutive 'temple' period phases discovered at burial and 'temple' sites.
(illustrations after Evans 1971)

Zebbug c.4200 - 3800 BC



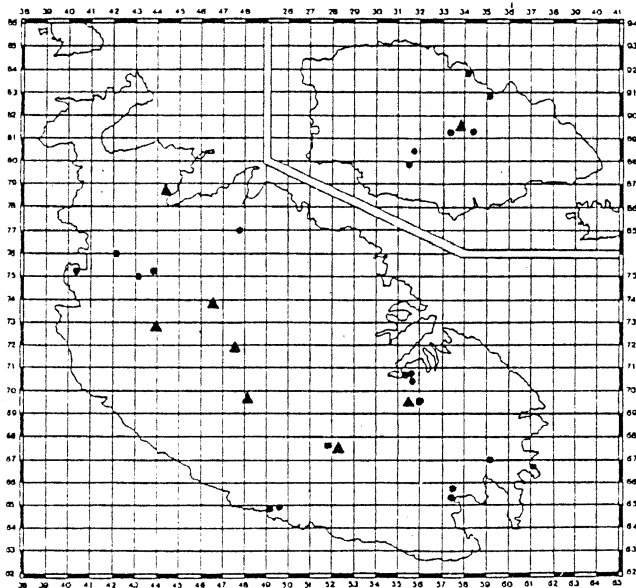
- ▲ — burial sites Late Neolithic
- — megalithic structure site

Mgarr c. 3800 - 3600 BC



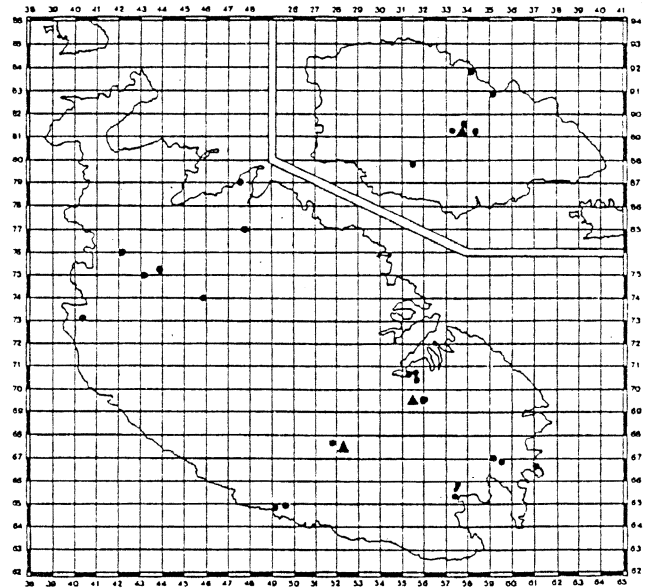
- ▲ — burial sites
- — other sites

Ggantija c. 3600 - 3000 BC



- ▲ — burial sites
- — other sites

Tarxien c. 3000 - 2500 BC



- ▲ — burial sites
- — other sites

however, still defines the original confines of this cemetery.

But expansion of centralized burial sites was by no means the only phenomenon. If such a deliberate expansion had been planned to accommodate growing social demands for access rights into central ritual sites, reverberations of such an ideological development would have been extensively felt. It may be of no great surprise to find therefore, as suggested by the accompanying table and charts, that the expansion and elaboration of central cemeteries occurred as smaller burial sites may have gone out of use. By the Tarxien Phase, only the large cemeteries - Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, Bur Mghez, Xemxija and the Xaghra Stone Circle - seem to have remained active.

Boundaries and beyond

Collectivity can operate beyond perceived boundaries. The significance of territoriality (Renfrew 1973) and inter-community rivalry (Bonanno et al, 1990) has often been emphasized with respect to Maltese prehistory. But Fleming (1982) has underlined the difference that exists between social and land boundaries, so that physical barriers and ideological beliefs may not be so easily recognizable in the archaeological record. In the case of Malta's Late Neolithic, it would seem that whereas megalithic building complexes could have served particular social functions including that of defining ideological as well as physical boundaries, cemeteries and burial rituals may have actually operated on a totally different socio-cultural level in which collectivity played an over-riding role. Thus, while megalithic building complexes remained entrenched in their geographical position, burial monuments experienced chronological change as well as fluctuating distribution patterning which may have been steadily directed towards the physical expansion of centralized burial space as opposed to the continual rock-cutting of individual chamber tombs. But in effect, the social necessity of unified strategies for the development of mortuary monuments would have transcended, and could have easily been different from, the established role of the archipelago's megalithic building complexes as socio-political focal points for the archipelago's communities.

Notes

1. The final report of the Xaghra Stone Circle excavation still awaits publication.
2. Dr. D. Trump is currently conducting another shard count and evaluation for the National Museum of Archaeology.

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