
AN INTERPRETATION OF MALTESE PREHISTORY

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Serious study for Maltese prehistory goes back some 50 years only, although by that time such important sites as Għar Dalam, Ggantija, Haġar Qim and Imnajdra, as well as the Hypogeum were already excavated, if it is at all proper to use that word for what essentially turned out to be a clearing operation coupled with a hunt to retrieve objects for Museum display. In point of fact, much of the material thus recovered was dispersed and never reached the Museum collection. Equally tragic must be counted the loss for ever of vital archaeological evidence, that ought to have been the true objective of the excavations. The object of all kind of archaeological investigation is not the recovery of artistic or museum pieces, but simply *a scientifically conducted search for evidence, for information*. It is a kind of detective investigation to find 'clues' about the past. The clues are the information sought that might take the shape of a great work of art or a precious object, but equally vital for the search are the unattractive finds, maybe a scrap of metal, a tiny piece of pottery, a small patch of floor made of beaten earth, a fragment of carbonised material, mere traces of architectural elements — traces that often disappear from sight after exposure to the air — and numerous other insignificant things and clues which the untrained eye and the enthusiast will hardly note and probably care nothing about. Archaeology is a scientific search for information. It follows that the evidence lying under the ground or elsewhere should never be tampered with unless a fully trained and authorised archaeologist is in charge.

It is important to guard our archaeological record from such interference because we have no written records for most of our country's history — and this is even more completely true as far as our prehistory is concerned. History always begins with a literate society and for this reason we cannot start our own 'history' earlier than 750 BC when the inhabitants of Malta came into close contact with the Phoenicians — a people with far-ranging maritime and trade interests, but also heirs to a great and ancient civilization that had in fact worked out the first known alphabet and ancestor to that of our own.

Everything else that happened in Malta before these contacts with the Phoenicians remains *totally* unsupported by written records. All our present knowledge of what happened in our country before written history has been accumulated through a series of archaeological investigations.

Maltese prehistory consists of a very long stretch of time, longer than the stretch of our written history. If the recently conducted calibration of radiocarbon dates are taken into account Maltese prehistory goes back to circa 5200 BC, and came to an end in 750 BC. That means that Maltese prehistory covers some 4400 years against only 2800 of (mostly) inadequately recorded history. The above figures serve to show that in fact we devote a tiny portion of attention to the largest segment of our history which has remained seriously under-studied until recently. The main contributors in this field have been Sir Temi Zammit who first worked out a coherent picture of its real significance, John D. Evans who gave it a firm scientific basis and put up the Archaeological Section of our Museum, and David Trump who gave it the definite framework that we now have.

4400 years of prehistory are a very long period during which much vital development took place at the very dawn of our modern way of life, even if throughout that period life remained still at a more or less primitive level and the tempo of change followed its own leisurely pattern. But there were changes, big and at times even violent ones, although the biggest changes and the most abiding were — as always — cultural ones that in themselves supply us with evidence for different social set-ups.

For a number of technical and cultural reasons, the prehistory of Malta is divided into three broad epochs, distinguished from each other by a distinctive material culture, distinctive architectural standards, an implied distinctive social structure, different cultural ties with the outside world, and very probably with a distinctive 'racial' origin as well.

These three epochs are termed: the Neolithic (New Stone Age); the Chalcolithic (Copper Age) and the Bronze Age.

Cultural Sequence of Maltese prehistory

(Calibrated dates used throughout)

			B.C.
NEOLITHIC	—	1. Ghar Dalam	5200-4500
	—	2. Red Skorba	4400-4100
	—	3. Grey Skorba	? 4500-4400
CHALCOLITHIC	—	4. Żebbuġ	4100-3800
	—	5. Mgarr	? 3800-3600
	—	6. Ggantija	3600-3300/3000
	—	7. Tarxien	3300/3000-2500
BRONZE AGE	—	8. Tarxien Cemetery	2500-1500
	—	9. Borg in-Nadur	1500/1450 - 800
	—	10. (Bahrija)	900-750

Source: Colin Renfrew, 'Malta and calibrated radiocarbon chronology', *Antiquity* XLVI (1972), pp. 150-154.

Most unfortunately, due to an out-dated usage still in fashion till the middle fifties, the term Neolithic came to be used indiscriminately to almost all manifestations of prehistory; even the megalithic temples are still being described as 'Neolithic'. This is an entirely mistaken practice, since the temples belong to the Chalcolithic civilization of Malta and there was nothing remotely approaching them during the earlier Neolithic.

THE NEOLITHIC AGE

The Ghar Dalam Phase

The earliest human civilization to touch Maltese shores — as far as we can make out — is termed Neolithic and arrived directly from Sicily where it is known as *Stentinello*; it developed here as a variant of the same tradition, known culturally as *Ghar Dalam* for in that locality was recognized the first clear evidence of this cultural phase. Its beginning is now fixed to around 5200 BC and may have lasted for 700 years. In fact we do not know much about this earliest phase of our Neolithic. They were certainly agriculturalists; in fact theirs was the first agricultural culture to penetrate the Western basin of the Mediterranean. Their arrival in Malta was just a minor event in their westward spread from the Eastern Mediterranean. In Sicily, they introduced agriculture and built settlements surrounded by a deep trench for there they were in fact intruders. In Malta they met no human opposition for the country was still clothed in its virgin mantle of vegetation. They probably adopted the most primitive method of cultivation, burning the thick wild maquis and tilling the soil until it became exhausted, then moving onwards to a virgin tract of land.

The Grey and Red Skorba Phases

The Neolithic culture of Malta passed through two more phases individuated during excavations at Skorba and called *Grey Skorba* and *Red Skorba* (4500-4100 BC). Their cultural evolution cannot be said to have been strongly marked, but slow and rather degenerative to judge by the little that we know.

At Skorba, one of the huts excavated showed ample evidence of having been utilised as a shrine with the use of goats' horns, as well as rude and schematic figures of pottery that suggest religious affinities with the fertility cults of Neolithic Anatolia. The evidence available suggests too that the population remained low throughout. Links with the outside world are borne out by finds of obsidian from both Pantelleria and the Lipari islands. Neolithic society, being of a primitive agrarian kind, would probably have had a simple social structure. Every unit was probably tied by bonds of affinity, such as clan, with the elder-to-be appealed to, maybe the patriarch of the unit. Little social stratification would have had any chance to form; indicative of this type of primitive

'democracy' is the existence at Skorba of a shrine in a hut hardly different from other huts that were used solely for living purposes. But if the whole truth is to be said, we know far too little about the Neolithic culture of our country which incidentally appears to have reached Gozo earlier than Malta. Only the most careful, scrupulous and well-planned scientific investigations will ever be able to throw more light on it in the future.

THE CHALCOLITHIC AGE

The Żebbuġ and Mġarr Phases

The Żebbuġ or the first phase of the Chalcolithic is dated to circa 4200 BC. It seems to have endured some 300 years and together with the following Mġarr phase represents the gestation period for that cultural flowering associated with the megalithic temples. It is important here to look a little more closely at the reasons which induced archaeologists to conclude that we are dealing with an altogether different kind of culture, substantially different from the preceding Neolithic culture. The evidence is fairly strong and cumulatively persuasive. We suddenly note that a new type of pottery has appeared on the scene replacing older types, and itself unrelated to Neolithic wares which had evolved slowly but coherently from the first impressed Stentinello type to Red Skorba ware. The Żebbuġ ware breaks with this tradition and has a different texture, different colour and shapes that altogether imply a different tradition. It is decorated imaginatively, something which the poor tradition of Neolithic ware was never able to achieve but rather seemed to turn out drab repetitions. In the Żebbuġ Phase we therefore meet an impulse, a fresh start which the Neolithic culture, left to itself, would never have managed. It all probably means a new immigration into depopulated and backward Neolithic Malta; the links again point to Sicily — not very clearly this time — but somehow close to the San Cono Chalcolithic culture of Sicily.

The Żebbuġ phase is only a preamble to the Chalcolithic civilization of Malta — a crucial phase of cultural gestation during which a new type of life consolidated itself, absorbing any remaining population from the previous Neolithic epoch to a new social set-up with its own superior standards.* Unfortunately finds dateable to this phase are still few and the overall picture remains hazy.

The first communal rock-cut tomb is noted in the next phase, Mġarr (? 3800-3066 BC). This practice is an important distinguishing rite wherever megalithic architecture cropped up from the British Isles, all along the Atlantic border of France, Spain and Portugal, to the SE coast of Spain and the Balearic islands. Some grounds therefore exist for assuming that the original cultural impulse that ignited the Chalcolithic

* Dominic Cutajar, "The Chalcolithic Civilization of Malta", *Times of Malta*, 27 March, 3, 10, 17 April, 1978.

culture of Malta derived from the western zone of the Mediterranean, in contrast to the Eastern derivation of the previous Neolithic culture.

The Ġgantija Phase

Probably too the earliest temples were constructed towards the end of the Mgarr Phase although we can firmly date the earliest structure to the next phase — Ġgantija (3600-3000 BC), in fact early in the Ġgantija phase. But we note that when the first temples appeared, their planimetry — plan at ground level — had *already* assumed the fully evolved trefoil type; in other words, we are faced with a completely symmetrical trefoil shape, a cluster of 3 apses around a small rectangular fore-court abstractly defined, completed with a concave facade. The prototype for this particular form of architecture certainly could not have been invented by inspiration, but most have been evolved slowly over a long stretch of time. Unfortunately nothing is known about the early stages of this evolution for we are suddenly presented with the 'finished product'. This could mean either of two things.

The first one, favoured by Euan McKyie, postulates that it was imported ready-made in Malta and to account for it he had to conjecture another immigration early in the Ġgantija phase. His theory has a number of inherent weaknesses, the most serious being the fact that we note no break in the ceramic tradition which would have documented such an immigration. His view implies too that the previous architectural evolution occurred somewhere else outside the Maltese islands; but nothing resembling our Chalcolithic temples, and as early as they, has ever been found anywhere else where megalithic architecture flourished. Wherever we look we only find vague and distant affinities of single elements, nothing comparable in conception or lay-out.

The other alternative was suggested by myself in a feature entitled *The origin of Megalithic Structures in Malta*.* An analysis of certain odd characteristics of temple-architecture, such as the absence of straight lines, the inward inclination of the apse-walls towards the centre, the concavity of the facade, and the clustering of rotund shapes suggest that the original constructional material could *not* have been stone. We are forced on consideration to think in terms of some *pliable* stuff which lends itself to such structural requirements. In fact reeds, commonly obtainable in most valleys, seem to answer all the demands made by the odd specifications of temple-architecture. The original unit might very well have been a single round hut of reeds whose tips were collected and tied together at the top. (Round huts appear to have been the rule in Neolithic Malta). Functional and ritual usages demanded more space, leading to the cluster of 3 huts adutting onto a small common courtyard. The natural curvature of the 2 outer huts led naturally

* *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 19 September, 1976.

to the concept of a common facade with its pronounced concavity. Taboos and the usual religious conservatism demanded that most of these anachronistic features characteristic of the old reed-structure would be retained when the entire complex was ultimately translated into stone.

If the above hypothesis is accepted it will not be difficult to understand the existence the trefoil structure in its fully developed form. All the early evolutionary stages of its architectural form have been lost, precisely because they were worked out in perishable material. I have come to believe that the whole evolution of this architectural structure could have been pursued in our country with only vague and general analogies to developments in other areas where the phenomenon of megalithic architecture appeared.

The Tarxien Phase

It is significant too that once realised in stone, this structure continued its evolutionary course especially in the last phase of the Chalcolithic known as Tarxien (3300/3000 to 2500BC). This could only mean that the people who formulated that planimetric shape thought about it in purely functional terms and so continued to evolve it according to the need. The primary requirement appears to have been more space, so 2 more lateral apses were added to the trefoil creating a structure made of five apses. At this stage, the central apse lost its importance and shrunk down to the size of a central shrine. Temples with four, and even six, lateral apses were created, and in the last development of all, the central shrine became transformed into a back entrance. We have to remember too that a small number of temples may have always had an irregular arrangement of the apses, while subsequent alterations to others for reasons unknown to us led to modifications in temples which had originally regular planimetry. The apses were of course never finished in stone as domed structures, even if the imitation in one of the chambers at the Hypogeum suggests it; the actual dome — when carried out — would have been finished in reeds and then thatched.

Before leaving the subject of the Chalcolithic temples, I feel one ought to point out that the open area outside the main entrance of Chalcolithic temples appears to have been designed to play an important part in the ritual. The low bench along the facade, the libation flagstones and accessories in front of the entrance, the slabs with the so called 'divination' holes at each tip or 'horn' of the concave facade, as well as the frequent presence of outside shrines, all point to the fact that some dramatic ceremony took place there in the open, in full view of the crowd of spectators, while the confined interior might well have been reserved for the initiates only. It ought to be kept in mind that the dramatised ritual of early religions paved the way for the birth of dra-

ma-performances* of which the Greek theatre is the most splendid offspring. Consequently a great mistake is committed in considering each structure by itself, in isolation of its environment when everything indicates that the plaza outside the entrance formed an integral part of the complex, corresponding to the public part of the ritual.

Now it is reasonable to assume that a civilization that had attained such a high standard of cultural attainment must have had a well-organised hierarchial structure. Its economic base must have been almost self-sufficient for archaeological evidence stresses that contacts with the outside world were minimal through the entire age. We have only hints that enable us to project the structure of Chalcolithic society and its economy. Its strongly hierarchical, possibly theocratic, character can be deduced from the major division we have observed between people and initiates. Later architectural alterations, noted by Dr. Trump,† indicate a phase of strong social retrenchment towards the end. It is clear too that the country was more thickly populated than in Neolithic times; so it may safely be presumed that they practised a form of agriculture more efficient and remunerative than that of the earlier settlers. But this difference in the standards of cultivation can hardly have been so significant as to account for the vast discrepancy in cultural attainments.

Obviously it had to be supplemented by other means — and if we recall the Tarxien friezes, and the engraved pattern of alternate whorls and weights beneath the monumental statue of the Tarxien Goddess, we will be forced to consider seriously the idea that Chalcolithic society had a *basically pastoral economy*. The known facts are few, but we can begin to understand their sources of self-sufficiency if we posit a basis of mixed economy heavily dependant on the rearing of sheep, and possibly pigs as well, with other benefits from agriculture, some fishing and a primitive kind of cottage industry.

Chalcolithic Malta came to an end 'not with a bang but with a whimper'. Strangely this attractive, inventive, but inward-looking, and (for all we know) peaceful civilization, carved out of the land in monastic isolation from the rest of the world, began to decay slowly but surely. Their temples were never destroyed or burnt. They were simply abandoned in slow stages. Such a process could well have taken an unconsciously long stretch of time, although we can find nothing to suggest a clear-cut answer. The cause was certainly not an earthquake nor any violent natural calamity. Nothing suggests an attack from the outside. Had it been an epidemic, it is unlikely that it would have lain low the entire population. We are forced to guess again.

My own view is that the country had been ecologically ruined by the large scale pastoral activity that had formerly yielded them a measure of ease and well-being. Centuries of sheep-grazing had denuded

* Dominic Cutajar, "Cult and Architecture in Chalcolithic Malta," *Times of Malta*, 26 June, 1978.

† D.H. Trump, *Skorba* (London, Society of Antiquarians, 1966), pp. 47, 51.

the island of its vegetation-cover, incurring consequently a calamitous loss of soil. That would have brought about a slow, protracted death to Chalcolithic civilization.* The shrunken size of the herds would have inflicted increasing poverty, hunger and diseases to a population that had grown too much and in no way corresponded to the real material possibilities of the island. The answer to these problems might have been the time-honoured one of mass emigration, while the survivors kept sinking into the abyss of cultural decay.

There is some evidence too that the island could have experienced a major geological tilt, not so violent as to cause damage but enough to interfere with the water-supply. Coupled with an ecological run-down, the effect would have been disastrous for the entire community.

Gozo appears to have been less affected by the above-mentioned processes due to the presence of large clay deposits that have resisted denudation throughout the ages. In fact, there are grounds for suspecting that a Chalcolithic nucleus survived in Gozo and might have fused with latter peoples.

THE BRONZE AGE

The Tarxien Cemetery Phase

The Chalcolithic civilization of Malta appears to have fizzed out around 2500 BC, but it is by no means certain when the Tarxien Cemetery culture reached the Maltese islands — an event that marks the beginning of the Maltese Bronze age. The same culture is assumed to have lasted 1000 years, to circa 1500 BC, although I prefer Dr. Trump's limit of 1450 BC as it coincides with a period of unsettled times in the Mediterranean, triggered off by the eruption of Santorini. But our knowledge of the Tarxien Cemetery culture is so limited and the material remains are so relatively scarce, that we may justifiably doubt if it really lasted an entire millenium.

In origin the Tarxien Cemetery Culture seems to derive from the coastline of Dalmatia, to a cultural group akin to the Middle Helladic civilization. So much so that an analogous culture has been attested in excavation in the lower levels at Olympia; it spread across the Adriatic to Puglia and other smaller maritime stages. Like the later Hellenes, they used to incinerate their dead and build over the ashes a monumental 'dolmen' — a practice that recalls the heroic sagas of Greece, but it will be wrong to consider them as a direct off-shot of Helladic civilization. They were certainly an aggressive seafaring people, with outposts in the Lipari Islands. It could well be that they were a piratical tribe who found haven in the more sheltered Maltese harbours and settled very thinly over the country. Artistically they rank among the most dynamic and gifted people to settle in Malta.

* Dominic Cutajar, "Vicissitudes of the Maltese Environment." *Times of Malta*, 9, 16, 23 January, 1978.

The Borg-in-Nadur Phase

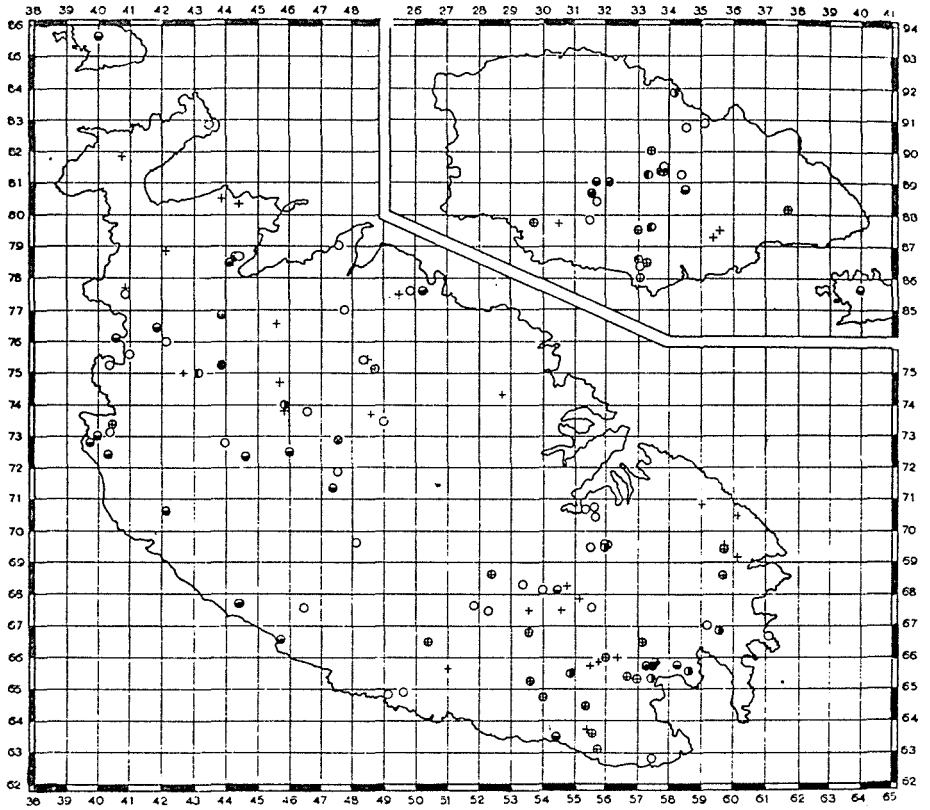
About 1450 BC the entire Mediterranean burst into turmoil; a new immigrant group took over the Maltese islands apparently after a struggle. They have come to be known as the Borg-in-Nadur people with clear authentic affinities to the southern coast of Sicily. They supplanted completely the Tarxien Cemetery people whose pottery disappears suddenly from the archaeological record. The new settlers were devoted agriculturalists and penetrated every corner of the country; their pottery is in fact the commonest encountered with from among all the prehistoric groups mentioned earlier. It looks too as if the cart-ruts were made during this portion of our Bronze Age and may have some connection with old quarry-sites.

The Borg in-Nadur people chose carefully the site of their settlements for as we said, the general situation in the Mediterranean was extremely unsettled and piracy flourished. As a result they selected easily-defensible sites for their settlements, such as promontories and flat-topped hills. Mdina appears to have been founded by these people on a site that afforded an easily defensible position. In or around their settlements, they dug bell-shaped silos which were often carefully plastered — and of these there must be scores all over Malta, a testimony to the very successful adaptation of these people to the ungenerous natural environment of these islands.

The Bahrija Phase

Around 950 BC a small, culturally different group settled at Bahrija from somewhere in Southern Italy (Calabria) too but they hardly affected the general pattern of life of the majority of Borg in-Nadur people. In turn both groups were almost instantly absorbed by the immensely superior Phoenician civilization when this mercantile people appeared on our shores somewhat around 750 BC. The Phoenicians so successfully 'converted' the native population to their way of life, to their religion, language and social institutions, that after 700 BC Malta became indistinguishable from other predominantly Phoenician colonies. The very first impact of Phoenician civilization was so overwhelming that the Maltese continued to retain and fondly nourish archaic Phoenician traits that in time went out of fashion even in Carthage itself.* So the arrival of the Phoenicians ushers Malta, not only into the period of literate history, but also into a completely new and familiar cultural orbit.

* Dominic Cutajar, "The basic Punic culture of Malta," *The Times*, Malta, 12 March, 1979.



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|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| ● Neolithic and Copper Age | ● Copper Age and Bronze Age |
| ○ Copper Age | ⊙ Probably Bronze Age |
| ⊙ Probably Copper Age | ● Neolithic, Copper Age and Bronze Age |
| ○ Bronze Age | + Prehistoric; not more closely datable |

Fig. 1. Distribution map of prehistoric sites in Malta and Gozo. The grid is that of the 2' map, GSGS 3859, 4th edition, 1954.