



Older than Metusalah

Has Malta always been over-populated? The huge number of temple sites on our tiny islands seems to indicate that it is so. *Dr Louis Lagana* takes us on a Prehistoric Pilgrimage

When looking at a map of Malta and Gozo in order to locate our temples' orientation and sites, you cannot help but be amazed at the concentration of prehistoric remains on such a small area of land. There are about fifty temple sites. The Maltese were always strong on worship!

These temple sites are mostly clustered in the south of the island of Malta, however there is no definite explanation for this. It seems that many other temple sites were destroyed in antiquity, or perhaps there are others still to be discovered. Scattered around the islands there are also many menhirs and dolmens. Interestingly most temples have the same basic structure: a central passage leading to two or more kidney-shaped chambers or apses. Large globigerina limestone megalithic blocks or orthostats surround the outer structure of the temple. Roofs were probably made of brushwood and clay, but there is an indication that beams made of stone were also used. In most temples you can also find an imposing doorway or entrance, constructed with the trilithon principle: two parallel orthostats (posts) supporting a horizontal lintel.

Perhaps one of the most famous megalithic temples found on the island is Hagar Qim which is situated in the south-west of the island of Malta, near the village of Qrendi, standing on a hill facing the sea - about 5km from the islet of Filfla. The name Hagar Qim means 'free-standing boulders' (gebel wieqaf in Maltese). The word Hagar is derived from the Greek word meaning 'large stone'. In fact the largest stones

are found in this temple, and one stone is estimated to measure about 6.40 meters high. It was built during the phases known as Ggantija and Saffieni (3600 - 3000 BC). The first excavations started in 1839. The most impressive aspect of the temple is the main façade. The trilithon entrance is made up of three megalithic boulders. Hagar Qim consists of a single unit divided into one main central passage with five apses. The original features of the temple include a number of small mushroom-shaped altars made out of carved stone. Unfortunately damage caused by wind and weather eroded most of the upper parts of the temple over the passage of time, and therefore the original altars and other artefacts had to be removed and preserved at the Museum of Archaeology in Valletta.

Hagar Qim is also well known for the wealth of artefacts found during excavations. Apart from pottery shards and items like the solar wheel; a pitted altar with plant in flowerpot, stone implements and ornaments and a series of figurines were found in this temple. The famous Maltese 'fat ladies', some of them in a standing position and others in a seated position are the most renowned statuettes found at Hagar Qim. These obese, headless statuettes fall into two different categories: clothed and nude. There is a clear indication that they were used for ritual purposes, and some scholars suggest that these were the first images of the goddess of fertility. Another statuette made of terracotta and known as the Venus of Malta has become synonymous with Hagar Qim. Dating



from around 3,000 – 2,500 B.C., British archaeologist, David Trump has rightly put her in the same league as the female figurines of the Upper Palaeolithic.

At Hagar Qim you can also find the 'oracle hole'. This also supports the idea that rituals were held inside the temple. That animal sacrifices were held is also probable because of the quantity of animal bones placed inside heat-reddened hearths that were found.

David Trump also refers to the nearby Mnajdra temples as "the most atmospheric of all the temples". Situated in a lovely, remote and sheltered spot, facing the open sea with the islet of Filfla seen at a distance, Mnajdra has three temple units, two with a four-apse form and a smaller one with a three-apse. The oldest temple is a simple trefoil, which dates back to the Ggantija phase, around 3,600 years B.C. Perhaps the third temple is the most interesting one, with a unique façade dating back to the Tarxien phase. Entering its first court you can find a remarkable porthole niche on the left, framed by a trilithon and two pointed orthostats. The decoration is typical of the Maltese temples, with dotted patterns and spiral carvings. It is possible to form an idea how these temples were roofed by looking at an exceptional representation of the temple façade, which is engraved on the left post (orthostats) of the Central temple. There is a concave corbelled, domelike structure, which could have been used as the method of roofing the temples.

Same as at Hagar Qim, you can also find more 'oracle holes' in the South temple of Mnajdra, which were, according to American artist and lecturer, Cristina Biaggi, "used to allow a priestess to make announcements or to chant" to the congregation assembled in the nearby rooms. This hypothesis is popular with those scholars who are more sympathetic to the idea that women had an important role in the Prehistoric religious culture. Mnajdra is of particularly interest for many scholars for its astronomical alignments. ■

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