Homage to Fertility?

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The depictions of voluptuous women found in the Maltese archipelago reflect the importance of fertility cults in these islands during the Neolithic period.

One of the most spectacular Neolithic monuments in the Maltese archipelago is the underground labyrinth and shrine known as the Hypogeum or Hal Saflieni temple. This extraordinary structure, carved in the non-limestone rock, was used as a temple and burial ground. Among other objets, it has yielded a remarkable female figurine, the famous Sleeping Lady of Malta.

This prehistoric masterpiece, made of terracotta and measuring twelve centimetres in length, represents a reclining woman with bare breasts and generous hips. Her lower half is covered by a pleated skirt held in place by a belt round her waist. Her head is lying on a sort of cushion and the bed on which she is reclining stands on four long strips of wood joined by two further transversal strips. She is lying on one side, one arm under her head, deeply asleep and dreaming.

Two hypotheses have been put forward to explain the figurine, which still shows traces of red ochre, symbolising blood, life, and rebirth. She may have been used during ceremonies to provoke premonitory dreams or for healing rituals held in the shrine. She may also have been a votive offering to the temple deity or a symbolic object used during burials.

The extremely well preserved Hagar Qim temple near Zurrieq is also renowned for its stone statues, although many of the numerous statuettes destined for use during worship remain mysterious. Some are standing, others comfortably sitting in various positions. Several are headless, but have a cavity between the shoulders with small holes to thread cords through. The heads of some statuettes were removed from the torso and placed nearby, while the heads of others were probably made from materials such as wood that have rotted away. Their location within the temple, near holes and spaces reserved for oracles, suggest that they were probably used during rituals.

All of the statuettes are fat. The best-known example is a standing figure some 49 cm tall, shown in a highly stylised posture. The right hand is stretched out, the other held flat to the stomach with the palm facing inwards. Although the breasts and genitals are barely sketched, it is thought to be a woman because of the egg-shaped body, chubby arms, and extremely curvy thighs and buttocks.

There has been a lively debate over the sex of the two other stone statuettes from this site, both seated and both equally obese. At first sight, the heavy bodies appear to be women. The breasts are ambiguous, but the curving lines of their torsos and buttocks are rather feminine. However, some archaeologists have argued that they are asexual or androgynous.

All of these figurines support the hypothesis of a cult in worship of the Mother Goddess of Malta, a fertility goddess honoured by early inhabitants of the islands. The famous terracotta Venus of Malta, one of the best-known figurines found at Hagar Qim, represents a female nude whose head must have been destroyed but whose body shows great anatomical detail. She is small and has large breasts taking up much of her body, symbolising motherhood.

The magnificently decorated Tarxien temples housed the enormous, impressive Fat Lady, also known as the Fertility Goddess. She wears a pleated skirt and her feet are tiny in proportion to the rest of her body. Unfortunately, only the lower half of the statue has survived. Most of the figurines found in this temple depict so-called "fat ladies" whose shapes are identical to the figurines found in other temples.

It is possible that these temples were built in worship of the Fertility Goddess. Malta's early inhabitants saw nature as their mother, providing them with offspring and nourishment. The prehistoric peoples of Malta were interested in how life began. They were well aware of the cyclical nature of reproduction, whether in harvesting and gathering food or in guaranteeing the survival of their own species. For them, developing a fertility cult was a way of influencing and encouraging the reproductive cycle. Worshipping idols must have been part of their daily rituals, as most megalithic temples were associated with a cyclical fertility cult. The clay statuettes and symbols were part of the cult, practised in temples and burial grounds.

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