

TWO RELIEF-CARVINGS OF CHALCOLITHIC MALTA

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This communication is intended to draw attention to two relief-carvings from the late Copper Age temples of Tarxien, in particular because the first of these — a panel with a decorative motif — may chronologically stand at the head of a line of development that evolved through the ages and has come to be designated as the Egg-and-Dart motif. References will also be made to the later stages in the evolution of the motif's history that apparently occurred in the Aegean area. One may here add that in the writer's own belief, there was little actual contact between Chalcolithic Malta and the Aegean. The evolution of the Tarxien motif does neither rest upon nor postulate such a linear development; the nature of the relationship is more likely to have been a collateral one.

At the same time one cannot help feeling some uneasiness about hypotheses of cultural development in complete isolation, the more so inside the Mediterranean. Neolithic Malta appears to have been an extension of Stentinello Sicily (Evans 1971:208-209; Bonanno 1986: 17-46) although during the Conference, in the course of a visit to the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta, Prof. E. Anati drew attention to a closer relationship between the material culture of the Għar Dalam phase and that of Neolithic Hazorea in Israel.

To-date the cultural antecedents of Chalcolithic Malta have remained obscure. As is well known, its external contacts were few and far between, although there is some evidence that some tenuous contacts may have been maintained even with the Aegean area, as one can presume from the occurrence of the so-called *Thermi cups* during the Tarxien period (Trump 1966: 46).

The Mediterranean has often been a sea which kept its people divided, but not infrequently it did bring them together. The level of sophistication reached by the Chalcolithic culture of Malta could neither realistically have been attained in isolation, nor in a complete cultural vacuum. In the final analysis cultural developments can be better understood as an extension of a much broader texture — even if at times they degenerate into cultural dead-ends.

More difficult to assess is the degree of indigenuous contribution to any transmitted culture; there can be no doubt that the contribution of the inhabitants of Chalcolithic Malta to the consistency of their culture was substantial, especially in architecture. But let us remember, it did not happen in a vacuum, nor could it even evolve in rigid isolation.

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Of the Copper Age temples in Malta, the west or third temple at Tarxien has the richest repertoire of relief-carvings, many in fact consisting of oblong bands of decorative motifs of vaguely abstract character. That early man had not arrived at a truly "abstract" expression is sufficiently well-known, although eventually and with time a number of abstractions were evolved. Frequently these came to be utilised in part for their decorative qualities, but largely — one suspects — for their symbolic connotations. However, most have reached us in their fully evolved and *abstracted* form, and thus present a veritable challenge to the decipherment of their original inspiration.

The object here is to suggest that one of the relief-motifs in the west temple at Tarxien seems to have preserved the proto-type — rather, the iconic form — that in subsequent ages became one of the commonest decorative motifs in the repertoire of Western art, thanks largely to its vast diffusion through the classical relief-sculpture of the Graeco-Roman world. I am referring to the motif carved in bold relief on the base of the monumental limestone statue of the so-called Mother-Goddess in the east apse of the third Tarxien temple (Pl. 24; Evans 1971: pl. 19/5; Ridley 1971: 23, no. 31).

The limestone relief in question measures 14cm × 146cm and appears to represent, in alternating order, spindle-whorls (or bobbins) and ovoid-shaped loom-weights. Actual specimens of precisely these spinning implements were recovered in dated archaeological contexts at Hagar Qim, Saflieni, Mnajdra and Tarxien — apart from other places — thus leaving no doubt as to their being well-known and very likely common during the Maltese Chalcolithic (Evans 1971: 66, 93, 94, 104, 165, pls. 65, 1-6 and 66, 1-3).

In the relief-carving, the whorls or bobbins are shown without their central perforation, probably due to these being pierced at their narrowest section. Luckily there also exists a single specimen from Mnajdra which is actually unperforated as in the relief-carving. Some of the loom-weights recovered at Hagar Qim were fashioned from

globigerina limestone, although most samples recovered were moulded in clay. The writer has himself picked up half one of these clay spherical loom-weights from a field adjacent to the temple at Borg in-Nadur.

The above would seem to indicate that the representation of a band of alternating whorls and loom-weights beneath a statue — commonly presumed to be a representation of the Mother-Goddess — is in itself both suggestive and significant, being tantamount to designating *that* particular female figure as *the Spinner*. The monumentality of the sculpture — in fact, the largest of the kind in the Maltese Chalcolithic context — serves to underscore dramatically the uniqueness of the figure, even when viewed against the background of Malta's entire corpus of Copper Age limestone sculptures — the individual specimens of which are themselves large, bulky and very heavy works. The Tarxien sculpture is thus conceived on such an impressive and monumental scale that it sharply contrasts with the negative criteria examined by Prof. P.J. Ucko (Ucko 1968: 427-434), justifying its designation as a representation of the Mother-Goddess.

This interpretation derives substantial support from the fact that an identical motif — more formally integrated — reappears in the stela mounted atop the Lions Gate at Mycenae. There the motif is carved beneath the pillar-altar, itself flanked by the “heraldic” lions — usually interpreted as a representation of the tutelary deity of the Mycenaean citadel. The close formal parallelism in the latter utilization of the motif at Mycenae, with that of the Tarxien monumental sculpture should not be underrated.

The motif recurs again in the Palace of Knossos, this time as a decorative mural frieze painted along the lateral sides and on top of the entrance to the Women quarters — where, incidentally, evidence of spinning activity was discovered. The Knossos painted frieze — probably Late Minoan III — seems to be later than the Mycenaean stela; yet, it too has a significance of its own, demarcating as it does the gateway to *the female domain*. The implication — if our reading of the signs is right — is that spinning being intrinsically a feminine occupation, its implements came to symbolize the female sex itself. Both the Tarxien relief and the Mycenaean stela appear to document an earlier stage when the feminine deity *par excellence* was thus designated.

The foregoing can hardly fail to suggest somehow the *Moirai* or the “Fates” — ancient Hellenic deities consisting of a triad of old

spinning women, individually identified as Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos — originally venerated as birth-spirits, the Allotters to every new-born child of his portion of life.

Whatever the case may be, the “egg-and-dart” motif at Tarxien seems to constitute yet another small link between Chalcolithic Malta and the civilizations of the Aegean area. Whichever way this traffic flowed during the Chalcolithic is a question that has in the past bedevilled the chronology of prehistoric Malta — that is, before the advent of radiocarbon dating. It could well be that the two areas of separate development — Malta and the Aegean world — might have been *both* dependent in certain ways on cultural stimuli from the earlier Balkan civilizations. It is a hypothesis well worth examining.

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With reference to the same temple at Tarxien, it might prove of some interest to discuss briefly the representation in relief of the two bulls and another animal, most times presumed to represent “*a sow suckling her litter of piglets*” (Ridley 1971: 28, nos 68-69). These animals were carved in shallow relief on the walls of a small enclosed area tucked between the third and middle temples (Pl. 25).

Michael Ridley has already cast serious doubts as to the correctness of the sow’s identification. The animal is shown hornless — or it might well be its horns were lost through weathering. Yet on closer examination, its legs are proportionately far too long to suggest a sow. On balance we seem to have a depiction of a bull and its female counterpart — presumably a heifer.

The main objection to such an interpretation is of course the presence of its large litter, that on surface would seem to rule out a young female bovine. Yet the very size of the litter — thirteen young, carved side by side beneath the female animal — might well be a hint suggesting a solution. It appears that the carved animals were intended to be read symbolically. The bull — representing the male principle — would stand for the Sun, while his consort would naturally be the Moon, generally represented in the form of a cow. If such is the case at Tarxien, the latter’s litter of 13 young would be nothing less than the thirteen lunar months of most primitive calendars.

Of course the point cannot be taken to be conclusively settled. It is yet not without significance that the two Tarxien relief-carvings here discussed seem to highlight in an overwhelming manner feminine interests, activities and functions, which the Chalcolithic temples of Malta strongly hint at on a score of other considerations.

Summary

The west temple of the Tarxien complex is certainly the most elaborately decorated of the Chalcolithic temples of Malta. The repertoire of stone-carved motifs is fairly extensive, among which one — carved beneath a monumental limestone statue of the 'Goddess' — seems to represent the prototype of the egg-and-dart motif before it was abstracted to become, presumably through the agency of the Aegean civilizations, one of the most popular architectural decorative motifs of western art.

A second carving — in an adjacent room to the west temple — represents a bull and a female animal with its young, usually taken for a 'sow with litter'. The writer suggests an interpretation connected with the calendar.

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