

Malta through the ages (1)

MYSTERY OF THE TEMPLES

History is a subject which, consciously or unconsciously, interests us all. A child may be interested in learning from grandparents what life was like fifty or sixty years before. Conversely, the latter revel in comparing the changes they have witnessed, and also recalling what their own parents had once related to them; and so the cycle goes on. Indeed, it is because History deals with Man's everyday life that makes it so interesting. It enables us to learn how certain progress was achieved and what caused certain changes, with the result that further changes become possible.

The dominant aspect of Maltese History has been the Islands' take over by a succession of foreigners, all of whom have left an indelible mark on Maltese society. Furthermore, Malta's compactness offers the advantage of having a wealth of history within easy reach, a considerable degree of which is still, unfortunately, not appreciated. Bearing this in mind, it would be advisable to promote local history among the Maltese themselves for a better understanding of local civilization.

Though History is a continuous process, without any clearcut distinction between one period and another, it has been conveniently divided into five basic periods of study. Hence, it would be well to link local history with these divisions. (1) Pre-History ranging from the earliest times to about the ninth century B.C. when Malta was occupied by the Neolithic man. (2) Ancient History takes us to the ninth century A.D. by which time Malta had witnessed the arrival of the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, the Romans and the Arabs. (3) Medieval History leading to the sixteenth century. During these centuries, Malta changed hands a number of times, the Arabs, the Normans, the Angevins, the Aragonese and the Order of Saint John. (4) Modern History follows up the Great Siege with the expulsion of the Order by the French, and the expulsion of the latter in 1800. (5) Contemporary History is the final phase leading up to recent events.

Covering approximately 236 kilometres of the Mediterranean Sea, Malta is larger than Gozo, Comino, Kemunett and Filfla, which are collectively



The chamber known as the *Holy of Holies* in the Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni





Ghar Dalam . . . a case in point?

known as the Maltese Islands. Being 93 kilometres away from Sicily and 290 kilometres away from Northern Africa, Malta occupies a central position in the Mediterranean which was called "the Great Sea" in ancient times because it was the only known sea to be practically enclosed by land. In affect, with the Straits of Gibraltar still non-existent, and with Italy, Sicily and Northern Africa linked to one another, the Mediterranean Sea was then still a number of lakes, with Malta, taking into consideration its central



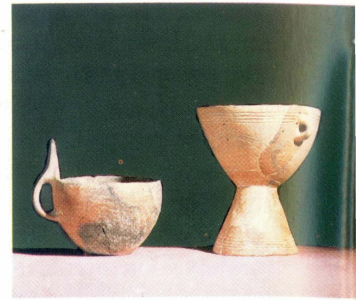
Hagar Qim Temple

position, forming part of a land bridge between the above mentioned countries. This would have been convenient for migrating animals in search of cooler or warmer air depending on the season.

Evidence does uphold such a theory. The shape of valleys like Wied il-Ghasel, suggests that a river once flowed through it. The fossilised remains of plants and animals, unfamiliar to Malta, further indicate that migrating animals could have stopped temporarily in Malta. Ghar Dalam is a case in point, bearing witness to bones of hippopotami, deer and



(a)



(b)

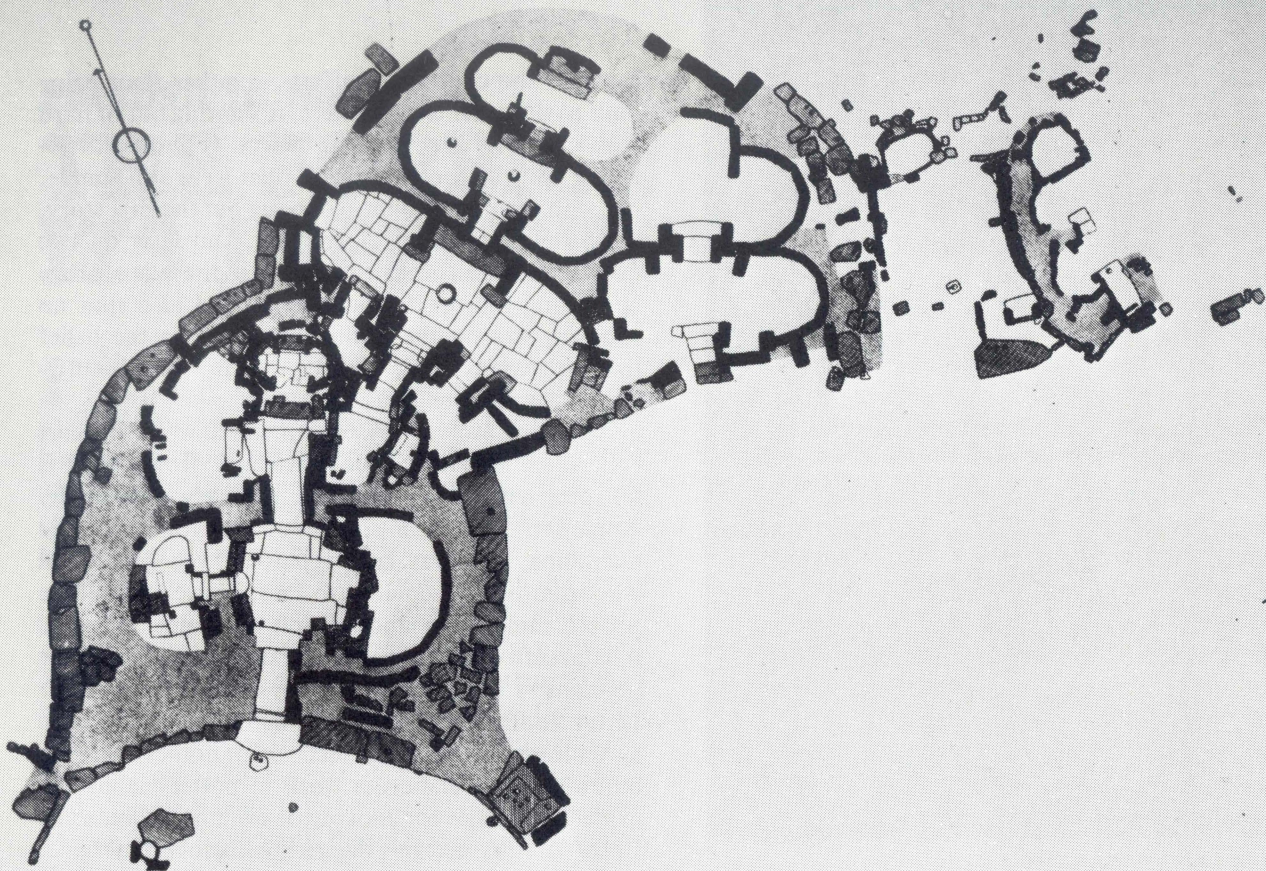


(c)

Prehistoric remains: (a) stone altar; (b) ceramics; (c) stone jug

elephant tusks, as well as other remains. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Malta was linked to other lands, so the logical question would be, what happened to alter such a situation?

The answer is to be found in the realm of geography. During the Pleistocene epoch, which spanned from 2,500,000 years to 10,000 years ago, the human species not only developed from its ape-like form to our present position, but also certain events occurred which influenced the current way of life. It is believed that for four or five times large ice-



Plan of the three temples of Hal Tarxien

sheets moved across the Northern Hemisphere. In the process this event affected climates, the distribution of plants and animals. The main result, however, was that sea-levels were lowered because the water was ice-bound on the lands. Consequently, when the ice melted the sea-level rose and covered large areas of land. It was at a time like this that Malta was cut off from other lands and became an island.

Who were the earliest inhabitants of Malta and how did they get here? It has already been ascertained that the Maltese Islands had previously been linked to other lands, thus, Man could have reached Malta like the animal did. Even if the first inhabitants arrived after Malta had become an island it is almost certain that they came from neighbouring Sicily. It is said that on a clear day, Sicily is visible to the naked eye from Malta and conversely Malta is visible from Sicily. Hence it would not be too far fetched that Malta had been sighted and wanting to know what this land offered, these people crossed the 58 miles in dug-out canoes. Naturally, Malta was then still covered with virgin, uneroded soil and offered favourable conditions for establishing a farming community. Indeed, one may picture life in early Malta with the men cultivating crops and hunting wild animals for food, while the women reared the

young at home which was most probably a cave. As may be expected the main occupations of the time being hunting and fishing, farming and eventually building.

Although no written records exist, it is possible, through the archeological evidence to obtain quite a clear idea of these people's way of life. The evidence suggests that they were both deeply religious and superstitious. Gods may have been worshipped because the inhabitants believed that their agricultural produce would flourish. In fact, various statues have been found representing the Goddess of Fertility as a short fat lady. The existence of tombs and temples further indicate that the dead were given due respect and that religious ceremonies were held. Sacrifices were also offered in these temples, a part of which called the "Holy of Holies" was cut off from the public. It was also possible to consult "the Oracle" at the Temple, with a priest, or holy man, answering them through a hole in the wall which has a resounding effect throughout the Temple – something which may still be experienced today.

The thirty temples of the time, or their remains, are the main legacy of the age. Besides depicting an aspect of our forefathers' lives, these temples have also provided a mystery, as yet unsolved, regarding



"The Fat Lady" of Haġar Qim

how the local inhabitants managed to build such beautiful temples with such large slabs of stone. The use of flint tools enabled them to make designs in stone which may still be appreciated today, while the designs in red to be found on the ceilings of the Hypogeum, show that man had found a way to produce some sort of paint or dye. In spite of the fact that these people had become fine craftsmen, the building of the temples themselves is still unexplained. Were such edifices to be constructed today they would surely entail the use of cranes, but no such device existed then, as far as we know. Recently, Erich von Daniken has forwarded an interesting theory in attempting to solve the mystery. He asks whether Malta could have been the land of the legendary race of one-eyed giants, the Cyclops. Tradition has it that this race inhabited Sicily and the link between Malta and Sicily has already been established. Furthermore, J.D. Evans maintains that the pottery remains found in Malta of the time, compares favourably with those found in Stentinello, Sicily.

Although such a theory does not offer a concrete explanation, it does offer food for thought. Until the mystery is solved the stone temples of the Maltese Islands, among them Tal-Haġrat, Skorba, Haġar Qim, Imnajdra, Ġgantija and Hypogeum remain fine specimens of our forefathers' skill. However, the Hypogeum, discovered early this century, is signifi-

cant for the contrast it offers – rather than being built as the other temples were, it was dug out of hard rock to a depth of over 12 metres. It should be recalled that the tools available then were still simple, but with them they managed to dig out the first story, which later served as a cemetery, and later on two deeper stories. The fact that this is the place where consulting the oracle took place, and also that no soot appears on the ceilings have led to the belief that, at least parts of the Hypogeum, were used by priests for their religious functions.

Another unsolved mystery of the time are the cart ruts which are still visible nowadays. However, it is not precisely known why and how they were made. Apparently, the local population was for some time dwindling, and was later replaced by a generation who used iron; it could also be suggested that these people came from abroad and overcame the local inhabitants with their better weapons. Certainly, the newcomers introduced new ways of life. With their better tools, they could do better work be it in agriculture or building their own homes or even hunting. More elaborate work in pottery is also in evidence whether for cooking or ornamental reasons. Proof of this are the daggers with lovely designs, together with necklaces, rings and pendants.

Not surprisingly, religious customs also underwent changes. They built their own temples, such as Borg in-Nadur, and improved those already in existence. Burial customs changed and cremation was introduced. Under the new system, the ashes of the deceased were placed in a jar, and together with other personal belongings these were buried in dolmens, some of which can also be seen today.

This also brings about a new dimension in History, the fact that it is a living subject which can be dealt with concretely, not just in an abstract manner. Already, we have seen that although no great technological advances had been made, Man in Malta was able to produce changes in his way of life. This would undoubtedly continue to happen in the years to come.

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(to be continued)

FURTHER READING

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