



The people who built Mnajdra and Hagar Qim

by Dr. A.N. Welsh

There were people living round the Mediterranean for many tens of thousands of years before our time, but the first we know of for sure who lived in Malta are the Temple People. We know also for sure that they were living in Qrendi, because they left us the structures of Hagar Qim and Mnajdra, the Misqa Tanks and many other remains. We call them Temple people because we believe that Hagar Qim and Mnajdra and the twenty or so other such megalithic buildings in Malta and Gozo were temples, places of religious significance, and a major, if not the chief, factor in their culture.

It is usual to say that we know nothing about them; they appear in no ancient history and they left few other traces by which we could know who they were.

However, there are some things that we know or can deduce about them. Firstly, that they must have come from somewhere else; we know they farmed and to do so they must have brought in breeding stock of cattle, sheep, pigs, goats, seeds of wheat and barley, probably implements and probably dogs. Theoretically these things could have been imported, but a hunter-gatherer community, if indeed one existed, would not have known how to farm, or to send for or organise these items from afar.

So, our first farmers must have come from outside Malta they were already experienced farmers, and they also had the boats and navigational ability to bring fairly large amounts of stock and stores across the sea, through their port of embarkation, so to speak, would have been Sicily. They had the skills needed to make pottery and mudbricks, they could build stone walls also, and they presumably knew where Malta was. Pieces of obsidian from Pantelleria and Lipari have been found, and we know in any case that others had been sailing from one area to another in the Mediterranean for some time. In other words they must have come from a developed culture but they must have had a strong reason for making such an expedition to a small dry rocky island covered with scrubby trees.

What reason could they have had? Look at when they came, which is assumed to be about 5400BC from the first traces of crops. This was when the Mediterranean burst into the Black Sea caused by rising sea levels as the ice caps continued to melt and turned the Black Sea from a freshwater lake into a very much larger saline body of water. We know from underwater archaeology that large numbers of people were displaced people who had experienced the so-called Neolithic Revolution, who could grow crops and raise stock animals. They also knew mud brick construction, which appears in early traces of buildings in Malta. They

also knew the fat lady goddess of fertility, Sybil. Sea levels rose elsewhere in the area, including the Maltese islands, so much lower lying land would have been submerged.

This is not proof that the Temple people came from the East, but it might offer a clue as to why pressure for new land gave rise to what must have been a very risky and difficult, and also well organised migration. (Our first illegals!)

These first immigrants may have been able to read and write, but if so they soon became illiterate, as there is no evidence that the Temple people were otherwise. Even for clever and resourceful people as these first comers must have been, breaking and clearing virgin ground must have been a major operation, living rough at first and requiring much hard work over a number of years. Perhaps they were joined by others, maybe at once and maybe later. Inbreeding was always a problem in Neolithic times, and I will refer to this later.

The Stone Age day ran from dawn to dusk; there was minimal illumination from the hearth and from very rudimentary oil lamps. I have visited places where there is still no electricity and basically when it becomes dark one goes to bed. Singing and storytelling are possible, and of course lovemaking but research elsewhere suggests that Neolithic men slept in one side of the hut, and women and children in the other. Farming is physically demanding and one goes to sleep almost at once after coming back in to the home.

Early man lived in small groups, like say a shoal of fish or a flock of birds. The idea of marriage, one man to one woman, developed with the introduction of farming, where in due course particular fields became the property of one man, who would build his own house and have his own stock and his own family. Stone Age houses elsewhere were often well built, but usually lasted a generation at the most, when it was easier to build a new house than to keep repairing an old one. However the idea of communal action continued and one sees it to this day with farmers cooperating wherever it makes sense.

I visited the last firehouse, in the Orkney Islands, much later than the Stone Age, but giving perhaps some flavour of early living. This was a small rectangular one roomed building, with a stone slab roof. The floor was divided in half by a stone part wall, against which a peat fire smouldered. The smoke went out through a hole in the roof, but this was set back, so that if there was any rain it would fall on the half of the room which was reserved for the farm animals (and would assist in its drainage). The human end had small recesses in the wall, one for the bed, a stone shelf on which



the man and his wife slept, and underneath it lodged the children. Other recesses were for fuel for the fire, and for seed and dried fish, implements, and clothes. Later a small glassless window had been let in to the human end, and a small dairy added on the opposite side.

The first Neolithic fields were small rectangles, and were for keeping the animals, which would otherwise make off and get lost or stolen. Recovering animals which have escaped is time and energy wasted. The fields entered from one corner, so that when moving or handling stock the animals could be driven into the corner more easily. Later of course as more fields were cleared and walled crops were grown in them after the stock had manured and puddled the soil. If you want to clear a field easily, put some pigs on it; in a few months they will have cleared out every weed and left you with clean soil. Drove ways between the fields were necessary. We do not know whether any of the small fields and tracks in the parish date from Temple times, but I think it likely. One of the most permanent features in farming is field boundaries ! It appears that the first animal to be tamed was the dog from wolf stock. The dog was and still is invaluable in the management of sheep and cattle, as for many other reasons.

In principle farming is a simple series of operations, but in practice it requires a multiplicity of skills, abilities, knowledge and experience. The stone age man, whose life was generally short, would have been learning and teaching all his life, as would his women. However, his brain was similar to ours, and he would have had intellectual capacity and imagination which would rise above his daily tasks. He would need explanations for the cycle of conception and birth, growth, ageing and death, what happens after death, who controls the miracle of seedtime and harvest, who makes the sun and rain, the winds, the moon and the heavenly bodies. He would feel the need to communicate with these forces mastering the universe and to propitiate them to continue providing him with the means of subsistence.

Stone age man spent his life literally on the land, and natural features, like springs, strangely shaped stones and rocks, unusual happenings stirred his imagination and he would attribute supernatural qualities to anything he could not understand. It is difficult for us, who have an explanation for nearly everything, to enter the mindset of someone who does not know the reason for anything. Yet, being human he has to find a reason.

We visited the Scilly and the Orkney Islands where traces of Neolithic life have been less disturbed, and while the neolithics in the UK may have been different to those in Malta it may provide us with some clues. Definitely they had a belief in the land of the Dead as well as the Living. Their stone circles and circular banks and ditches were arranged around a house possibly the house where a particularly knowledgeable or important person had resided. The area enclosed was the land of the Dead. They were concerned with the cycle of death and life, as when the seeds of dead plants and crops are returned to the earth to be reborn as new plants. Winter, and night were the dead times, and the dead resided in these circular areas, and maybe could be invoked or communicated with. (or venerated, as is done in China and elsewhere to this day.)

Subsequently chambered tombs or structures were built over the site of the original house, with dark and mysterious interiors and sometimes staircases going down into the ground. We consider Heaven, the abode of our dead to be in the Sky, somewhere up above our earthly existence, but these people, and others in the ancient world thought that the abode of the dead was under the earth, and that the gods of fertility etc., were there with them. The dead were awakened at Solstice times when the sun's rays entered the tombs and lit up the inside. Our Maltese temples have similar arrangements where the sun's rays enter the chamber at Solstice times. Our temples do not have stone circles or separate earth banks round them we do not have enough earth, but the principle could have been the same.

We have to remember that most Neolithic men and women were young, children and teenagers, some lived into their forties or so, but in general they had a very much shorter lifespan than we enjoy. Often they were healthy and well-fed, but there were no medical facilities as we know them and no dentists or antibiotics. Accidents or disease, physical problems could lead to death. They had no books or records, no science, nothing to refer to except what the older members remembered or thought up. Basic knowledge of farming and building, managing a life they would absorb as they grew up, but simple to us problems, for example when to plant crops, required some sort of special message from the spirits, gods or ancestors just as who would be sending rain, wind, sunshine, disease, calamities and curses of any kind. In ignorance it is easy to rationalize by attribution to supernatural agency.

Neolithic man appears to have had the same physical characteristics and intelligence as we do now, although one pictures him as smaller, hairier and dirtier than modern man! We assume he could communicate by speech, but we do not know whether there was any universal language, or whether each group developed in words of their own, rather like children still do, and these would not necessarily be understood by other groups. Having said that there must have been some interface; the enormous communal effort required to build their monuments and temples required some group interface, as also the necessity for obtaining or exchanging women and stock to avoid interbreeding. It would seem that religious ceremonies and these occasions took place together, and must have been operated on some acknowledged cycle, like Festas are now. All this must have been organized, and it looks as if there were priests or other resident staff or headmen accommodated close to our temples.

The culture and technologies of the Temple people came to an abrupt end about 2500 BC, a date which seems to have signalled a break elsewhere in Europe and also Egypt. One assumes that some climatic event such as a prolonged drought, or a long lasting volcanic cloud, even in our case a tsunami, killed off most of the inhabitants. It used to be thought that all died, but recent excavations at Tas Silg suggest that some life continued down to the arrival of Bronze Age men from Sicily. Future DNA and other biological studies may show us more about the origins and characteristics of the Temple People, and, as has happened elsewhere, it may be shown that some of us may share their genes!

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