

THE MALTESE DOLMENS

Daniel Sciberras

Introduction

A dolmen can be defined as a massive, worked block of stone which has been made to lie suspended in space in the horizontal position. It constitutes an integral component of the megalithic buildings which had their hey-day in the New Stone Age, or Neolithic period (*Mega* = large, *Neo* = new, *lithic* = stone).

The term is a traditional French term formerly used to denote a megalithic chamber tomb, and consists of vertically inclined stones, called orthostats, supporting a capstone. It is probably derived from the Cornish term, *tolmên*, (*tol* = table, *mên* = stone), which is a chamber formed by a capstone supported on stones. In the Far East, a dolmen is a megalithic stone burial feature dating to the first millennium BC, and usually contained polished stone implements (Brown 1977: 6; Bahn 1992: 137). The term is no longer used in association with a megalithic chamber tomb, and is usually reserved for tombs of undetermined plan or of a simple unspecialized form (Bray & Trump 1982: 78).

The dolmen is always supported on other large stones. In large structures, such as the Maltese temples and Stonehenge, the supporting stones are also worked and are as massive as the dolmen. These upright slabs are called menhirs (*men* = stone, *hir* = long) (Brown 1977: 6). When the stones supporting the dolmen are comparatively small, the entire structure itself is also known as a dolmen.

Function

The uniqueness of the Maltese dolmens lies in the fact that, whereas these structures are associated elsewhere with burial sites of the Bronze Age, no such burials have ever been found associated with the Maltese specimens. They cannot therefore be assigned as Bronze Age burial sites when their function appears to have been different from that overseas.

They cannot be dated from the pottery, since this has been disturbed. Zammit reported that "*no pottery, implements or similar objects have ever been found near the menhirs or dolmens in these islands. Being usually raised on the bare rock, everything around them must have been cleared centuries ago*" (Zammit 1930: 7).

The Maltese temples are also unique in that they represent the earliest freestanding megalithic structures above the ground. Megalithic structures outside Malta and Gozo are, with a few exceptions like Stonehenge, associated with burial complexes. In Malta and Gozo these megalithic temples cannot be similarly associated, especially in the sites of Tarxien, in Malta, and Xaghra in Gozo. The Tarxien temples lie in close proximity to the Hal Saflieni burial complex in the Hypogeum area, and the Ggantija temples are practically surrounded by underground burial structures such as the Brochtorff Circle. The Hypogeum and the Brochtorff Circle are similar to the structures above ground in that they are megalithic in structure. The Hypogeum is unique since it has been carved in the living rock over a very long span of time, and it was also decorated in red ochre.

Therefore, in Malta and Gozo, the megalithic complexes above and below ground are unique, and, besides the menhirs, the dolmens are crucial elements in their structure. In the Maltese islands, the function of the dolmen complex without supporting menhirs remains unknown. The smaller supporting stones enclose a space or chamber, such as can be seen in Plate 1. When they were first discovered in Malta as a group, by Professor Napoleon Tagliaferro, they were thought to possibly represent either altars for public sacrifices or monuments erected over graves. The practice of erecting large complexes of stones over, or around grave areas, is classically seen in the pyramids of Egypt, although in these instances the final product is completely different in appearance.

Large slabs of stone have been utilized universally to mark the site of a buried body. The Phoenicians and Punic people dedicated their prayers on these slabs which are known as stelae. To this day burials are covered over by large slabs of stone such as marble. Large military cemeteries contain smaller slabs of stone bearing the name of the deceased.

The space inside a dolmen is too small to contain a straight corpse, although it may accommodate it if it is flexed in the so-called foetal position. On the other hand, if the body is cremated before burial, one dolmen can accommodate several urns. However no evidence of this sort has been found in the Maltese dolmens, and there is therefore no proof that they served the function of ritual burial.

Historical records

The earliest reference to a dolmen-like structure in the Maltese islands is the one described by Abela and Ciantar at Xewkija. *"in that part of the island called el Sceukia, near a church dedicated to St. John ... one can see a huge enormous stone whose sides exceed 15 feet, which rests on four other stones – high enough from the ground to allow a man to stand under them"* (Abela & Ciantar 1772-80: 341). This was interpreted as a residence for giants, and used as evidence for their presence on the islands in prehistoric times.

In the late eighteenth century, Leith Adams described a dolmen-like structure on Corradino Hill, overlooking the Grand Harbour. Dolmens in Malta and Gozo typically overlook panoramic views. *"Overlooking the Grand Harbour of Valletta there are remnants of small chambers, mostly formed of erect blocks not exceeding 3 to 3½ feet in height. These being remarkably small as compared with any of the above-mentioned blocks [Ggantija and Hagar Qim], may represent what has been named an uncovered dolmen; they however contain no subterranean sepulchre, and are not surrounded by circles of stones, or any vestige of the kind."* (Leith Adams 1870: 248). Once again, the absence of any sign of the function of ritual burial argues against a sepulchral function of these

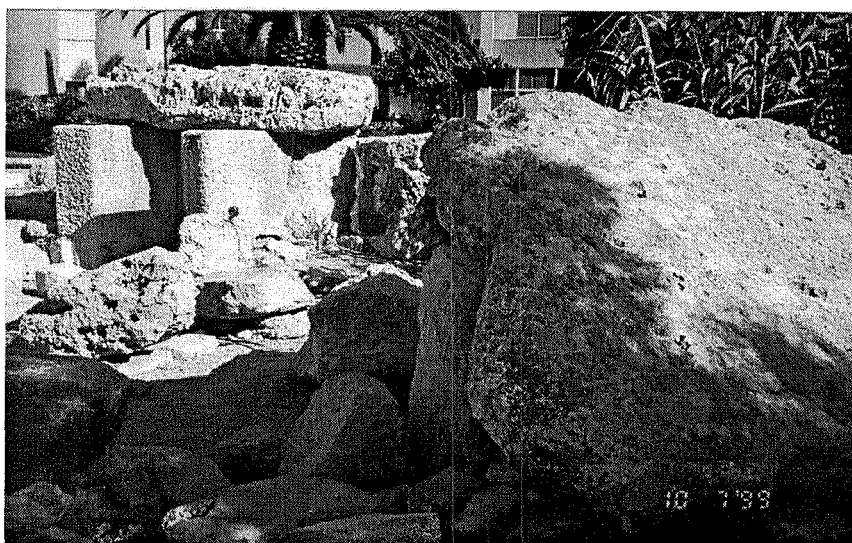
structures. The close association of dolmenic assemblages with typical megalithic temple layouts, such as at Bugibba, would rather date the former to the Neolithic, and not the Bronze Age.

The first group of dolmens to be discovered in the Maltese Islands was in the field of "Ix-Xaghra ta' fuq wied Filep," between the village of Mosta and Fort Mosta. Three dolmens lay close to one another, and the best preserved consisted of a hard coralline slab of stone measuring twelve feet in length, five feet in breadth and two feet in thickness. It was supported by roughly hewn slabs of stones and stood five feet above ground.

Shortly afterwards, Tagliaferro discovered another large dolmen in the district of Misrah Sinjura, between the villages of Qrendi and Siggiewi. The dolmen here measured thirteen by eleven feet, and was two and a half feet thick on average. It lay four feet above ground. The dolmen had been adapted to another use through the erection of a rubble wall. Zammit reported that no archaeological material was discovered at either of these dolmenic sites discovered by Tagliaferro.

Several other dolmens have since been discovered in Malta and Gozo. In 1914, another dolmen was discovered at Hal Far, where the *"rocky ground is strewn with the remains of megalithic structures"*, which again associates it with the Neolithic period. This dolmen, known as "Il-Gebra Msaqqfa" was composed of hard calcareous stone and was rectangular in shape. It measured twelve by six feet, and was two feet thick. Although similar to the previous examples, this dolmen had a quadrangular depression in its middle, and this was surrounded by a deep groove on the side and several cup-like holes. From the shape of the underlying rock, it appears that the dolmen was cut off from the very same spot which it covered, and was then raised to a height of two and a half feet by two courses of boulders.

In 1915, a dolmen discovered at Zabbar contained a circular central hole about three inches in diameter. These features in the centre of the dolmen may suggest a function other than a ritual burial, but as



Close proximity of dolmen to the Neolithic temple at Bugibba

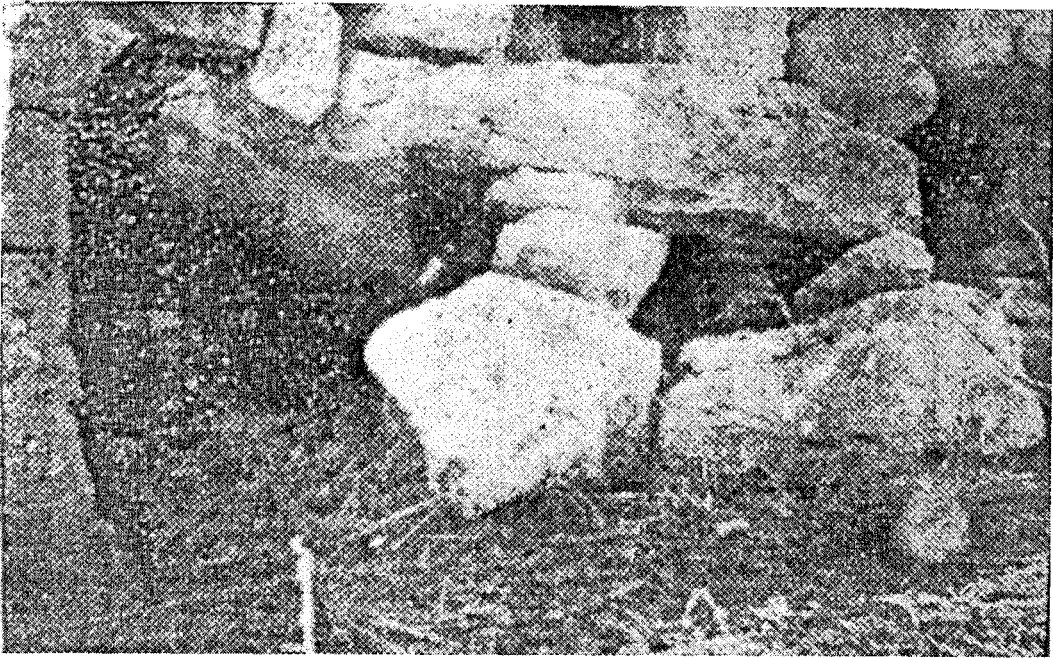


Rounded capstone on smaller stones, Bugibba temple

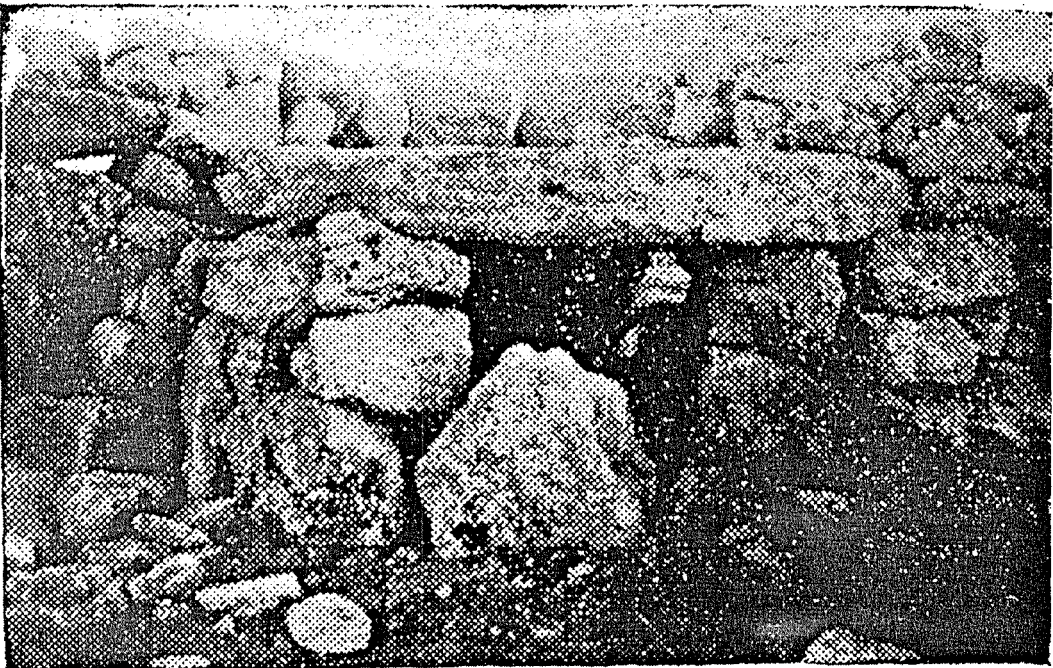


The pair of dolmens at Sta Margherita, Mosta

Plate 1: Dolmens – large capstones resting on smaller stones



Ta' Gherwa dolmen, south of Gudja. Capstone 7 feet by 6 feet



Safi dolmen, associated with Neolithic sherds, and close to Id-Dawwar Neolithic temple

Plate 2: Two of the dolmens discovered by the Rev. J. Farrugia in 1946 and 1947

yet no satisfactory explanation has been put forward.

Other sites where dolmens were brought to light include those at San Giorgio in Birzebbuga, and Ta' Cenc in Gozo, where they clearly manifest their prominent positions along the highest edges of the plateau. At Gnien Imrik in Xaghra, Gozo, the massive stone slab measured twenty feet by sixteen, with a thickness varying between two and four feet. It is readily apparent from the size and weight of these dolmens that their erection required a tremendous amount of concerted effort on the part of the Maltese builders, who must have developed and utilized some form of engineering system to permit their erection. The most popular hypothesis suggests the filling in with earth around the supporting stones and the lifting of the dolmen on top of them through the action of levers in the form of tree stumps.

Another dolmen near Hal-Farrug consists of a small dolmenic niche, where *"two large slabs cover an elongated space cut in the rock, the entrance being narrowed by means of stone blocks placed on each side. The niche is dug to such a depth that several steps had to be cut in the rock in order to make it accessible."* Although this arrangement may suggest a burial site, this is very unlikely in view of the several features of past human activity which are associated with it. These include *"hemispherical pits, artificial caves, deep trenches and cup-like depressions,"* which are not typical of burial areas (Zammit 1926: 39-42).

A spate of discoveries occurred just after World War II. A priest by the name of John Farrugia reported on a number of dolmenic structures which he was unearthing in various parts of the Maltese Islands. The one discovered at Safi lay close to the Id-Dawwar temple, and further evidence pointing against a Bronze Age dating for the Maltese dolmens is drawn from the fact that several pottery sherds of the Maltese Neolithic type were found in the proximity of the dolmen here. Another dolmen at Ta' Gherwa in Gudja was re-utilized as a hut by the local farmer and thus escaped both destruction and detection (Times of Malta 15th Dec. 1946; 12th Jan. 1947).

John Evans

In 1953 and 1955, the British archaeologist John Evans investigated two atypical dolmens at Wied Moqbol, and on the rather flimsy evidence of some superficial sherds at one site at Ta' Hammut, he attributed all the dolmens of Malta to the Bronze Age. The conclusion reached by Evans is not justified. Although the sherds at Ta' Hammut dolmen were Bronze Age, those at Id-Dawwar dolmen were Neolithic, whilst those at Borg in-Nadur dolmen were Punic and Borg in-Nadur—the sherds cannot date the dolmens. There have never been any human remains or cinerary urns anywhere near the Maltese dolmenic structures, and a sepulchral function cannot therefore be demonstrated. The proximity of some of these dolmens to Neolithic temples—Borg in-Nadur (M.A.R. 1914-15), Id-Dawwar (MAR 1954-5), and particularly Bugibba cannot be overlooked as insignificant. At Bugibba the massive dolmenic capstone lies inside the Neolithic temple itself, and it is depicted as such by Evans (1971: plan 23), though he does not include it in his chapter on "Dolmens, Cairns and Menhirs" (Evans 1971: 193-9).

Furthermore, still in relation to funerary practices in Malta, Evans' associations of the Tarxien spirals with those of the grave shafts of Mycenae in Greece were reversed in time by fifteen centuries. Tarxien temples are neither sepulchral in function, nor Bronze Age in dating.

At any rate, however, Evans' prehistoric chronology has been shown to be faulty, and has since been superseded by that of David Trump. The latter also uncovered faulty excavation methods employed by Evans for sampling the BM-100 radiocarbon specimen. On the other hand, calibrated radiocarbon dating in 1971 has proved that Themistocles Zammit had been right after all, and that was forty years before the process was available. Evans disregarded these radiocarbon dates (Renfrew 1976: 166).

Analogies

The Maltese dolmens have been likened to similar structures in the south of Italy, in Lecce and the Otranto region; at these

sites there is no evidence for an independent evolution or for a spread from the west (Trump 1981: 139). Strangely enough, no similar assemblies have yet been discovered in Sicily, where one would certainly expect to find such links with the Maltese Islands.

Dolmens are absent in Sicily but present in North Africa. Here, as in Malta, the monument is of modest dimensions, and comprises a monolithic roofing slab supported by monoliths or dry stone walls; a mound does not cover it. According to Camps (1962), they cannot be dissociated from the other dolmens built in the Mediterranean area (Joussaume 1985: 225).

One large Mediterranean island which produced chamber structures made of moderately-sized stones is Sardinia. These *nuraghi*, however, do not possess the large stone slab at the top, and the entire structure is made up of smaller stones. They are found only in Sardinia. Like these Sardinian *nuraghi* and Maltese megalithic temples, the dolmens of the Maltese islands seem to represent "insular specializations." They must have been created spontaneously by the local prehistoric inhabitants. Further research may throw further light upon their function.

Conclusion

The function of the Maltese dolmens remains unidentified and they remain undated. There is insufficient evidence to date them comfortably to the Bronze Age, and to attribute a funerary function to them. A few, such as that at Bugibba and Id-Dawwar, manifest a clear association with the Temple period, and at the latter site Neolithic sherds were discovered rather than Bronze Age ones.

Several of these dolmens must have been lost, through re-utilization of the stone or the land for farming purposes. A few of these may turn up in the future, and

these might provide further clues to solve the problem of their true function and dating.

References

- Abela, G.F. and Ciantar, G.A. 1772-80. *Malta Illustrata*. Malta.
- Bahn, P. (ed.) 1992. *Collins Dictionary of Archaeology*. Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Bray, W. and Trump, D. H. 1982. *Dictionary of Archaeology*. Penguin.
- Brown, P.L. 1977. *Megaliths, Myths and Men: An Introduction to Astro-Archaeology*. Dorset: Book Club Associates.
- Camps, C. 1962. *Aux origines de la Berberie: monuments et rites funeraires protohistoriques*. Paris: Delegation Generale en Algerie.
- Evans, J.D. 1959. *Malta*. London: Thames and Hudson. Ancient Peoples and Places.
- Evans, J.D. 1971. *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Joussaume, R. 1985. *Dolmens for the Dead*. (translation by Anne & Christopher Chippindale of *Les dolmens pour les morts*). London: B.T. Batsford Ltd.
- Leith Adams, A. 1870. *Natural History and Archaeology of the Nile Valley and Maltese Islands*. Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas.
- Renfrew, C. 1976. *Before Civilization: the Radiocarbon Revolution and Prehistoric Europe*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Savona-Ventura, C. and Mifsud, A. 1999. *Prehistoric Medicine in Malta*. Malta.
- Trump, D. 1972, 1990, 1993. *Malta, An Archaeological Guide*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Trump, D.H. 1980. *The Prehistory of the Mediterranean*. London: Allen Lane.
- Trump, D.H. 1981. Megalithic Architecture in Malta. In Evans, J.D., Cuncliffe, B. and Renfrew, C. (eds.) *Antiquity and Man*, pp128-140. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Zammit, T. 1926. *Malta, the Islands and their History*. Malta: The Malta Herald.
- Zammit, T. 1930. The Prehistoric Remains of the Maltese Islands. Reprint from *Antiquity* March 1930. London.