

MEDICAL MYTHOLOGY IN STONE AGE MALTA

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Mythology or religious belief attempts to give an explanation of life-event uncertainties such as failing crops, life and death. These problems are difficult to explain to the primitive non-scientific mind. Mythology often implies a belief in supernatural forces or beings who are both different and superior to living men, in that they directly or indirectly exercise a benign or harmful influence. It is the function of ritual practices or ceremonies to encourage the former influence, and prevent or neutralise the latter. Supernatural beings, the objects of these beliefs, can be divided into two categories. On the one hand there are the dead ancestors or *manes* who have been known to their contemporaries while alive; while on the other hand, there are the divinities who never existed as ordinary mortals.

The study of prehistoric mythology is frequently cited as a neglected, even dangerous area of archaeological study. Cognitive archaeology - the study of past ways of thought from material remains - is in many respects one of the newer branches of modern archaeology. The religions and myths of many prehistoric societies can only be gleaned through the interpretation of either physical traces of what appears to be vestiges of ritual practice or else pictorial representations of such practices from which can be inferred, with the aid of ethnological parallels, a belief in the existence of the supernatural beings to whom they were addressed. One cannot, therefore, insist too strongly on the hypothetical character of conclusions based on such material (Renfrew & Bahn 1994: 339-370).

Man is equipped with instincts that drive him to commit actions tending to preserve the individual, to propagate his kind, and to omit actions inimical to such a purpose. We may readily assume that man's instincts were the purer the less developed his civilisation was, i.e. the less his actions were the result of reflexes conditioned by a more complicated social

environment. The main concern of prehistoric man and primitive human societies was that of survival, and thus the procurement of an adequate daily diet was vital to his needs. Major life events notably that of the delivery of a newborn baby in the community, the occurrence of disease, and the death of an individual were also important landmarks. It is not surprising that these four events - fertility, food procurement, illness, and death - were associated with magico-religious practices in many prehistoric and in primitive societies.

To primitive man, medicine, magic and religion were a set of practices intended to protect him against evil forces and spirits that inhabited his environment. The supernatural forces included the various deities and the ghosts of the dead which hovered over the village. In order to live safely, primitive man was required to be continuously on his guard to appease these supernatural forces. A serious illness was interpreted as being the result of an evil act performed either by a higher power, spirit, ghost or deity, in which case there was a religious explanation, or by a living person through sorcery, in which case there was a magical explanation. Sickness was induced either by the magical introduction of something foreign to the body (a "magic shot") or by the magical removal of a vital part or the soul. The magic shot generally explained acute painful illness that befell the patient suddenly, while the loss of the soul was often held responsible for chronic disease where the patient withered away slowly. The management of magico-religious disease states was based on efforts at prevention by undertaking continuing efforts at appeasing and warding off the deities, spirits, or ghosts of the dead; and in the presence of illness by the use of magical rites through the intervention of a medicine-man or shaman (Porter 1996: 83-117).

Hunting Magic - food procurement

Prehistoric man's preoccupation with

fertility and death in Europe dates to the Palaeolithic period, the former being linked to the procurement of food through the development of "hunting magic". Man of the Old Stone Age in Europe was a hunter who lived in caves on the walls of which he painted the animals that were the object of his hunting. These wild animal depictions, sometimes shown as injured, were aimed as a portrayal of a wished-for event, and were intended to bring about the event itself. In addition a number of anthropozoomorphic (*anthropo* = human, *zoo* = animal, *morpho* = form) figures were depicted in this cave art. These have been interpreted as depicting magicians in disguise practising forms of hunting magic. Similar designs have been described by Prof. E. Anati of the Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici at Ghar Hasan (Malta) in 1989. The anthropozoomorphic design at Ghar Hasan appears to have a vague human form with close similarities to the group of three figures showing personages with chamois heads depicted in the Mège Shelter at Teyjat in Dordogne. Similar depictions have also been described from the cavern at Trois-Freres in the Ariège department of southern France. These have been interpreted as being hunting divinities or more probably depicting shamans associated with hunting magic. Whether any of the figures mentioned above actually represent a hybrid deity or not, it is easy to see how the use of magic disguise contributed to the belief in such deities. The power of the shaman was attributed to his disguise. It played the role of establishing a mystic communion, a fusion of essence between him and the animals on which he proposed to act.

Magic power and the shaman's appearance were naturally associated. His aspect, simultaneously animal and human, naturally led to the conception of gods under the same hybrid form. The god possessed similar powers and the shaman, at least in the exercise of his functions, was in some way the god's incarnation. In any case, whether the anthropozoomorphic figure at Ghar Hasan represented a divinity or shaman, the drawing, together with the animal drawings, strongly suggest that in Malta there is evidence of the existence of religious beliefs tied with a hunting

magic. Whether these rituals entailed magic, an equivalent of the witchdoctor practice, or whether they were merely ceremonial, occurring prior to activities such as hunting of wild beasts, is a matter of conjecture. The desired effect was not being attempted by physical means directly, but through the intervention of the invisible, the supernatural (Anati 1990, 1995; Luquet 1981).

Since hunting of necessity required the existence of game it was natural that Palaeolithic man, in order that game should be plentiful, also practised fertility magic. In this case, sympathetic magic could not, as with hunting magic, consist of performing in animal images the operations which would produce the desired result on the animals themselves. Fertility could only be caused artificially in effigy. The fertility cult of Palaeolithic man was represented by several obese female figurines interpreted as symbolic forms of the Mother Earth deity and by animal couple scenes. Palaeolithic man in Europe was also particularly concerned with the burial of his dead; these were buried in the sleeping position, painted with red ochre and decorated with necklaces or crowns of shells, with various implements placed beside them (Luquet 1981: 3-8; Phillips 1980: 141-146). These Old Stone Age practices exemplify man's earliest preoccupation with the supernatural in his struggle for survival, concentrating on a fertility deity and hunting magic practices to ensure the availability of food, and the development of a death cult to ensure appeasement of the dead ancestors.

Fertility Magic - food procurement

The fertility and dead cults became markedly developed during the Neolithic period after the advent of farming and husbandry. Man the Farmer was very much concerned with survival and very conscious of the cyclical process of reproduction of his crops and stock, and of his own species. He understood that his survival depended on the fertility deity who regularly supplied him with his dietary requirements. This deity had to be constantly appeased to ensure its benevolence. The earliest accepted date for the presence of Neolithic Man in the

Maltese Islands has been set by calibrated radiocarbon dating at c. 7000 years ago, which fits the time scale of the spread of early farming in Europe. Stone Age man in Malta thus appeared to have developed, at c. 4400-4100 BC, a fertility cult in an effort to promote and encourage the reproductive cycle. What survive of this initial cult are the figurative representations around which these rites took place. These include the small fragmentary statuettes, which appear to emphasise the female sexual characteristics, and rubbed down animal bones which have been interpreted as phallic symbols (Trump, 1966: 33). By the fifth millennium BC, the agricultural population was gradually set on a path of very independent cultural development - the Temple Period c. 4100-2500 BC - which included active preventive efforts at appeasing the fertility deities and the ghosts of the dead. These two Maltese stone-age cults were represented principally by the megaliths and hypogea, and by the vestiges of items possibly used during the ritual practices.

The megalithic buildings have been associated with a progressive Fertility Cult on the basis of the clay statuettes and symbols associated with fertility. Images of obese human deities, said to represent the Mother Earth deity, and similar to those excavated from Malta, have been described from the Upper Palaeolithic era (about 25,000 years ago) to the dawn of metal-using European societies in the Neolithic era. A few have been found in western Europe, but the yields have been much richer at sites in Egypt, the Levant, Turkey, Greece, Cyprus and the Balkans (Veen 1992). Animal bas reliefs in the various temples, particularly the bull associated with the cow and her thirteen young sucklings at Tarxien Temples, are strongly suggestive of fertility magic. The Tarxien Temple bas relief bovid couple are similar in style to Palaeolithic ones described from Le Fourneau du Diable and Levanzo (Mifsud & Mifsud 1997: 144-145).

The ritual practices in these "temples" apparently included the ritual sacrifice of domesticated animals and collected foodstuffs such as fish and sea-shells. This is evidenced by the finds at the Tarxien

Temples, wherein a sacrificial altar with a curved flint knife in its interior was described. At the same temple complex several animal depictions showing the ibex, moufflon, pig, bull and cow were described, while several sea-shells were also found. Fish depictions were recorded from the Bugibba Temple (Evans 1971: 116-149, 109-112). Presumably the ritual sacrifice would also have included agricultural products, thus encompassing all the "gifts" of the Mother Earth deity. There is no archaeological evidence that human sacrifice was practised during Maltese prehistory¹.

Fertility appeared to have been the centre of Late Neolithic man's culture in Malta. The apparent strong development of this cult in the later Temple Period has been interpreted as an increased effort at appeasing the Fertility deity, at a time of food shortage caused by agricultural stresses, and occurring during this time (Stoddart *et al.* 1993: 3-19). Fertility was also the basis of prehistoric man's economy. The population of the Maltese Islands has been variously estimated to be in the region of about 700-2000 persons in each of six territories. The figure is based on the number of persons that can be supported per square kilometre of arable land by shifting agriculture in the presence of the prevailing local conditions, and the distribution of the megalithic structures on the islands (Renfrew 1973: 166-174). In a society in which the family had to be supported by the labour and produce of its members, the birth of a child must have been an important and special event in the lives of the family group and the community. This was a special gift to the community from the Mother Earth deity.

Three small clay statuettes, from Mnajdra Temple, Tarxien Temple and the Hal Saflieni Hypogea, represent a female body with a great projecting abdomen, large breasts and very detailed representation of the vertebrae and ribs. In the specimens from Mnajdra and

¹ The suggestion that human sacrifice was practised in prehistoric Malta stems from the fictional poem by G. Pisani entitled "Il-Ggantija ta' Ghawdex". Vide Gulia OJ (1951) *Mill-Gnejna Maltija. Gabra ta' Poeziji*. Malta: Progress Press, pp.38-40.

Tarxien the genitalia are well illustrated. Posteriorly the figures are represented as wasted, and the iliac regions represented as hollow. The back in the Tarxien specimen has a kyphotic curve. The latter also has a number of fragments of shell stuck symmetrically into different parts. It has been suggested that these two specimens may represent an abdominal tumour, ascites or filariasis, while the shell fragments may reflect the use of witchcraft or counter-irritation. In the presence of a fertility cult, the grossly enlarged abdomen, the pendulous breasts and the emphasized genital features of these figurines most likely depict a pregnancy state, and may be examples of sympathetic magic related to fertility (Ashby 1910: 59; Zammit & Singer 1924: 92, 96).

Protection from the Spirits of the Dead

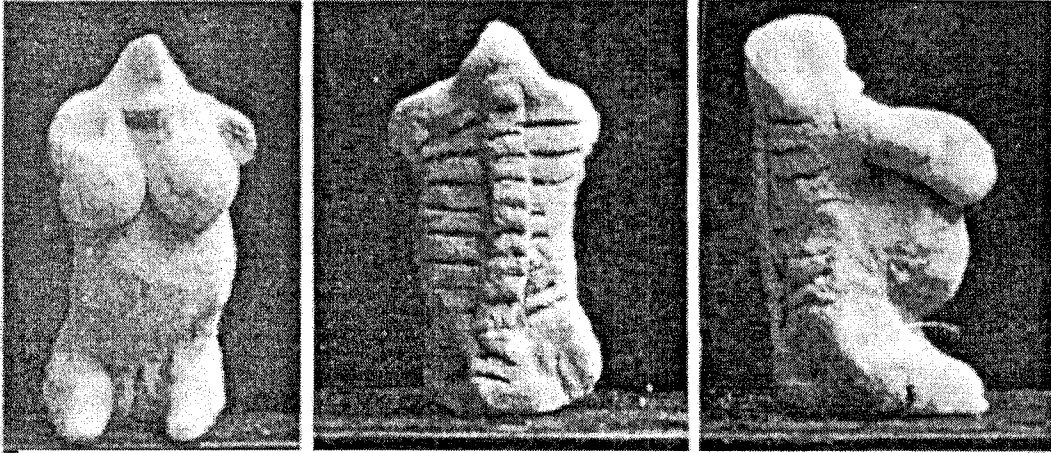
The dead, too, were considered to be supernatural powers, and Stone Age Man in Malta also took extreme efforts to appease the ghosts of the dead ancestors. It has been suggested that the development of the death cult in the Temple Period was related to the fertility cult and that the fertility deity had an interest in death as well as fertility, death being looked upon as a prelude to rebirth. The inclusion of grave goods during burial is sometimes assumed to indicate a belief in an afterlife, but this need not follow. In some societies, the deceased's possessions are so firmly associated with him or her that for another to own them would bring ill luck, and there is therefore a need to dispose of them with the dead, rather than for the future use of the dead. Because of the custom of reburial of skeletal remains (*scarnitura*), it is to be expected that prehistoric man during the Temple Period in Malta was well aware of the destructibility of the human form (Malone *et al.* 1993; Renfrew & Bahn 1994: 363). The ritual attention, including the positioning in the foetal sleeping position and the red ochre wash, given to the dead at the primary burial probably served a different purpose than simply a belief in a physical rebirth. Rebirth was thus more probably looked upon as the birth of the soul in the afterlife. The aim of the death cult ritual was more probably

aimed at appeasing the dead ancestors and preventing their ghosts from causing harm to the community, particularly until the soul transgressed to the afterlife.

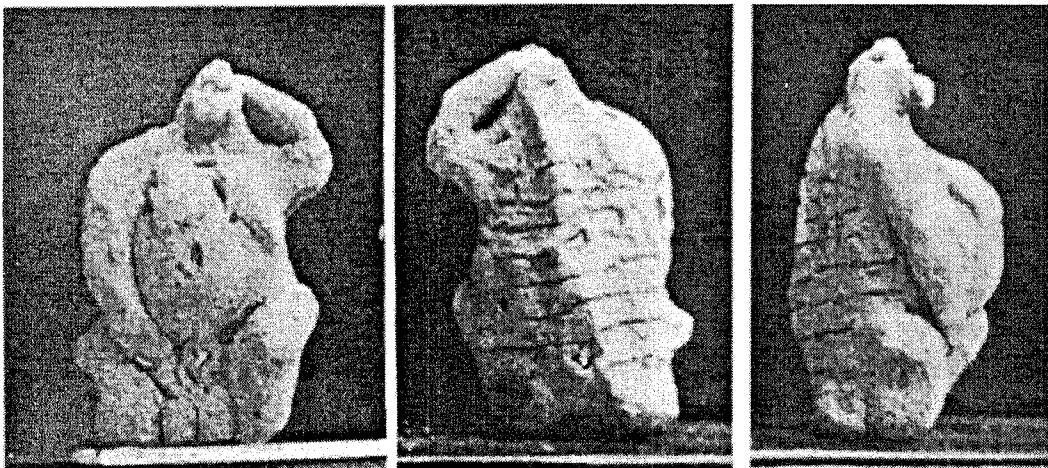
The burial customs of the Early Neolithic farmers are still not established, though skeletal material possibly belonging to Early Neolithic man has been excavated from various sites in Malta and Gozo. This material however was frequently fragmented, and afforded little information. Excavations in 1911 at Santa Verna in Gozo, dated by pottery associations to c. 5000-4500 BC, revealed two whole skeletons interred with a heap of human bones; these belonged to at least three persons buried in earth stained with red ochre. The adult skeleton was buried straight on the back with folded arms. It has therefore been suggested that these burials were from a later period than indicated by the shards since all previously discovered Neolithic burials were found in the flexed position (Zammit 1912: E1-E2; Evans 1971: 188). The burial customs of Late Neolithic man of the Temple Period apparently progressed in line with the development of the above ground megalithic structures. A recent hypothesis proposes a three-stage development for the burial practices of Late Neolithic man in Malta (Pace, 1997). This hypothesis has recently been refuted by Savona Ventura and Mifsud (1999: 37).

Hypogea are represented by the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, attributed to c. 3300-3000 BC in Malta; and by the Brochtorff Circle in Gozo, c. 4100-2500 BC. Important prehistoric cave-tombs in Malta include Gzibbu Tombs at Zebbug, c. 4100-3800 BC, Xemxija Tombs at St. Paul's Bay, c. 3800-3600 BC, and BurMghez Tombs at Mqabba, c. 3600-3300/3000 BC. Apart from the Brochtorff Circle, the dating of these burial sites has been based mainly on the associated pottery.

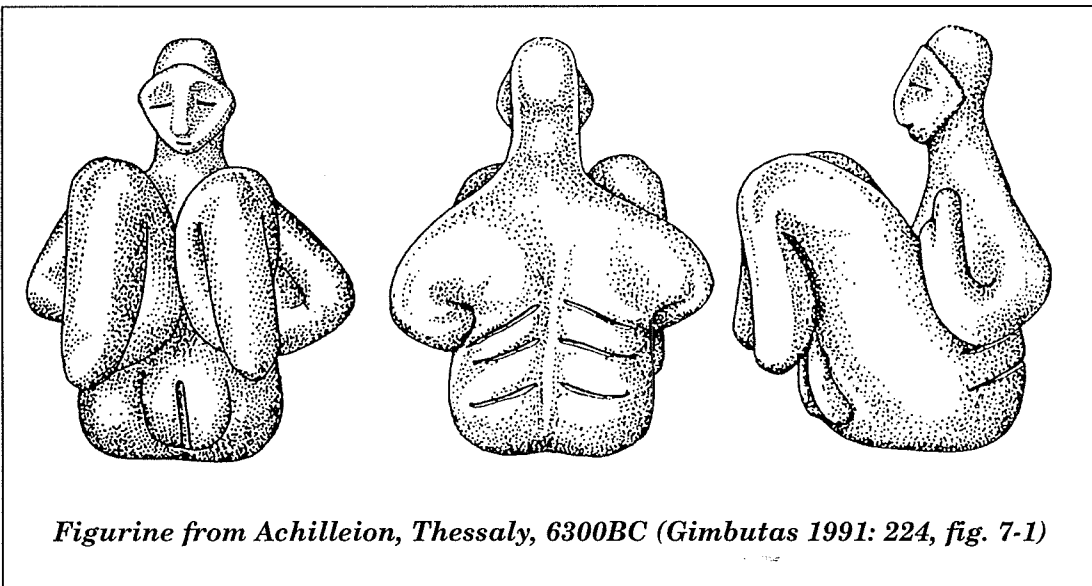
Man during the Temple Period in Malta buried his dead in the foetal or sleeping posture, interpreted as the desire to give the diseased an ideal resting position or as a preparation for a rebirth. The death-bed was often covered with ochre, probably regarded as a replacement of blood for life hereafter. Red ochre staining



Figurine from Mnajdra, Malta (Zammit & Singer 1924: plate xi)

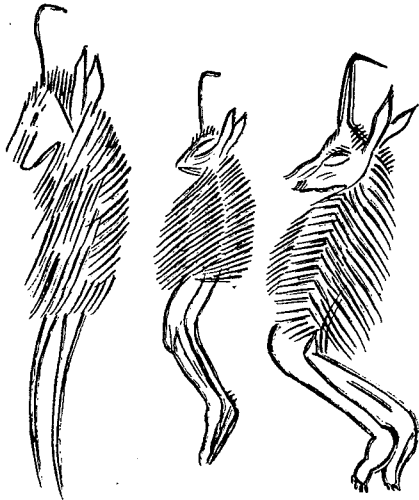


Figurine from Tarxien, Malta (Zammit & Singer 1924: plate xv)

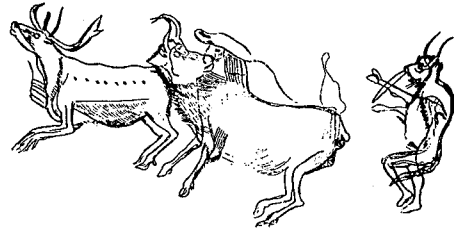


Figurine from Achilleion, Thessaly, 6300BC (Gimbutas 1991: 224, fig. 7-1)

*Pregnancy in Mediterranean Neolithic
(The lines on the back probably indicate months of pregnancy)*



Mège Shelter, Dordogne



Les Trois Frères, Ariège

HUNTING MAGIC



Ghar Hasan, Malta



Les Trois Frères, Ariège



Medicine man, South Rhodesia (Wellcome Museum)

SHAMANISM

was noted at various Temple Period burial sites including the Buqana Rock Tomb, Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, Xaghra, Brochtorff Circle, and other sites. The primary burial rites evidently included the interment of gifts with the dead. These grave goods included pottery, stone axes, and shell, bone or stone bead pendants and necklaces. Sea-shells, such as those found at Zebbug, Xemxija and Pergla Tombs, have also been associated with life after death being symbolic of the vulva through which life was born. The burial sites were regularly visited and bones from earlier burials were progressively removed and stacked to allow space for later burials (Sigerist 1967: 106; Evans 1971: 115, 167, 186; Malone *et al.* 1993: 76-83).

The burial customs of Maltese Late Neolithic man were similar to those described elsewhere in Europe, in inhumations dating as far back as the Palaeolithic period, with the placing of the dead in the foetal or sleeping position, and with the inclusion of grave goods, and the liberal covering of the dead with red ochre. The burial ritual may thus have served to mimic a comfortable rest. To most primitive people, the world of the dead is a very real one. The spirits of the ancestors are never far away and take an active part in life, bringing good and bad luck. At the point of death, when the soul leaves the body, the soul is not yet reconciled to its fate and may wish to come back to life by entering into some other body thus causing illness. Particularly feared were the ghosts of people who died without having fulfilled their mission on earth - young children, brides, women in childbirth, etc. These, more than any other dead persons, would be eager to return to life or, feeling lonely, they may kill a close relative for company in the world of the spirits. Corpses were the object of practices which give evidence of deference, and were buried with funerary intention. In many cases objects were placed with the bodies, constituting funerary furnishings, while red ochre was sprinkled over the corpse in an attempt to strengthen and help the dead during the journey into the after-world (Sigerist 1967: 136-137).

Protection from Malevolent Spirits

Prehistoric man, like primitive man, believed that internal disease and death were brought on by malevolent spirits or by enemies. He thus took precautions to ward off disease and evil spirits through the use of amulets. Amulets are objects that possess magical properties, and whose action is directed towards warding off evil or catching and neutralizing evil magic. There is an infinite variety of amulets, some of which can be distinguished into various groups. One group consists of objects having the faculty of inflicting wounds such as sharp and cutting objects, animal teeth and claws. A second group of amulets is represented by reproductions of the male and female genital organs and sea-shells whose life-bearing properties give protection. Other objects used as amulets include reproductions of the hand, foot, leg, heart, animals' eyes, and snake. Precious stones are also considered powerful amulets, their glittering attracting the evil eye, holding it and neutralizing it (Read 1995: 256-274; Sigerist 1967: 144-146).

The use of amulets in Malta has apparently been in vogue since prehistoric times. A number of carved objects and statuettes excavated from Neolithic sites can be interpreted as having a protective function from evil magic. These included a number of personal ornaments incorporating sea-shells and fossilized shells, axe and tooth amulets, phallic symbols, and "Venus" figurines. The use of amulets to ward off evil continued to be used in later times with the advent of the Punic Semitic culture and persisted to until relatively recent times (Cassar 1964: 421-436).

Witch-Doctor practices

When the protective measures fail and a breakdown in prehistoric man's vigilance to ward off evil occurs, then "internal" disease resulted. The treatment measures applied depended on the conceived cause and nature of the disease. Thus if the cause was diagnosed to be religious, such as when a taboo was broken or actions which may incur the wrath of the spirits had been performed, then the ghost or deity needed to be appeased. If, on the

other hand, the evil were the result of sorcery, then stronger magical powers would be required to overcome the illness. The medical practices of primitive man were thus closely intertwined with magico-religious rites, and they required the intervention of the medicine-man or shaman. The medicine-man in primitive societies was concerned not only with the people's health, but also with their entire welfare. It was his function to avert any evil which may threaten the individual or tribe in any form, to propitiate the spirits for the benefit of his people, and also to destroy the enemy. He was therefore priest, sorcerer and physician in one (Read 1995: 256-274; Sigerist 1967: 161-180).

There are strong indications that Late Neolithic man in Malta practised *shamanism*, whereby priests or shamans had powers which could influence evil spirits, which were the harbingers of disease and death. The administration of all healing procedures involves both visible (or audible) and invisible elements. Evidence of shamanism during the Temple Period was found at Brochtorff Circle in Gozo. Among the stone sculptured finds from the site was a cache of nine carved stone idols, associated with a miniature Tarxien Phase pot filled with ochre. The objects must originally have been wrapped tightly in a bag or box since they were all lying one above the other. Eight of the objects represent human figures, while the remaining idol has a pig's head. The context of the discovery suggests that these objects were the paraphernalia employed by shamans, probably in conjunction with the death cult (Malone *et al.* 1993: 82). The association of shamans or priests with the fertility cult can be evidenced by the definite sacrificial rituals which were carried out in the megalithic temples, while some of the portrait model statuettes excavated from various temple sites have been interpreted as representing the temple officials (Zammit & Singer 1924). There can be no doubt that shamans were involved in the magical rituals associated with the fertility and death cults.

Further evidence of the possible use of witchcraft or counter-irritation to treat

disease states may include a small baked clay statuette depicting a naked pregnant female form; this was excavated from the Tarxien Neolithic Temples. This statuette has a number of white shell fragments stuck into it when it was still wet. These fragments are found in the neck, in the umbilicus, on the mons veneris, in both groins, in the base of the figure, on two of the ribs, three of the vertebra and on both scapulae (Zammit & Singer 1924: 96-97; Cassar 1964: 4).

Furthermore, a number of statuettes interpreted as possible votive offerings have been excavated from Neolithic sanctuaries in Malta. Among these are two models of legs from Mnajdra, one of a hand from Hagar Qim, and a number of torso fragments from Hal Saflieni and Mnajdra. A limb from the Bugibba Temple showed a small conical knob on its lower part of the anterior aspect possibly representing a tumour. The feet of many of the obese statuettes are depicted as very short and plantiflexed suggestive of an artificial deformity, while some of the legs of statuettes found exhibit what may be marked oedema. A clay head shows puffed out cheeks possible representing angioneurotic oedema or bilateral parotitis, such as one gets in mumps (Zammit & Singer 1924: 78, 81, 85, 90-92, 97-98; Pace 1972: 14; Agius 1968: 4-6; Zammit *et al.* 1912: 28).

The retrieval of the clay statuette suggestive of sympathetic magic rites and votive statuettes from various temple and hypogean sites may be interpreted to suggest that the medical shaman was the same as the official of the temple and hypogean. The shaman was probably also consulted in situations where the disease was being interpreted as due to the invasion of the person by an evil spirit or ghost. In many prehistoric and even in primitive societies, this situation was remedied by embarking on trepanning of the skull to allow the evil spirit or ghost to leave the possessed (Lisowski 1967; Margetts 1967). Trepanation has not been previously described in Neolithic Maltese skulls. However one of the skulls excavated from the Hal Saflieni Hypogean in Malta (*HS/2*) shows an elliptical defect measuring about 15.5 x 12.7 mm on the left parietal bone, its

medial edge being about 25.4 mm from the sagittal suture. The borders of this defect appear regular and are not likely to have been caused by accidental post-mortem trauma (Savona-Ventura & Mifsud 1999).

On the basis of the two statuary remains depicting two women lying on a couch, found at the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, it has been suggested that this site served as a sanctuary in which "devotees were able to consult an oracle under the direction of a numerous priesthood who among other things practised oneiromancy, that is they interpreted dreams provoked in the faithful that slept in cubicles". This practice is similar to the temple-hospitals of Asclepius of ancient Greece where, after acts of purification, the patient was brought to the holiest part of the sanctuary, and instructed to lie down on a couch. Here the patient awaited the coming of the god in a dream or vision, possibly brought on by the use of drugs. Thanks offerings in the form of votive offerings were then presented to the sanctuary (Zammit & Singer 1924; Cassar 1964). There is however no definite proof that the practice of oneiromancy was prevalent in Late Neolithic Malta, and the statuary remains depicting sleeping women were probably related with the restful sleep of the death cult. The votive Neolithic objects excavated in Malta may be interpreted as *ex votos*, offered as a thanksgiving to the gods by afflicted devotees.

Conclusion

It would thus appear that medicine, mythology and religion probably all arose from the basic instinct for survival with the fertility and hunting cults being related to food procurement, while the dead cults and shamanism were related to ensuring good health. Ethnological parallels of the practices of prehistoric man in Malta with those of prehistoric man from other European regions and those of primitive communities suggest that in the face of common instincts and pressures, human responses tend to converge. These are represented by common human responses aimed at satisfying basic supernatural needs.

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