

# THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF MALTESE PREHISTORIC ART

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*Art is stylized communication.*

(Devereux 1971)

## **Introduction**

From the outset, the subject of this paper provokes a number of challenging questions: What exactly is a social context? What is the social context of art? And, to what extent does prehistoric art constitute a window through which *we* in the present can observe or 'read' the past (Hodder 1991)? It has to be said that the answers to these and many related questions have been approached by way of a varied and somewhat turbulent trajectory of theoretical discourse in archaeology over the past four decades, and it has only been with the emergence of post-processual and cognitive approaches of the 1980s and 1990s that progressive insights have been attained. In anthropology, the situation has generally been different and here the art of 'primitive societies' (Forge *ed.* 1973; Fraser 1962; Jopling *ed.* 1971) has been at the forefront of investigations (Layton 1991).

It is proposed in the present paper that the art created on the Maltese islands during the Temple Period (c. 4100-2500 BC) constitutes a body of data which facilitates, at very least, a preliminary analysis of its social context. However, "art" alone, as an individual body of data or as a concept, cannot sustain an argument; it must be evaluated in terms of the social environment or cultural *milieu* (Townsend 1997a, 1997b) in which it was produced, used and in which it functioned (Talalay 1993: 38)—a whole constellation of different factors have to be taken into account. These include the geographical status and physical morphology of the islands and the availability of space and resources, for these are all factors which affect the way human social groups develop and interact. It is also not just objects such as figurines or statues that should be considered when speaking of Maltese prehistoric art;

equally important are buildings, pottery/stone containers, altars and objects used for personal ornamentation.

## **Art and context**

Before attempting to define the social context of art, it must first be acknowledged that prehistoric cultural remains, whatever their nature, are a manifestation (materialization) of socio-economic activities taking place in a given social environment (Townsend 1997a, 1997b). A social environment is one in which humans live and interact with each other. The particular way those humans live and how they interact within their social environment is commonly referred to as "social organisation". Social organisation is generally categorised into units such as chiefdoms (Earle *ed.* 1991; Kirch 1989), corporate groups (Hayden & Cannon 1982) or others (Service 1962). With prehistoric societies (i.e., without written texts) archaeologists use evidence from settlement patterns, trade, subsistence activities and the presence of ceremonial structures, on which to build inferences for the type of social organisation they might be dealing with. This is also a theme which is of great concern to archaeology and anthropology as it is inextricably linked to the nature and quantity of art produced by a given society. For example, hunter-gatherer societies who rely on seasonally-factored mobility for group survival (Henry 1989) have little or no desire to produce large, heavy or cumbersome objects—which includes art objects (Muentserberger 1971: 8). Rather, mobile groups produce and use highly portable personal ornaments, or resort to body decorations in order to communicate social (non-verbal) information (Goldschmidt 1981: 97). Sedentary farming communities, however, are able to produce and make use of much larger objects such as statues, for if required, those objects can remain in one specific locale throughout the course of their functional life—in permanent settlements or ritual/ceremonial centres.

In the case of Temple-Building Malta and Gozo, society produced and used an array of art objects which varied not only in terms of form, but also, physical scale,<sup>1</sup> and by implication, transportability (Townsend 1997a, 1997b).

What evidence is available for the nature of social organisation of the Maltese islands during the Temple-Building Period? Colin Renfrew (1973), by using the distribution (clustering) of temples on the Maltese islands, developed a most useful chiefdom-based model for social organisation during the Temple-Building Period. In comparing the Maltese case with Easter Island in the Pacific, he suggested that the islands comprised a social matrix of six territories and using data from semi-arid south Iran, suggested that the total human population would have been in the order of 11,000 individuals. Furthermore, it was possible for chiefs in each territory to mobilize labour in order to build ceremonial centres such as the temples in which 'priests' are thought to have officiated. Based on the nature and quantity of evidence currently available, is Renfrew's model realistic (Townsend 1997a)? As noted earlier, a given social environment comprises all aspects of human existence and activities which include ceremonial, mortuary and domestic components, and collectively, can be considered to be social 'whole' (Hodder 1992: 24). One component of the Maltese whole which is missing at present is firm evidence for settlements. Thus, a model for social organisation which is temple-specific in terms of its construct is taking into account only part of the story. The problem is further perpetuated by absent data from the temples themselves, resulting from nineteenth century excavation activities—a time when excavations were not scientifically controlled as they are today. Other strands of evidence apart from ceremonial structures are available for inferring socio-economic processes that might have taken place during the Temple-Building Period. Using data recently obtained from the mortuary site of the Brochtorff Circle in Gozo (Bonanno *et al.* 1990; Malone *et al.* 1993, 1995a; Stoddart *et al.* 1993; Trump 1995) and

elsewhere on the Maltese islands, Stoddart *et al.* (1993) have suggested an island-insularity scenario. In essence, during the Zebbug phase (c. 4100-3800 BC) there was inter-community rivalry taking place on the islands which operated through the exchange of exotica such as obsidian and other materials. This was at a time when the islands were an active component of the central Mediterranean exchange system. If the model suggested is correct, there followed a period of socio-economic insularity whereby the Maltese islands became a 'closed society' (Evans 1977: 21)—commencing in the Ggantija phase (c. 3600-3300/3000 BC). It is during the latter that the first temples are constructed and hails the beginning of art production on a grand scale. Stoddart *et al.* (1993) suggest that the earlier rivalry via exchange, witnessed during the Zebbug phase was now focused on the construction of temples.

Both models noted above are extremely useful for envisualising the socio-economic state-of-play during the Temple-Building Period, but it is clear that far more data is needed in order to make higher level interpretations. Perhaps more problematic is the sudden change that takes place at the end of the Tarxien Temple phase, when the islands appear to have experienced a radical change in cultural practices—as denoted by the Tarxien Cemetery Period (c. 2500-1500 BC). During this phase, temple construction is non-existent and, along with new cultural practices and forms (cremation-urn burials, figurines, pottery types) there is the appearance of metal objects (copper axes) for the first time. Attempting to understand the Tarxien Temple—Tarxien Cemetery interface (Dixon 1998; Evans 1956; Pace 1995; Trump 1976) and subsequent developments has to be one of the main tasks of Maltese archaeological research in the future. At this stage, it is important to note the apparent dichotomy which can be observed between the 'exaggerated' (Evans 1973: 519) forms of the Temple-Building Period and the much humbler manifestations of the Tarxien Cemetery Period.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of which are very large.

With little settlement evidence to go by

and loss of contextual information resulting from nineteenth-century excavations of the temples, it would seem that a fairly bleak picture exists in terms of making headway with new models for social developments and changes on the islands during prehistory. Notwithstanding this, what *can* we glean from the art productions of the Temple-Building Period?

Anthropologists have, for a long time now, valued art in terms of what it is able to tell us about society and there is a rich body of data at the disposal of archaeologists to do the same—providing the limits of the data are given due respect. Even when no art is found on a particular site then this may be considered negative evidence (Stone 1981). It has to be admitted that in some cases, for instance, when a site has undergone little excavation, any art objects recovered may be of only slight information value. However, with the Maltese islands, there is a rich and varied repertoire of objects available for analysis.

### ***Maltese prehistoric art***

While the production of the most elaborate Maltese prehistoric art is associated with the Temple-Building Period, lesser-scale production did take place during the earlier phases of the islands' cultural trajectory. Notwithstanding the value of pottery containers as art objects in their own right (Trump 1996), the first known figurative work to be produced on the islands takes the form of two zoomorphic pot lugs (Evans 1971: plates 32.7-9) dating to the Ghar Dalam phase (c. 5000-4500 BC). But the evidence for art during the earliest phases is extremely scarce and it is not until the Red Skorba phase (c. 4400-4100 BC) that the first evidence for the production of anthropomorphic figures on a quantitative basis is known. At Skorba, David Trump (1961a, 1961b, 1961c, 1966) found fragments of anthropomorphic figurines (Evans 1971: plate 34.2; Trump 1966: fig. 30, plates XXVI & XXVII) in a building which he interpreted as a 'shrine' (Trump 1966: 11). Trump's ritualistic interpretation is based not just on the presence of figurines, but also, the skeletal remains of animals

which are possibly indicative of the practice of animal husbandry in terms of a social context (rather than solely for subsistence) (Keswani 1994).

At c. 4100 BC—the beginning of the Zebbug Phase (c. 4100-3800 BC)—there is a radical shift in cultural practices but this cannot, and should not, be assumed to be indicative of the arrival of a new population on the islands (Evans 1984: 493). The first evidence for mortuary practices in the form of rock-cut tombs used for collective burials appears, examples of which are known at Ta' Trapna (Zebbug) on Malta (Baldacchino & Evans 1954) and at the Brochtorff Circle on Gozo (Malone *et al.* 1995a). Associated with the tombs is anthropomorphic imagery of two basic types. One type is the so-called 'statue-menhirs', one example from the tombs at Ta' Trapna (Zebbug) (Baldacchino & Evans 1954: plate 3; Evans 1971: fig. 57, plates 61.7 & 61.8) and a further, albeit smaller, example from the Brochtorff Circle [**Figure 1**] (Malone *et al.* 1995a: fig. 17). A series of anthropomorphic pendants were also found in the rock-cut tomb at the Brochtorff Circle (Malone *et al.* 1995a: fig. 25; Stoddart *et al.* 1993: fig. 5), and to date, appear to be unique to this site. It has also been suggested that a number of pottery designs found on Zebbug phase pottery vessels from the Brochtorff Circle may be anthropomorphic images (Malone *et al.* 1995a: 314). However, while the Zebbug phase heralds the appearance of new cultural forms, it is not until later in the Temple-Building Period that a florescence of art production takes place. It is during the Ggantija phase (c. 3600-3300/3000 BC) that most of the temples were first constructed. A number subsequently underwent elaboration and enlargement during the Saflieni (c. 3300-3000 BC) and Tarxien (c. 3300/3000-2500 BC) phases (Trump 1966: table 2).

In view of its provocative and extraordinary nature, Maltese prehistoric art has attracted a considerable amount of scholarly attention (Battaglia 1927; Biaggi 1986, 1989; Evans 1971, 1976-77; Pace 1994; Pace [*ed.*] 1996; Malone & Stoddart 1995; Malone *et al.* 1995b; Stoddart *et al.* 1993; Townsend 1997a, 1997b; Trump 1963; Zammit & Singer

1924). Anthropomorphic imagery includes figurines, statuettes and statues (Townsend 1997b). Zoomorphic imagery includes figurines (Evans 1971: plates 33.13, 37.5, 37.6 & 37.8) and relief carvings (Evans 1971: plates 17.5-6 & 18.3-4) and there are also representations of fish (Evans 1971: plates 37.2-4). There is also more “abstract” imagery such as the spiral decoration found on carved stone slabs (Evans 1971: plates 22.4 & 22.5) and painted on the ceiling of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum (Evans 1971: Plans 14C & 14D). The rather enigmatic phallic objects (Evans 1971: plates 50.9-11 & 51.1) also deserve mention here.

Recent excavations at the Brochtorff Circle have produced an array of art objects which, in cases, are not dissimilar to objects found elsewhere on the islands, and as such, can be considered as part of the same material culture repertoire (‘system of visual communication’ [Forge 1971: 292]). Highly portable anthropomorphic figurines [Figure 2] were found placed in a ‘module’ (Stoddart *et al.* 1993: 10) containing vast quantities of human skeletal material. In yet another module on the site, provisionally interpreted as a ‘shrine’ (Stoddart *et al.* 1993: 10) was found an anthropomorphic statuette carved from limestone [Figure 3] and items of cult paraphernalia forming a ‘bundle’ (Stoddart *et al.* 1993: 11) [Figure 4]. The latter module also contained a “megalithic” stone bowl not dissimilar from that found by Zammit at the Tarxien Temples complex (Von Freeden 1993: Abb. 55). The remains of a limestone statue [Figure 5], originally c. 1.00 m in height, were found scattered about the burial area of the site. Last but not least are the large quantities of pottery, personal ornaments and red ochre (Marshack 1981; Wreschner 1980) that were found on the site.

As noted earlier, the Brochtorff finds bear a strong resemblance to many other objects found at sites elsewhere on the Maltese islands. It would appear that a distinct Maltese artistic style (Conkey & Hastorf [eds] 1990) prevailed (Townsend 1997b) and as such, could be used in the creation and maintenance of visual (i.e., non-verbal) rhetoric (Malone *et al.* 1995b: 11). Comparison of specific objects found

at different sites on the islands helps to confirm this hypothesis.

Common characteristics can be observed amongst objects from different sites which vary not only in terms of their configuration, but also, physical scale. Thus, the so-called “Tarxien Skirt” device appears on small objects such as the Brochtorff twin-figure statuette [Figure 3] and objects comprising the Shaman’s Bundle (Figure 4), in addition to much larger objects such as two statues from the Tarxien Temples complex (Evans 1971: plates 19.5 & 49.11-13). The bulbous legs observable on the Brochtorff twin-figure statuette [Figure 3] can also be observed on the large anthropomorphic statue at the Tarxien Temples complex (Evans 1971: plate 19.5). In addition to the actual temples themselves, there are also representations of temples in the form of models (Evans 1971: plates 47.7-9; Von Freeden 1993: Abb. 102 & 103; see also Renfrew 1994: 6; Trump 1990: 28), engravings on slabs (Von Freeden 1993: Abb. 101) and even the representation of a temple found on an amulet (Evans 1971: plate 51.6). Motifs such as the spiral are also employed, in this case engraved on the Brochtorff twin-figure statuette [Figure 3] and also painted on the ceiling of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum (Evans 1971: Plans 14C & 14D). Even from this most brief of surveys, it is clear that there is an interrelationship at play between objects from the same, and different, sites which is dependent on variability of form and physical scale and surface application (Townsend 1997a, 1997b).

### *The social context of Maltese prehistoric art*

What then is the social context of Maltese prehistoric art? As noted earlier, the particular social environment (Townsend 1997a) in which art functions and is used comprises manifestations of material culture (buildings and objects)—and people. The landscape itself is also a major component of that environment (Tilley 1994). Even if archaeologists are unable to define exactly the nature of social organisation they are dealing with (i.e., chiefdom society) it is still possible to define a social context for art by considering the data at hand under five basic categories of analysis [Table 1].

Level		Category of analysis
1	↓	At the broadest level of contextual analysis, objects are used and function within (and in cases between) their geographical context (unit)—an island, group of islands or mainland interaction-sphere.
2	↓ ↑	Second, objects are used and function within (and in cases between) communities forming part of their geographical context (unit).
3	↓ ↑	Third, objects are used and function within (and between) elements (or units) of the communal context, for instance, within and between temples or households.
4	↓ ↑	Fourth, art can be used and function within different modules of a given communal element. However, this is more likely to be the case with structurally complex structures such as the Maltese temples and/or hypogea.
5	↑	Finally, the interrelationship that exists between objects that form part of caches.

**Table 1: Categories of object-context analysis** (After Townsend 1997b)

What evidence is there from the Maltese islands for such a contextual analysis to proceed?

*Level 1: Geographical Context:*

In the case of the Maltese islands, geographical context is comprised of a comparatively small group of islands located in the central Mediterranean. When compared to other Mediterranean islands such as Sicily (25,805 km<sup>2</sup>), Sardinia (24,180 km<sup>2</sup>), Cyprus (9,280 km<sup>2</sup>) and Crete (7,800 km<sup>2</sup>), the Maltese islands are small (Branigan & Jarrett 1969). The largest of the group, Malta, is 247 km<sup>2</sup> in area, followed by Gozo (68 km<sup>2</sup>) and Comino (2.6 km<sup>2</sup>). Two rocky islets—Cominotto and Filfla—complete the group. It is in the context of this small, biogeographically constrained island environment (Keegan & Diamond 1987; Schüle 1993) that archaeologists must conduct their enquiries.

The nearest major landfall to the islands is Sicily, the southern coast of which is some 96 km to the north. In clear weather conditions, the summit of Sicily's Mount Etna can be seen from the Maltese

islands, but only from elevated locales (Trump 1990: 110). This relatively close proximity and inter-visibility with Sicily, raises the question as to what level of insularity the Maltese islands experienced during prehistory (Eriksen 1993; Gosden & Pavlides 1994). As noted earlier, the model proposed by Stoddart *et al.* (1993) suggests that the islands *did* enter a phase of cultural insularity during the Temple-Building Period. Here, the problem lies in deciding whether such isolation was deliberate or the product of geographical factors—or a combination of both. Certainly, the cultural traits of the Temple-Building Period are consistent with what one might expect from a 'closed society' and also observable with other geographic-isolates such as Easter Island in the Pacific (Bahn 1997; Bahn & Flenley 1992; Renfrew 1984; Sahlins 1955). There is little to compare with contemporary cultural traits on Sicily and the Maltese case appears to be a unique and indigenous phenomenon.

*Level 2: Inter-community context:*

As noted earlier, the lack of settlement evidence for Malta and Gozo poses an enormous problem for researchers. To

date, only scant remains for what might be “domestic” structures have been encountered. David Trump (1966: 14-16) found remains of Zebbug, Mgarr, and Ggantija structures at Skorba. More recently, structural remains, which may also have had a domestic function, have been found at Ghajnsielem Road (Malone *et al.* 1988) and Tac-Cawla (Calvert 1995) on Gozo. Notwithstanding other forms of material culture evidence, this basically leaves us with the temples and hypogea in order to make inferences concerning possible inter-community relations.

It could well be, as Colin Renfrew suggests, that the temples are indicative of territorial socio-economic strategies on the islands. If so, then inter-community rivalry and/or cooperation may have been played out via the existence of such territories. Furthermore, the social boundaries (Cohen 1969) created by this socio-economic demarcation may have been advertised and legitimated by manifestations of material culture (Wobst 1977), with the temples acting as ritual/ceremonial centres.

An alternative suggestion (Townsend 1997b) is that the temples were part of one, all-encompassing socio-economic island-factored ‘whole’. In this instance, the most elaborately embellished of the temples—the Tarxien Temples complex—may have served as the main centre for ritual and ceremonial activities. From Tarxien, and the nearby Hal Saflieni hypogeum, rhetoric could have been disseminated via the use and function of art objects (including pottery) to other ritual centres. This involved large static objects such as limestone statues to small, highly portable, stone/ceramic figurines (Malone *et al.* 1995b: Figure 2).

But if the social context of prehistoric Maltese art is to be understood, long-term and immediate historical contexts need to be considered. As noted earlier, the first evidence for ritual and ceremonial activities, coupled with the use of art objects, was found by Trump at Skorba (Red Skorba phase). By this time, the Maltese islands had been populated by humans for over 500 years and it is possible that the local ecosystem was beginning to experience a degree of

degradation created by land-use for agriculture and animal husbandry in addition to the procurement of natural resources such as timber (Keegan & Diamond 1987; Schüle 1993). Although the islands may have still been only sparsely populated, it could well be that village communities, albeit part of a larger ‘whole’, were beginning to become conscious of their biogeographical predicament, which itself, triggered *inter-* and *intra-*settlement social tensions. Combined with other factors, it could be those tensions which triggered a social response resulting in ritual and ceremonial activities (Shils 1966). The relatively confined and isolated environment of the islands would undoubtedly have been a deciding factor in this respect. Unlike mainland situations where large interaction spheres (Bar-Yosef & Belfer-Cohen 1989) offer response flexibility in the face of perturbations and environmental degradation, small island environments have little to offer (Townsend 1997b). In the case of the Maltese islands, it is possible to envisage a small-island-factored social environment in which social tensions prevailed at both the *inter-* and *intra-*community levels, and that such tensions were ever-increasing as time went on, reaching their apogee during the Tarxien Temple phase.

### *Level 3: Inter-unit context:*

While acknowledging that settlements and smaller residential units such as hamlets probably existed on the islands, at present, only two categories of social unit are available for analysis at Level 3: temples and subterranean mortuary complexes (hypogea). But saying this, the evidence is still somewhat fragmentary. While some twenty-three classified temple structures are known (Trump 1990: 27), only two hypogea have been reported to date: the Hal Saflieni hypogeum on Malta and the Brochtorff Circle on Gozo. In essence, this leaves us with only two hypogeum-temple clusters to consider; present evidence suggests that the Hal Saflieni hypogeum (Tarxien Cluster) and the Brochtorff Circle (Ggantija Cluster) each relate to a nearby cluster of temples (Bonanno *et al.* 1990: figs. 2 & 3; Trump

1981: fig. 11) and it is this relationship which is important in terms of understanding the types of art being used and functioning at these clusters. The discovery of further hypogea in the future, which are believed to exist,<sup>1</sup> will no doubt help to clarify the cluster model being discussed here.

In considering the known art from the Tarxien and Ggantija clusters it can be observed that, as with other levels of analysis which comprise this paper, similar artistic devices were employed between units in each of those clusters (Tarxien - Hal-Saflieni / Ggantija-Brochtorff). In essence, an *intra*-unit interrelationship was maintained via the interplay of artistic devices employed within and between each centre.

The Tarxien Skirt found on two statues from Tarxien (Evans 1971: plates 19.5 & 49.11-13) is repeated on the so-called "sleeping Lady" figure found at Hal Saflieni (Evans 1971: plates 36.6-9). The spiral motif found on engraved panels from Tarxien (Evans 1971: plates 22.4 & 22.5) can be found painted on the ceiling of the hypogeum (Evans 1971: Plans 14C & 14D, plates 5.1 & 5.2). There are also architectural forms found at Tarxien which are mimicked below ground at Hal Saflieni (Evans 1971: plates 5.3-5) (or vice-versa).

It has to be said that the surviving works of art from the Ggantija Temples complex are not as abundant as those found at the Brochtorff Circle, but as with Tarxien and Hal Saflieni, it is still possible to observe similarities in form employed at each site. Two stone heads (Evans 1971: plates 62.1-6) are not dissimilar in configuration and style to those of the twin-figure statuette found at the Brochtorff Circle [Figure 3]. Spiral-carved slabs found at Ggantija can be related to the spiral decoration also observable on the top elevation of the Brochtorff twin-seated figure [Figure 3]. Again, there is also a similarity in form which can be observed in the use of architectural components at each site. For instance, the 'shrine' architecture

discovered at the Brochtorff Circle (Stoddart *et al.* 1993: fig. 4) finds a parallel in that employed in Room 6 at Ggantija (Evans 1971: plate 26.5).

Thus, the *inter*-unit context of the Tarxien and Ggantija clusters is evidenced not only by the close proximity of sites at each, but also, by the similarities that can be observed between manifestations (materializations) of material culture.

#### *Level 4: Intra-unit context:*

In order to consider the possible *intra*-module context of Maltese prehistoric art it is again necessary to refer to the known temples and hypogea of the islands, but more specifically, the Tarxien Temples complex.

The Tarxien complex is undoubtedly the most elaborately embellished of all the known Maltese temples and thanks to the methods employed by its excavator, Sir Themistocles Zammit, important contextual information was saved at the time of its excavation (Gouder 1996). In essence, the analyst is presented with a whole suite of different art forms, which at the time of their use and function, were interrelated and as such, constituted a system of visual communication within the temple complex. Amongst other manifestations of material culture, that system was comprised of figurative work (figurines and statues), engraved stone slabs (zoomorphic and abstract forms), pottery containers, stone containers, "architectural" models, personal ornaments, and items of cult paraphernalia. The most notable example is the 'fixed' statue (Malone *et al.* 1995b: fig. 2) standing in Apse 2 of the South Temple (Evans 1971: plate 15.2). It is hardly a coincidence that this happens to be one of the first images that one encounters when entering the temple, and indeed, one of the last when leaving. In its complete state, it would have been in the order of 2.75 metres in height (Trump 1990: 70) and would have presented an awesome spectacle to the extent of creating an element of shock, surprise and emotion for any person or persons encountering it—a lasting psychological impact on the observer would have been

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<sup>1</sup> Trump (1990: 67) suggests that there could be as many as 14 further hypogea awaiting discovery.

created. Other images within the temple would have achieved a similar effect—albeit on a lesser scale perhaps. Notable amongst these are the large stone slabs engraved with spiral designs (Townsend 1997b) such as those in Rooms 15 and 16 of the Central Temple (Evans 1971: plates 21.4, 22.4 & 22.5). One can only speculate on what the atmosphere inside the temples must have been at the time of their use, but it can be postulated that imagery in the form of anthropomorphic cult statues and spiral-engraved slabs were strategically placed in order to attain a maximum visual impact on observers (Evans 1996).

Attempting to make sense of *all* the art contained within the Tarxien Complex is a daunting if not impossible task. The entire interrelationship which once existed between art forms in the temple (which would have included objects and materials that are now long perished) (Heider 1967) simply no longer exists. Those examples just noted—the giant cult statue and the spiral-engraved stone slabs—are however observable remnants of this interrelationship. But the argument can be elaborated still further to include the art from other sites on the islands. Those art forms include a whole repertoire of artistic devices—“skirts”, bulbous legs, spirals—which collectively can be interpreted as a Maltese ‘way of doing’ (Hodder 1990: 45) or style (Townsend 1997b). It is this aspect of the material culture assemblage which is pivotal in the sense that it constitutes a testimony for the way in which art was functioning in society.

#### *Level 5: Inter-Object Context:*

Objects found at any given archaeological site or region, in the majority of cases, bear some form of resemblance to one another whether this be in terms of conformity to the prevailing (artistic) style, or the use of artistic devices (including symbolic devices) employed. This general aspect of material culture was touched upon earlier when it was noted how artistic devices such as the depiction of bulbous legs and the Tarxien Skirt could be observed in the Maltese repertoire of art-objects. Ascertaining the

interrelationship that exists between objects can, however, be a problematic if not impossible task, especially if there are only a small number of objects on which to base an argument. In rare cases, caches of prehistoric art objects have been found more-or-less intact, notably recent discoveries at ‘Ain Ghazal in Jordan (Schmandt-Besserat 1998; Rollefson 1984; Tubb & Grissom 1995), Kissonerga Mosphilia in Cyprus (Peltenburg 1988; Peltenburg & Project Members 1991) and important for this study, the Shaman’s Bundle discovered at the Brochtorff circle in 1991. Perhaps the most important aspect of caches<sup>2</sup> is that there is a collective relationship which can be observed. It could be that the cache in question was hurriedly placed in an indiscriminate fashion, perhaps as an act of concealment; alternatively, it could have been placed in a specific order, perhaps in the form of creating a narrative or scene (Drennan 1976: fig. 11.10). Equally, it could have been deposited as a ritual toolkit with no specific order intended—but there are many other possibilities which could be noted. Whatever the case may be, it still remains that the objects concerned, in the majority of cases, mean something as a group, and therefore, the interrelationship of those objects, at least to a degree, has survived.

The Shaman’s Bundle discovered at the Brochtorff Circle in 1991 offers much scope for theories pertaining to the interrelationship of art objects. The cache [Figure 4] consists of six limestone anthropomorphic staff figures, two further limestone anthropomorphic figures, a limestone zoomorphic figure and a small ceramic pot bearing traces of red ochre. As noted earlier, the find was made in an area of the site interpreted as a ‘shrine’. One intriguing aspect of the staff figures is the different stages of manufacture which can be observed (Stoddart *et al.* 1993: 11). At one level, a single piece of globigerina limestone has been carved to form a ‘roughout’. From this, further stages of manufacture can be observed culminating in the finished object. An

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<sup>2</sup> Schiffer (1987: 78-80) discusses the difference between ‘banking caches’ and ‘ritual caches’.



important question must be asked here: What was a group of completed and partly completed objects being used for in a shrine on a mortuary site? This question may be partly answered by taking into account the *inter-object* relationship. As with some of the objects discussed earlier, a number of commonly used artistic devices have been employed in the Shaman's Bundle, and in doing so, render them part of the Maltese stylistically factored repertoire of art. The old favourite—Tarxien Skirt—appears on two of the figures. While no limbs are depicted, the heads of the anthropomorphic figures, with their hairstyles and quiescent gaze, are not dissimilar to figures found at other sites elsewhere on the islands. It is reasonable to suggest that all the anthropomorphic figures forming part of the bundle conform to the prevailing Maltese style of art and therefore, not only relate to each other, but also to other figures being used and functioning at other locales. Notwithstanding their incomplete state, even the roughout and other partly finished objects conform to the prevailing style and, as such, could be identified by observers at ritual and ceremonial activities. It would seem that in order for the Shaman's Bundle to have efficacy as a ritual kit it was important that each object, whether completed or partly completed, could be readily identified as forming part of that kit, and ultimately, be identified as part of the much wider arena of Temple-Building Period art production. In essence, the *inter-object* relationship observable in the Shaman's Bundle rendered efficacy to both roughout and other partly completed objects. Comparison of the Shaman's Bundle with similar caches that might happen to come to light in the future would add an exciting dimension to the argument being advanced here.

It seems clear that defining the social context of prehistoric art entails taking into account a host of variables relating to the prevailing social 'whole'. In the case of the Maltese islands that 'whole' comprised a highly complex package of interrelated socio-economic variables which was heavily dependent on the islands' biogeographical status, and it is from this perspective that a social context

of art should be defined.

### ***Evaluating the social context for Maltese prehistoric art***

There is a palimpsest of socio-cultural and psychological-functional variables (Devereux 1971: 193) inextricably involved when attempting to define the social context of art produced by any society, and these are linked to short- and long-term processes taking place. Archaeology, as a discipline, relies on site-contextual information obtained from settlements, mortuary complexes and/or cemeteries, amongst many other types of site, in order to make statements about social life in the past. Thus, high-resolution statements concerning Maltese society as a 'whole' during the Temple-Building Period will only be possible when far more data than that currently available comes to light. But to say that no statement whatsoever is possible at this stage would be falling into the trap of minimalist or descriptivist thought (Dark 1995: 62). A significant quantity of art objects are known from the temple sites and Hal Saflieni hypogeum and provide a basis for at least preliminary analyses. Although many of these objects lack properly recorded site-contextual information, the repertoire as a whole has been greatly complemented by those discovered more recently at the Brochtorff Circle. If art *is* capable of telling us something about the type of society that produced it (Berndt 1971: 100) then how does this work in terms of Temple Period art?

A key factor in the argument must be the conditions which 'switched on' (Wiessner 1990: 109) the need for the production of art and construction of temples on such a grand scale during the Temple-Building Period. It is commonly and incorrectly assumed that when a florescence of art ensues in a given society that this is a sign of increased wealth and affluence. But as Paul Taçon (1983; also Odess 1998) reminds us, just the opposite can be true; troubled societies may produce elaborate art in large quantities in response to social tension(s), stress, and the practice of ritual and ceremonial activities may also increase under such conditions (Shils 1966). By the beginning of the Temple-

Building Period (c. 4,100 BC), the Maltese islands had experienced nearly one thousand years of human activities and it is possible that the resulting pressures placed on what was a small, biogeographically constrained, environment were well in place by now (Keegan & Diamond 1987; Schüle 1993). The elaborate temples and art created during the Ggantija and Tarxien Temple phases could well have been society's way of coping with perceived danger—a harmless safety valve (Devereux 1971: 203). Unlike mainland situations where community fissioning is possible in the face of environmental perturbations or social stress, on small islands there is often 'nowhere else to go' (Townsend 1997b). The events which took place at c. 2,500 BC when the Tarxien Temple Culture vanishes from the archaeological record remain a puzzle. At this stage it is, perhaps, incorrect to assume that the Tarxien Temple society simply "collapsed" overnight, and other models for explaining what might have happened should be sought (i.e., a gradual socio-economic realignment). What is certain is that c. 2,500 BC heralded the advent of the Tarxien Cemetery Culture/Maltese Bronze Age when new forms of cultural expression appear in the archaeological record. Whether it was a short- or long-term process which was involved in the transition, the new social environment of the Tarxien Cemetery period commanded the use of a new types of art.

Even this metanarrative-style account of events provides much fuel for evaluating the social context of Maltese Temple Period art. One of the most noticeable characteristics of Tarxien Temple figures is the level of transportability (via human agency) found with each (Malone *et al.* 1995b; Townsend 1997a, 1997b). Thus, small highly portable figurines [Figure 2] could have been readily transported from one locale to another with little effort involved. Statuettes [Figure 3] could easily have been transported, but in view of their size and perhaps level of workmanship involved in their production, would have generally remained in one specific locale and perhaps only moved on rare occasions. Large statues [Figure 5] are likely to have remained in one specific locale

although could have been moved with considerable effort. As an individual concept, ease of portability of art objects tells us little about social context, but when those objects interrelate via commonality of style and the use of symbols and motifs, a new dimension is added. Whatever the precise nature of Tarxien Temple society and whatever events were taking place on the islands at the time, it is apparent that art and ceremonial buildings were playing a key role in ongoing developments. Large statues were referents to statuettes and figurines which could have been used in the same temple, or perhaps other buildings located elsewhere on the islands. Symbols such as the spiral device, were also used in various ways (i.e., wall decoration, carved slabs, incised on figures) and were intended to be observed at different locales on the islands. A whole host of other devices were also used including containers (stone, ceramic) of various sizes and representations of temples (Townsend 1997a, 1997b).

Prehistoric societies were without written texts as we know them<sup>3</sup> and it was art which was employed as a means of expressing and circumventing social tensions and stress, and as an active component of ritual and ceremonial activities. It is suggested here that the temples and art objects of Temple-Building Malta and Gozo are a profound testimony to what must have been intense ritual and ceremonial activities being practised at the time, and such activities possibly reflect a society in a predicament resulting from a resource-exhausted physical environment, and perhaps, an over-populated physical and social environment (Stoddart *et al.* 1993: 17). It is the way in which the art objects of Temple-Building Malta and Gozo were used and functioned within the prevailing social environment which is that art's social context.

### Conclusion

Making tangible statements about the prehistoric past is one of Archaeology's greatest challenges and prehistoric art,

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<sup>3</sup> But see Tilley (1991, 1999).

perhaps more than any other type of data, poses enormous difficulties. Ian Hodder (1999: 15) reminds us that “*objects only exist within traditions of inquiry*” and therefore it must be accepted that the interpretations we make today concerning prehistoric art objects are but provisional while at the same time remaining valid statements within the present. The ancient remains of the Maltese islands lend themselves well to single and multiple interpretations—a position which can only be enhanced in the light of new data. During the Temple-Building Period, the social environment of the Maltese islands (Townsend 1997a) was ‘materialized’ by the indigenous population through the construction of buildings and creation of art. It is by taking into account the variability in form and scale (Townsend 1997b) in relation to site-context which can be observed within that materialization which *today* provides for just *one* interpretation.

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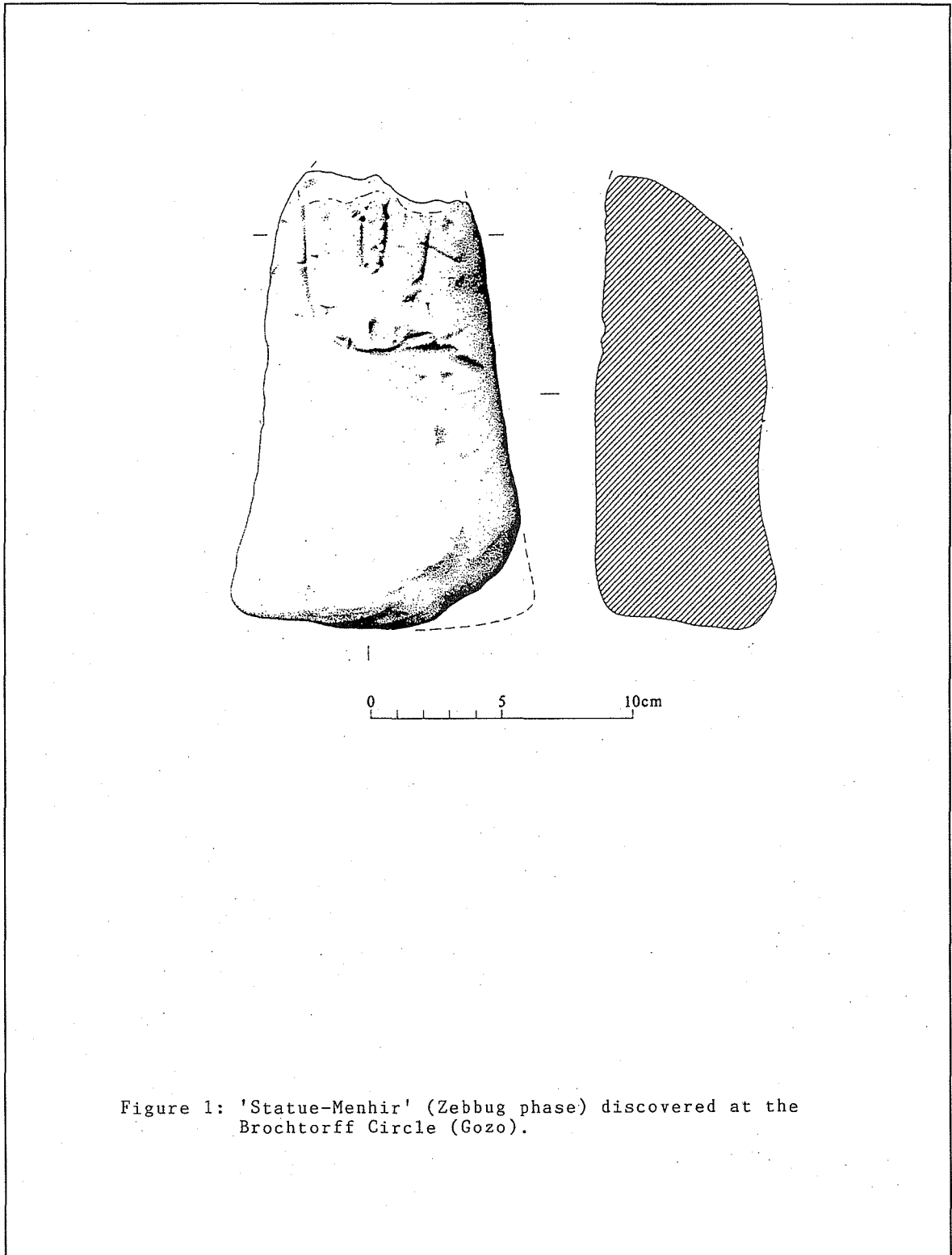


Figure 1: 'Statue-Menhir' (Zebbug phase) discovered at the Brochtorff Circle (Gozo).

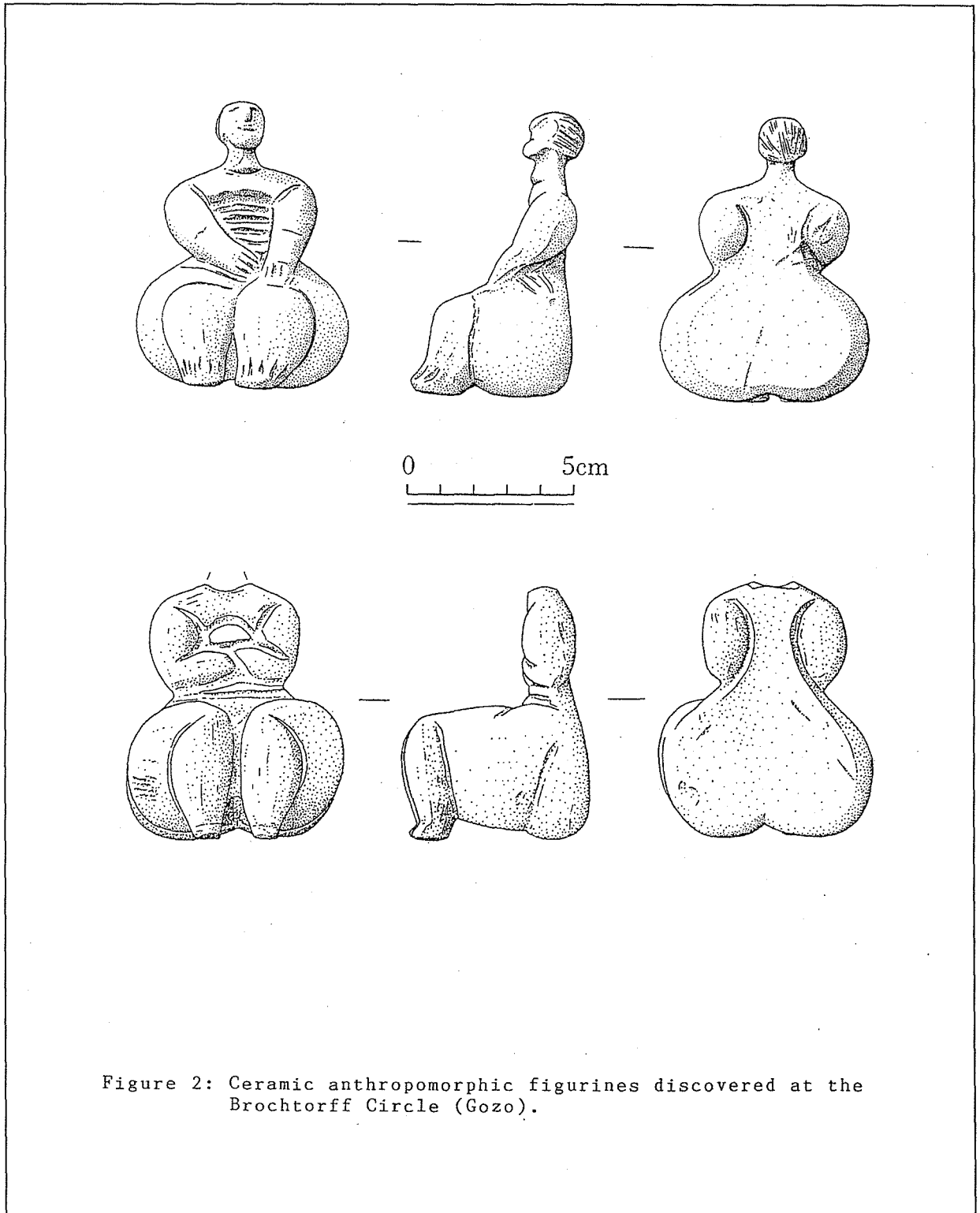


Figure 2: Ceramic anthropomorphic figurines discovered at the Brochtorff Circle (Gozo).



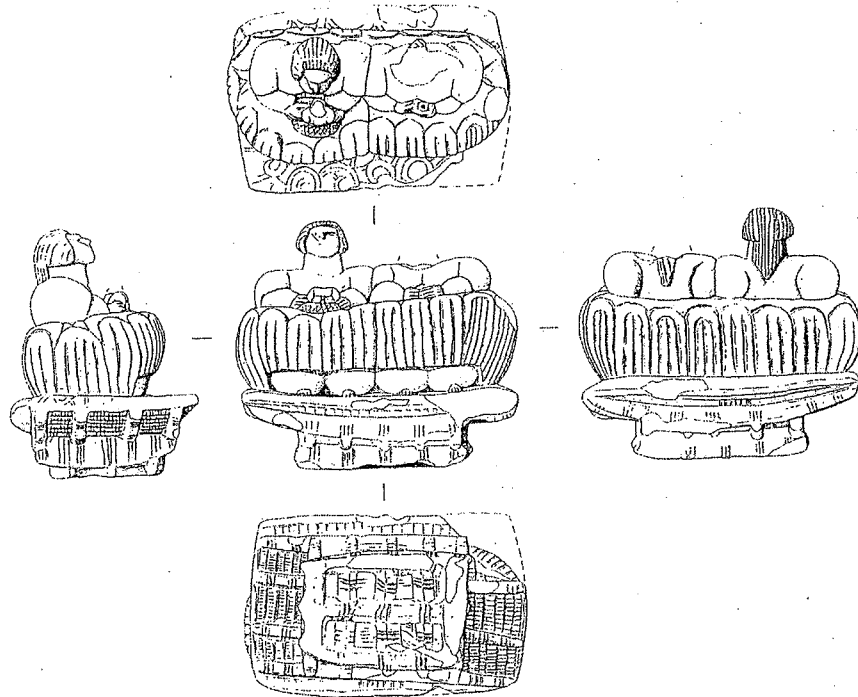


Figure 3: Limestone anthropomorphic statuette discovered at the Brocchtorff Circle (Gozo). Dimensions: 9 x 14 x 10 cm.

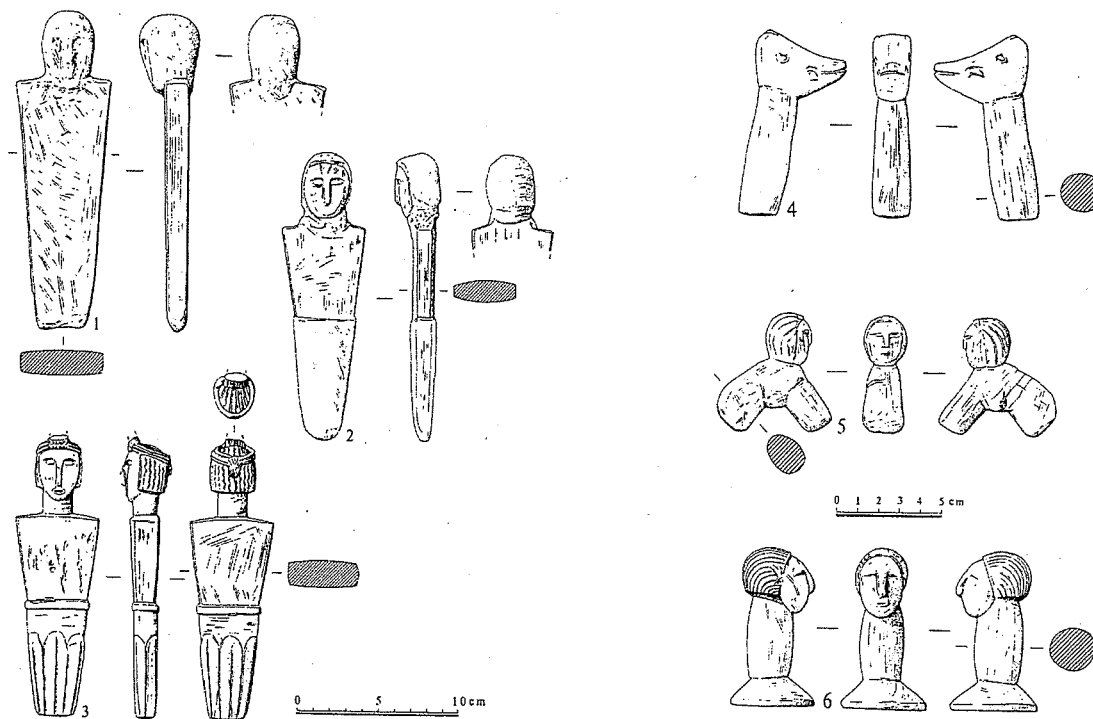


Figure 4: Limestone figures forming part of the 'Shaman's Bundle' discovered at the Brochtorff Circle (Gozo). Nos 1 to 3 show different stages of manufacture from roughout to completed object.

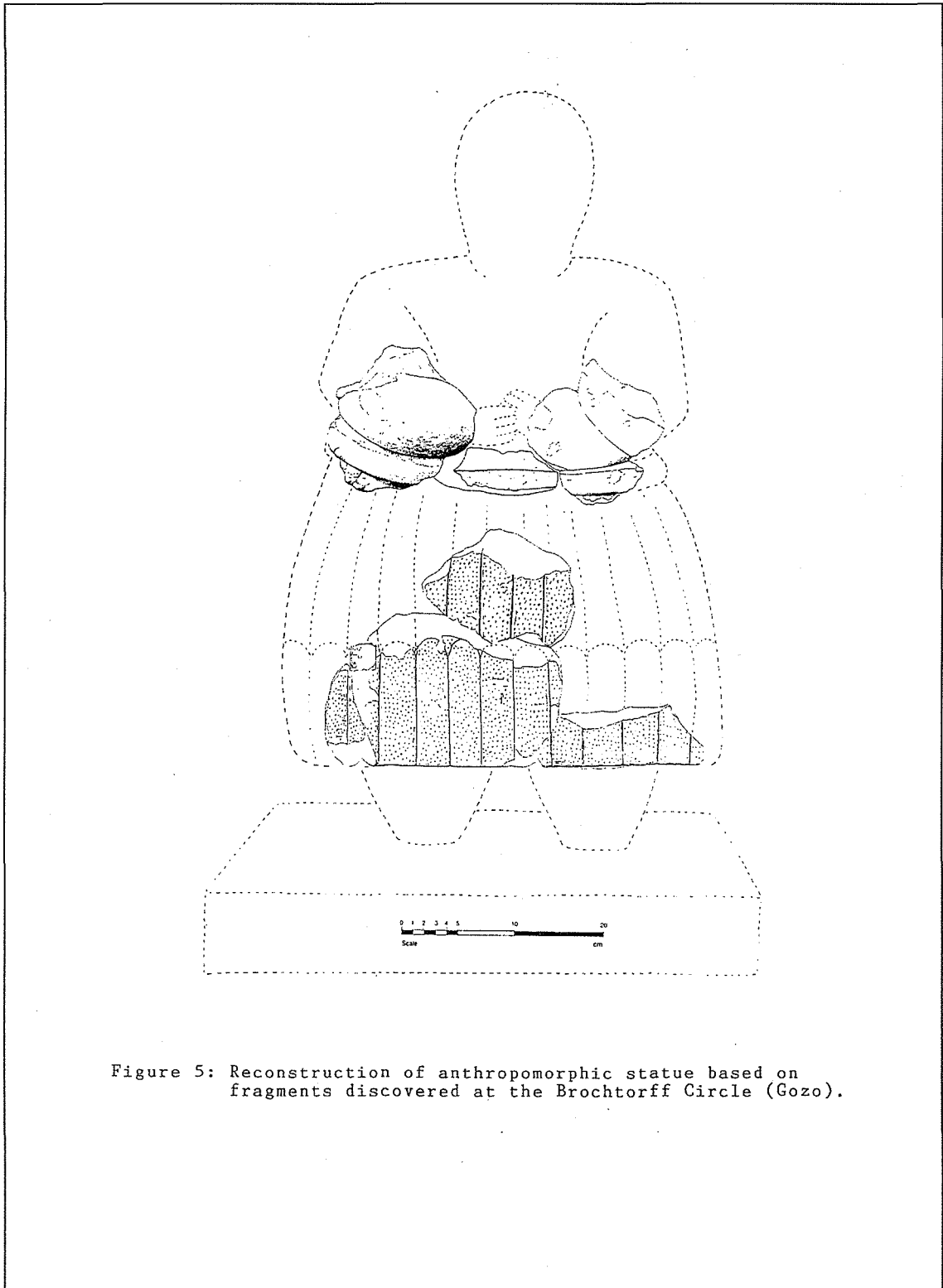


Figure 5: Reconstruction of anthropomorphic statue based on fragments discovered at the Brochtorff Circle (Gozo).