MORTUARY CUSTOMS IN PREHISTORIC MALTA

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Introduction

The Maltese islands are known in prehistory for the monuments which are generally designated "temples". These impressive monuments immediately suggest two questions to the visitor: *where* did the temple builders live and *where* did they place their dead? - and the more curious will add a third question, *how* did they place their dead? The Anglo-Maltese project started in 1987, and continuing up to the time of writing (1999) with the important analysis of the material, has given an opportunity to study all these enquiries. The wider project was directly or indirectly involved in the more detailed understanding of two domestic sites at Ghajnsielem Road (Malone *et al.* 1988) and Tac-Cawla (*pers. comm.* Mark Horton) on Gozo, within the context of regional survey on the island of Gozo. The project has, however, principally contributed to the deeper understanding of mortuary customs in prehistoric Malta through the work at the Brochtorff Circle at Xaghra, where excavation was conceived to answer both questions: *where* and *how* did the prehistoric Maltese place their dead. This site provides an important insight into prehistoric mortuary customs, with an approach complementary to the famous mortuary Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni. The Hal Saflieni monument provides a superb architectural framework, but one that is almost completely lacking records of *in situ* skeletons or artefacts. The Brochtorff Circle is a less imposing architectural monument, but was excavated at a time when the precise position of skeletal and artefactual material was recorded in some detail (Table 1).

Site	Architecture	Skeletal material	Cultural artefacts
Hal Saflieni	Architectural	Largely dispersed	Lacking context
Brochtorff Circle	Embellished natural	Substantially intact	In context

Table 1: Comparison of Hal Saflieni and the Brochtorff Circle at Xaghra.

The traditional approach

Mortuary remains have always been a focus of archaeological research. One of first methodological dicta of archaeology – Worsaae's Law – centred on the funerary remains, by making the claim that all funerary deposition was of a single moment, a capsule in time, an intentional act. Funerary remains have been used in this respect to construct many of the traditional chronologies of European archaeology. Other traditional archaeologists have collected funerary remains to fill the museums of the World with rich and beautiful things, even using death as the closest available approximation of life, in the absence of settlement archaeology and in the belief that one mirrors the other. The first theoretical archaeologists of the 1960s (e.g. Binford 1971) took this assumption even further by envisaging funerary remains as the route of access to an understanding of social structure, by following the simplistic rule that complexity of funerary activity is directly related to complexity of social structure. The Maltese evidence presented here has produced beautiful objects, many of which are quite rightly symbols of Maltese identity represented on the very postage stamps of the nation, but none of the other traditional assumptions apply with the clarity that earlier archaeologists have assumed. A different approach

which takes account of anthropological evidence, both social and physical, needs to be applied. The theoretical archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s took archaeologists away from the study of funerary customs *per se*, into a realm of social interpretation. The funerary remains of Malta emphasise the inherent interest of the funerary custom itself, as well as any deeper understanding which may be gleaned of ancient Maltese society.

An anthropological approach

The anthropological approach to death in Malta has to be interdisciplinary, drawing on physical anthropology to understand the burial processes and social anthropology to take us away from our current Christian influenced and western culture. The study of mortuary customs in prehistoric Malta is pre-eminently a study of the differential distribution of bones – human and animal – in varying architectural contexts, in association with different cultural artefacts and sediments. This distribution of bones is strikingly different from the single and final depositions of Christian death, where the deceased is put to rest in one clearly defined compartment, at least theoretically, for eternity.

Furthermore, the archaeological account of death can be very sanitised. An anthropological account introduces many further dimensions. A whole range of different senses is introduced: not only vision, but sound, touch and even taste. The mortuary practices become a performance for the living as well as a commemoration of the dead. The living are part of social networks with respect to themselves and the deceased which all need to be taken into account in conceiving the action of burial. The classic texts of anthropology give a strong sense of these arenas of action (Goody 1962; Bloch 1971) and a clear understanding of the multi-phase nature of the funerary rite of passage. Funerary rites were drawn out over a period of time, with a constant and repeated return to the bones of the ancestors (Metcalf & Huntington 1991).

A key question is how much of this social action is accessible through archaeological evidence. A good start lies in the linkage of ethnographic and archaeological material culture to provide bridging arguments between the two, and provide evidence of the non-visual senses in ritual performance. Recent work has reviewed how an integrated team, with archaeological and musical expertise can tackle this issue (Lawson *et al.* 1998). A further illustration of this type of approach is the work on rock gongs (Fagg 1997). Although not necessarily linked specifically to funerary ritual, it has advanced in the right direction. Rock gongs are permanent fixtures within the cultural landscape which can be identified by wear on their surface. In this way, an ethnographic knowledge from Africa can be transferred to megalithic tombs and Palaeolithic caves in France (Dams 1985), with sound grounds for testing the interpretation. In some circumstances, the prehistoric fixtures can be associated with the act of painting, in other words with an actual performance itself. These specific gongs are, however, associated with hard rocks such as granites or precipitated crystalline limestones (Fagg 1997: 6). In Malta, the soft limestone rocks may have been more associated with voice resonance (as demonstrable in the Hal Saflieni chambers) and were, probably, less suitable for being struck to produce a sound. A number of shells found in funerary contexts may have combined symbolic and acoustic roles (Skeates 1991), offering portable evidence of music making. Although not all ethnographic examples may be transferable across cultures, the principle nevertheless applies that archaeologists should stretch their imaginations to piece together the full picture of death and its associated rituals, without straying into the realm of speculation.

Pre-temple death

There is no evidence for occupation of the Maltese islands prior to the colonisation of the islands by agriculturalists and it is, therefore, only from the Holocene that we should expect funerary remains. The evidence for the first funerary evidence of agriculturalists on Malta from the early Neolithic death is nevertheless rare, reflecting a pattern that is seen in the

Plate 1: Two articulated skeletons at the Brochtorff Circle

rest of the southern Central Mediterranean at the time. Some human remains were found in the Ghar Dalam (early Neolithic) levels of Skorba (Evans 1971: 38) (following c. 5500BC). Significantly these were incomplete skeletons including three jawbones of children. A similar pattern has been detected at Ghar Dalam itself where two teeth (originally assigned to the Pleistocene deposits) and other human teeth and bones were found disarticulated (Evans 1971: 19). We are witnessing here only part of the funerary ritual, a ritual that is clearly very different from the final and definitive deposition which forms part of modern practice. Furthermore, funerary evidence was, at this stage, linked to domestic structures, rather than taking place in distinct, formal areas reserved for burial (the pattern of modern Christian practice and in many other earlier state organised societies).

Burial took on a new form in the Zebbug period (following c. 4100BC). By this stage there is clear evidence for formal zones of burial on the Maltese islands. Rock cut tombs were found singly or in small cemeteries and employed for the burial of what appear to be extended families over several generations. The Zebbug period takes its name from the five tombs discovered at Zebbug on Malta in 1947 (Evans 1971: 166-169). These had been severely truncated at the time of discovery, leaving only 60 cm of deposit in shallow depressions, which must have originally been the lower part of chambered tombs very similar to the recent discoveries at Brochtorff Circle at Xaghra and Xemxija (although these latter finds appear to have been of later date) (Malone *et al.* 1995; Evans 1971: 112-116). The impression of the deposits was of complete disorder to the excavators, but, as more recent work elsewhere has shown, ritual order can be extracted from seeming chaos. The finds included animal as well as human bone, Zebbug style pottery, shells and shell beads, flint blades, a bone bead, a V-shaped shell button and, most significantly a stylised anthropomorphic stele. The minimum number of individuals spread between five tombs has been estimated as little as twelve, a figure dependent most probably on the fragmentary nature of the human remains.

The discovery of a single intact rock-cut tomb (with two chambers) within the Brochtorff Circle at Xaghra has greatly enlarged knowledge of the funerary practice of this period (Malone *et al.* 1995). The two chambers were entered off a central vertical shaft. The eastern chamber still had a blocking stone at the moment of excavation. The material within the tombs was substantially Zebbug in date, but the western chamber had been re-opened in the subsequent Ggantija (temple building) phase and one (?) individual placed inside, and the shaft refilled with limestone rubble that included quern stones and rubbing stones. In each chamber there was evidence of a final mortuary insertion with earlier bodies pushed to the back of the chamber. Both chambers had substantial numbers of beads, pendant figurines, perforated shells, axe pendants and chipped stone artefacts. The entrance to the western chamber was marked by a stylised anthropomorphic stele very similar to that found at Zebbug, more complete, but more rudimentary in its execution. The chamber's lowest deepest deposits were marked by a small cache of axe pendants. The entrance to the eastern chamber was marked by a substantial damaged shell which may originally have been a musical instrument. 54 adults and 11 children were found in the two chambers, with the western chamber containing the highest number (34) of the adults and a roughly similar proportion of children. A significant detail is that smaller bones, particularly those of the body extremities, were present in larger quantities than those of the more substantial parts of the body were. Animal bone was also found in the two chambers. Sheep and goat was most common and the head was the most highly represented part of the body, perhaps symbolic of the identity of the animal or its symbolic association.

The discoveries at the Brochtorff Circle at Xaghra allow a much more developed understanding of the ritual practice of this population which lived in the period just prior to the first construction of the "temples". Small foundation deposits

appear first to have been made (especially in the western chamber) of valuables which had to be procured outside the Maltese islands. This suggests an important exotic quality attached to these items which had to be competitively acquired from exchange partners in Sicily. Over a number of generations, small extended families appear to have continuously placed complete bodies (without lengthy exposure of the bodies) in one of the two chambers, probably following precise rules of access according to their kin links. At the time of each deposition of a new recently deceased individual, the preceding body was pushed to the back of the chamber, and, when required, larger bones removed entirely from the chamber. This would account for the discovery of a disproportionate number of extremity bones and other parts which fall off a fleshless body (e.g. patella)[1]. There is also undated, but possibly contemporary, evidence from a hollow just outside the tomb of long bones and skull bones which could easily provide the context for some of the bones removed from the chamber. Finally, the ritual appears to have been *closed* at the end of the use of the tomb with the placing of significant objects at the entrance to each chamber, the stele and the large shell respectively, and in the case of the eastern chamber the entrance was physically closed with a stone block.

Temple period death and the impact of the Brochtorff Circle at Xaghra on the understanding of temple period mortuary customs

In the period of the construction of the Maltese temples (substantially the Ggantija and Tarxien phases of c. 3600 – c. 2500BC), the mortuary rituals appear to have enlarged considerably in complexity. It is likely that they were drawn out over time (generations) and space (temple focused landscapes). No human remains (except intrusive examples) have ever been found in the "temples" themselves. The two principal funerary monuments from this phase are the Hal Saflieni underground monument (traditionally called The Hypogeum) and the Brochtorff Circle at Xaghra. These appear to have been the focal points of funerary activity, but other locations also existed which probably played a role in a more complex landscape arena for mortuary practice. It is difficult to establish an impression of this landscape in the urban area of Tarxien, but the Xaghra plateau on Gozo, even though itself today beginning to become part of a modern urban landscape, can be partly reconstructed as an arena of ritual action. The Brochtorff Circle lies between two temple complexes (Santa Verna and Ggantija) (Bonanno *et al.* 1990) and must have been linked to them by processional ways along which the mourners would have moved. The North Cave and Ghar Ta' Ghejzu, which lie along a putative route following the 440 foot contour, contained some human as well as animal bone and deposits of ritual largesse (pottery vessels). Although difficult to reconstruct in detail, the funerary ritual of Malta must be understood in this wider landscape setting.

The focal point of the funerary activity was certainly monuments such as that of Hal Saflieni and the Brochtorff Circle at Xaghra. The Hal Saflieni monument expresses the architectural complexity of funerary space, arranged in almost 70 compartments in eleven levels of access, reaching down to more than 10 m from the surface. The Brochtorff circle at Xaghra which has been excavated to more than 5 m from the surface, is also arranged in numerous compartments (about 5 of Hal Saflieni dimensions, but with numerous sub-compartments), although currently only in three to four levels of access. The contents of the Hal Saflieni compartments were, however, either destroyed (most of the human bone) or deprived of detailed context (much of the artefactual material). Some of the upper levels of deposits of the Brochtorff Circle at Xaghra suffered a similar fate in nineteenth century excavations, but the recent fieldwork uncovered substantially intact deposits which allow a tentative reconstruction of the multi-phase character of funerary ritual and the organisation of funerary

[1] It should be noted that Corinne Duhig, the osteologist, retreated from this position in the publication, but from an anthropological perspective this interpretation of the evidence appears to this author to make sense.

space, compensating for some of the knowledge lost from Hal Saflieni.

Over 200,000 fragments of human bone were recovered from the Brochtorff Circle at Xaghra, representing at least 700 individuals. It is, however, not simply the large quantity of human remains which is important, perhaps one of the largest samples of prehistoric populations in Europe, but the distribution of these remains which is of great interest. Analysis currently nearing completion, but which will be published as part of the final report, suggests that varying distributions of body parts in different compartments reflect the various stages of the funerary ritual. Some bodies were articulated and intact (especially deep - vertically or horizontally - in the cave system) **[Plate 1]**. Other deposits contained the residual parts left behind once larger bones were removed. Further deposits were composed of those larger bones bundled by selected body part. Most particularly one area near the entrance to the site was where skulls had been stacked. These are deliberate deposits that represent the products of ritual practice whose full reconstruction is a challenge to the archaeologist.

Only an abbreviated version of a funerary ritual can be given here, but this will at least give some idea of the interest of these deposits. It is highly probable that a funerary procession would have entered the complex from the east between two upright monoliths and passed into the megalithic circle over a threshold with strong similarities to those found in the "temples". This threshold was flanked by burial pits. One of these burial pits had an articulated male at its base covered by the disarticulated remains of what appear to be his ancestors and sealed by cobbling. The funerary procession would thus every time have passed over a significant ancestor before descending into the natural, but architecturally embellished, caves below. Behind a stone screen, to the left of the entrance, and presided over by a small image of twin seated corpulent individuals, significant items for the funerary ceremony were kept, including a group of stick figurines which appear to have been hand-held during ceremonies (Stoddart *et al.* 1993). This was also the location of a stone bowl, probably employed for the washing of the newly deceased, and it indeed contained a small figurative representation of a human leg. In some ceremonies, bodies were buried here, particularly early on in the history of the site and left untouched. In later ceremonies, this was a place reserved for children. If the deceased was not left here, the body was placed in deeper recesses of the cave system, in one of the many niches partly created by nature and partly embellished by the strategic placing of imported globigerina blocks within the coralline cave system. On other occasions we can envisage ceremonies to re-arrange bones, either as a practical need to make room for the newly dead or as part of a ceremony to revisit the dead. Some deposits were packages of long bones and skulls placed in separate pits or compartments, sometimes with significant parts of an animal skeleton, whether dog, sheep or pig. The lowest part of the cave system seems to have been a deposit reserved for displaced larger body parts. An area close to the entrance was reserved for skulls. The articulation of these disarticulated bones appears to reflect a multi-stage series of burial ceremonies contrasting again with the finality of modern burial.

These underground complexes were the focal point of funerary ritual, but many other contemporary deposits have been found in the Maltese landscape. The six rock-cut tombs investigated at Xemxija in 1955 were substantially intact and may represent the continuation of the pre-existing tradition of extended family ceremonies (Evans 1971: 112-116). It is difficult to estimate the minimum number of individuals represented from the bone report, but a conservative estimate based on patella numbers[2] gives a figure of at least 29 adults with a range of children (Pike 1971a). The osteologist suggests that some bones had been reworked in antiquity, again suggesting attention to the human bones after death, in some form of revisit ceremony. The animal bones placed within the tomb contain a high proportion of the meat-bearing bones of sheep (especially lambs) (Pike 1971b),

[2] Divided by two to take account of the maximum number of Left/Right presences.

suggesting that feasting accompanied these revisits. Cow seems to be represented by rib, vertebra and feet fragments, whereas the bones of a further range of species (including some wild animals) were much more fragmentary. A similar but isolated and truncated example of a rock-cut tomb is that of Busbisija which contained five individuals (Evans 1971: 28). Other deposits may represent further stages in the multi-phase burial ritual where the bones of the deceased were revisited and communal feasting undertaken. One candidate is the burial cave of Bur Mghez (Evans 1971: 40-1), where some of the skeletons were still articulated, but where others had been re-arranged in prehistoric times into discrete (?) piles of bodies parts including 39 skulls. Deer, pig and tortoise bones were found with these deposits. No detailed records remain of the bones themselves or of their distribution, but these finds can be reinterpreted in the light of recent discoveries at the Brochtorff Circle at Xaghra as a smaller funerary site interlinked with focal funerary sites such as Hal Saflieni and the Brochtorff Circle.

Post-temple building period death

The funerary ceremonies changed drastically at the end of the period of temple construction (c. 2500BC). The traditional interpretation has been a change of people. An equally probable interpretation is a radical re-assessment of ideology by the same people (and this is the current opinion of the writer). Only a modern study of the DNA of populations of the two funerary traditions will help resolve this issue. Whatever the identity of the people, the funerary ceremonies were now centred around cremation rather than multi-stage inhumation. The principal evidence is from the "temple" of Tarxien which was re-used as cremation ceremony, probably after a period of abandonment of the temple (Evans 1971: 149-166). It is difficult to reconstruct the precise funerary ceremony, but it seems that cremation took place elsewhere (although some burning was *in situ*), and that the poorly burnt bones (still dressed in a coloured (reddish yellow) fabric shroud) and ashes were gathered together and placed in large jars with three handles. Many grave offerings accompanied the remains of the deceased, including smaller pots, carbonised grain and many bronze implements. The small dolmen (uprights covered with capstones) that mark parts of the Maltese landscape have been associated chronologically with this same phase when excavated, but have never been conclusively associated with death rituals, except by association with typologically similar monuments in Puglia (Italy). Although these monuments cannot be directly associated with funerary rites - no human bones have ever been found within them - they could have played a role in the display of bodies prior to the conclusive funerary ceremony and almost certainly played a role in the articulation of the ritual landscape of Malta, in which funerary rites must have had a central role.

A complete reconstruction - the use of new technologies

"Aut ubi concava pulsa saxa sonant vocisque offensa resultat imago".
(or where the hollow rocks ring when struck and the echoed voice rebounds from the shock).
(Vergil Georgics Book IV)

The temptation is to employ new technologies to provide the full range of sensory perception of Maltese funerary ceremonies. Computerised reconstruction was undertaken as part of the Anglo-Maltese project (Stoddart & Chalmers 1996a, 1996b). The danger is to produce one *received* and authoritative account of the arena of ritual and thus constrain the interpretation down too narrow a route. Work must proceed carefully from the known excavated evidence and any antiquarian records to a base reconstruction on which various alternative reconstructions can be erected. Computerised approaches can now assess the internal acoustics of buildings, or, where the complete structure exists, these results can be investigated by the placing of microphones in significant positions within enclosed chambers such as Palaeolithic caves and megalithic tombs (Lawson *et al.* 1998). All these approaches are attempts to progress beyond the dry bones that form the basis

of our interpretations without entering the speculative world of mother goddesses and the New Age with which the Maltese monuments and other prominent monuments like Stonehenge have been plagued.

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