

GOZO AND ITS CULTURE



Edited by
Lino Briguglio
and
Joseph Bezzina

Proceedings of the 1995 Löwenbräu Seminar
organised by the University of Malta Gozo Centre
in collaboration with the
Ministry for Gozo and Löwenbräu Malta

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Proceedings of the 1995
Löwenbräu Seminar
held at L-Imgarr Hotel, Gozo
on 3 March 1995.

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Front cover: Lace-making in Gozo. *Photo Gino Galea*



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The opening session of the 1995 Löwenbräu Seminar on the theme “Gozo and its Culture”. H. E. Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, President of Malta (third from right) and Dr Paul Debattista (second from right) inaugurated the seminar. The opening session was also addressed by Rev. Professor Peter Serracino Inglott, Rector of the University of Malta (second from left). The seminar was concluded by a speech by the Minister for Gozo, the Hon. Anton Tabone (third from left). Also in the picture are the joint convenors of the seminar, Rev. Dr. Joseph Bezzina (first from left) and Prof. Lino Briguglio (first from right).



A section of the audience at the 1995 Löwenbräu Seminar

Preface

The history of human settlement in Gozo goes back seven thousand years. It could be said that Gozitan culture started to develop with the arrival of the first settlers from nearby Sicily, and reached a zenith during the Temple period as evidenced by the monumental Ġgantija temples. Subsequent historical phases left their mark on the Gozitan way of life, and this has led to the development of contemporary Gozitan culture with its own distinct identity and character.

The purpose of this book is to present, in one volume, a number of papers on Gozitan culture, originally presented during a seminar "Gozo and its Culture" held at L-Imgarr Hotel, Gozo, on 3 March 1995.

The themes of the papers can be grouped into three. The first four papers look at Gozitan culture from a historical perspective, and cover the prehistoric period (Bonanno), the Greek and Roman times (Vella), the Middle Ages (Fiorini), and the period during which the islands were ruled by the Knights of Malta and by the British (Bezzina).

The second group of papers relates to the Gozitan cultural heritage, and the topics dealt with are folklore (Attard), religion (Bishop Cauchi), language (Aquilina) and art (Buhagiar).

The final paper (Briguglio) examines the impact of economic conditions on the culture of Gozo, and looks at the contemporary Gozitan way of life.

The book is introduced by Rev. Prof. Peter Serracino Inglott who presents some philosophical observations prompted by the classical references to Gozo and the later development of its distinct cultural identity.

The book also includes three papers based on the inauguration and closing speeches at the seminar, which, as can be seen, do not contain

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mere ceremonial words, but make an important contribution to the discussion.

Some of the opinions expressed in the book are open to debate, and we would like to state that we do not necessarily agree with everything that is written in the papers. We anticipate that some of the arguments presented here will give rise to a degree of controversy, and it is hoped that this will help to shed more light on the development of Gozitan culture.

We would like to thank H.E. Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, President of Malta, for accepting to inaugurate the seminar and to participate in the proceedings, and to the Hon. Anton Tabone, Minister for Gozo, for his support in the organisation of the seminar and the publication of this book.

Thanks are also due to Professor Peter Serracino Inglott, Rector of the University of Malta, for the initiative he took some years ago to establish the Gozo Centre and for the backing he extends to the activities of the Centre.

We would also like to express our gratitude to Dr Paul Debattista, General Manager of Löwenbräu, for sponsoring the seminar during which the papers included in this book were presented and discussed.

We would like to acknowledge the support for this publication extended by Professor Salvino Busuttil, Director-General of the Foundation for International Studies.

We are very grateful to Mrs Maryrose Vella for her secretarial assistance in the preparation for the seminar and in the editing of this book.

Finally, but not least, we would like to thank the authors of the papers, for their contribution to the seminar and to this book.

Lino Briguglio
Joseph Bezzina
June 1995

Introduction

Peter Serracino Inglott

There are reasons why Gozo is a particularly apt environment for a cultural centre such as the University of Malta is in the process of building up in collaboration with the Ministry for Gozo. Among these reasons, there is Cardinal Newman's opinion that the main objective of a University is to provide an environment conducive to reflective and imaginative mental exercise. I tried to show briefly the applicability of this opinion to Gozo in the introduction to the proceedings of last year's seminar on Tourism.

By way of introduction to this collection of papers, with their largely historical focus, I am prompted by the very erudite discussion of both the classical references to Gozo and the later development of its distinct cultural identity to indulge in some musings which may be taken as a symptom of the professional disease my flesh is heir to as a result of my philosophical studies.

In the discussions I have read about whether Gozo is Calypso's island or not, I have of course often read that Homer was not concerned with establishing a realistic geographical itinerary for Odysseus, but rather with symbolic purposes. But I have never come across a discussion as to how apt would Gozo be as the correlative location for the Calypso episode in the symbolic schema of the Odyssey. Moreover, I surmise that the answer to that question might well turn out to also be another answer to the question about the justification of the University Gozo Centre's existence.

In the Odyssey, Calypso's island is a sort of halting-place where Odysseus is waiting, at the beginning of the poem, to be summoned back to a properly human life by the will-power of his son and the strong desire for his return to the real world as opposed to the quasi-unreal quality of existence on Calypso's island. It has, therefore, a double meaning.

Introduction

On the one hand, it is the place where Odysseus is undergoing punishment, for his part in the Sun cows episode which had led his companions to their death, through the disfunctioning of his memory. On Calypso's island, he gets no material to spin into a story, nothing happens that can become news, his life-story becomes just a gaping hole.

On the other hand, it is the place where it is possible to be revived, to be re-energized for flight, to rise from the depths of melancholy to a new joy in life, provided that the love of the son is rekindled for the Father.

Throughout the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is tormented by the fear of the loss of memory, the great threat which could prevent him finding his way back home to a truly human existence. His obsession is to preserve the past in his mind, for its disappearance would spell out the loss of himself as a human being. For Odysseus, recalling the past is a wager against death.

Calypso's island is the turning point where Odysseus, the representative of man as the voyager in exile from his true home, plunges deepest down in the direction of oblivion and is turned round upwards towards the destination of fulfilment of the self through the loving remembrance of offspring.

How much does this characterisation fit the cultural identity of Gozo, as it has been fashioned first by geomorphology and then by the chequered history recalled in this book? How many of us first found here to be a place of escape, where the reality of the modern world seemed to ebb away, only to be called back with a new impetus to commitment to the passionate pursuit of true human and family values? At any rate, it is my hope that this book, an exercise both in recalling the past and in exploring a present identity may prove for us an equivalent to the call in the heart of Telemachus which summoned Odysseus back to himself.

The Prehistory of Gozo

Anthony Bonanno

It is generally agreed that the physical environment is a determinant and conditioning factor in the formation and development of cultures, and the prehistoric cultures that planted their roots on the island of Gozo were no exception, even if one of them, the temple culture, achieved heights of grandeur and magnificence that went beyond what one would normally deem possible, given the limited local resources. So much so, that for decades students of prehistoric societies and ancient civilisations could not explain the phenomenal rise of the megalithic temple culture on Gozo and Malta if not as a by-product of the richer and more sophisticated proto-urban civilisations of the Aegean and the Near East (Evans 1959; MacKie 1977).

It should be said from the very start that the general background, the physical environment (geological and geomorphological) in which prehistoric man conducted his activity on Gozo, is almost identical to that prevailing in Malta (Bowen-Jones 1972; Alexander 1988). This accounts, at least in part, for the fact that there were no essential or marked differences between the cultural development of Gozo and that of its sister island (Bonanno 1990). The more noticeable difference even today is the greater abundance of spring water and, therefore, the greater fertility of the smaller island, due to a more extensive preservation of the upper porous crust of coralline limestone and its underlying blue clay layer than in the larger island (Zammit Maempel 1977; Alexander 1988).

THE NEOLITHIC AGE

The island's apparent greater fertility might well be the factor, together with its more northern position, behind the possible earlier settlement of man on Gozo than on Malta. This has been suggested on the grounds that some pottery collected from certain caves at Il-Mixta (Veen and van der

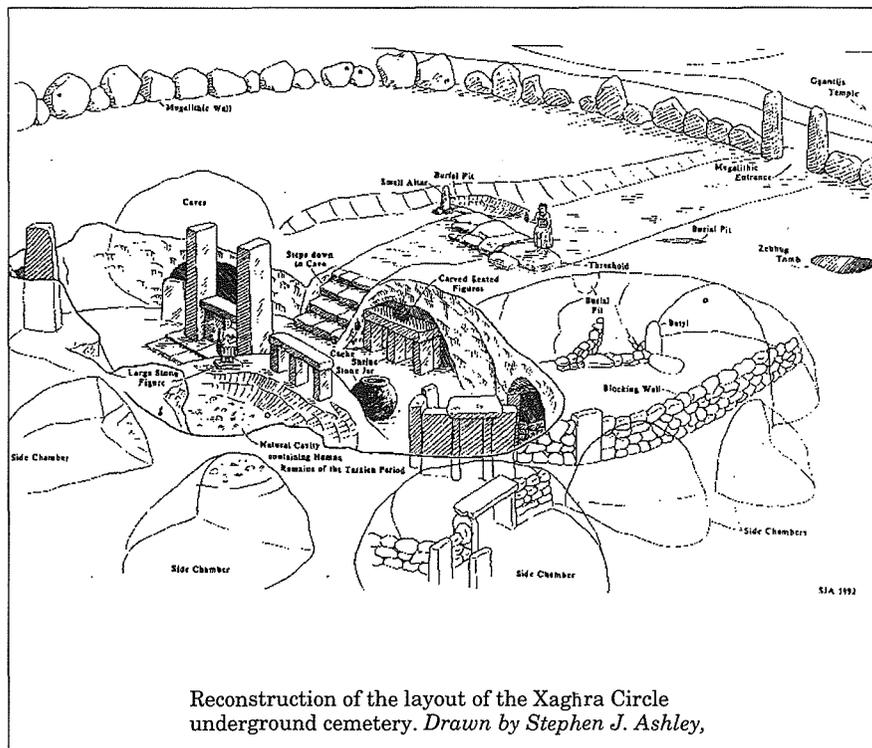
Blom 1992: 17-18, fig. 13; Bonanno 1993: 222, fig. 4) looked more closely related to that of Stentinello, in Sicily, which is generally retained to be the parent- culture of the first colonisers of the Maltese islands (Trump 1966:21-24; Evans 1971:208-209). Unfortunately, these pottery sherds, a selection of which is exhibited in the Gozo Archaeological Museum, were retrieved from an unofficial and scientifically uncontrolled 'excavation' and their scientific value is, therefore, very limited.

The only other excavated archaeological site in Gozo that has produced Neolithic material is Santa Verna which was explored in 1911 (Ashby *et al.* 1913: 105-123; Evans 1971: 186-190). This site, together with a marked concentration of pottery sherds of the *Red Skorba* phase recently identified on the slope of one of the hills close to Xaghra (Brown 1990: 22), suggest that the settlement pattern on Gozo in the Neolithic age was not limited to cave dwelling, but extended also to open villages (De Lucca 1990: 122); the site of Iċ-Ċnus ta' San Ġwann at Ix-Xewkija was mainly a temple period complex and produced only a few sherds of the Neolithic period when Fr. Magri made some trial excavations there (Magri 1906; Evans 1971:191-192). Claims of evidence of a Neolithic settlement at Taċ-Ċawla, near Rabat (Veen and van der Blom 1992: 19-26), have also been confirmed, though to a limited extent, by an archaeological investigation made by a research team from Oxford University in April 1995 (Calvert 1995: 6-7).

THE TEMPLE PERIOD

Gozo seems to have participated in full in the megalithic temple phenomenon. There are even reasons to believe that in some aspects it might have had a leading, more precocious role, at least in the earlier phases. The temples of Ġgantija are unparalleled in Malta for their size and daring architecture within the earlier phase of temple construction (Evans 1971:172-185; Bonanno 1986: 27-33). The same temples are still the most imposing and the best preserved specimens of temple architecture. Gozo also possesses a number of minor temple sites which are still unexplored, such as, Ta' Marziena, Borġ il-Gharib, Mreġzbiet and Borġ ta' l-Imramma (Evans 1971: 170-172; Bonanno 1986: 37-41). A preliminary surface survey and measured drawing of the standing structures will go some way towards a better understanding of their identity and their relation

The Prehistory of Gozo



with the Ġgantija temples; but there is no doubt that it will take a proper, scientifically conducted excavation, to reveal their full significance.

As a result of the joint research project which was set up in 1987 between the universities of Malta, Cambridge and Bristol, and the Department of Museums of Malta, remains of the only settlement site in Gozo for the temple period have been investigated on the north side of Mgarr Road, Ġhajnsielem (Malone *et al.* 1988). The scanty but important remains consisted of the surviving half of one large oval hut (about 8m. long) with a central mud-brick pillar and with a much smaller hut (about 2m. in diameter) to its south. Both structures were partly rock-cut and partly built up of mud-brick. Traces of the latter were encountered in several places. The superimposed *torba* floors had been recognised for what they were by Mr. Joe Tabone of Xaghra in a vertical section of a field deposit

which had been sliced through for the laying of the foundations of a newly built house right on the side of the thick rubble wall which had been protecting the hut remains for the last few centuries.

This discovery is of great interest and importance because, after Skorba in Malta (Trump 1966), it provides us with the only site with evidence of habitation datable to the temple period - to which one must add the *Tarxien* phase hut freshly excavated at Tač-Ċawla (Calvert 1995) - thus confirming our hypothesis that the temple builders lived in modest houses consisting of huts constructed of very perishable materials, in sharp contrast with the durable and monumental architecture of their temples (Bonanno 1986a: 21-22).

The same joint research programme has, over the last eight years, made possible the excavation of an underground cemetery at Xagħra which, in more ways than one, parallels that of the Hal Saflieni hypogeum. For that reason, the exploration of this site promises to fill a number of serious gaps in our knowledge of the temple people's mortuary rituals that were left open by the unscientific and undocumented excavation of its Maltese counterpart at the beginning of this century (Malone *et al* 1993: 78-79). A system of underground natural caves in the coralline limestone was utilised by the temple builders as a communal cemetery, eventually embellished by architectural features constructed of imported *globigerina* limestone blocks, and further monumentalised by a circular boundary wall with its monumental entrance facing the Ġgantija temples (Bonanno *et al.* 1990). The circle of upright megaliths was still in a fairly good condition when it was painted on two watercolours by the artist Charles de Brochtorff in the 1820s.

Besides thousands of human bones - as well as some animal skeletons - that await proper study in order to reveal the physical appearance and other attributes of the temple builders (Malone *et al.* 1993: 81), the Xagħra Circle has produced flint tools and exotic 'prestige' objects of imported hard stone, and a number of anthropomorphic figurines that are quite singular in their form and in the message they were intended to impart. Some of the imported green, axe-shaped pendants reached Malta from the Calabria region in southern Italy, while a few jadeite items came all the way from the Alpine district (Stoddart *et al.* 1993: 7). The possession and display of these 'prestige' objects must have surely

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Limestone statuette with traces of colouring, representing two corpulent figures seated on an elaborate couch. The headless figure holds a cup on its lap, the other holds a small figure of the same type (Brochtorff Circle).

served as a mark of social distinction among the members of this prehistoric community.

Highly artistic and surprisingly well preserved, including clear traces of colour, is a statuette portraying two corpulent figures of the typical Tarxien type sitting on an elaborately carved couch and holding on their lap, one a hollow cup, and the other a miniature figure of the same type (Stoddart *et al.* 1993: 10-11, fig. 6-7; Malone *et al.* 1993: 82). It might never be possible for us to be certain of the meaning of this group but we are entitled to propose educated guesses (Bonanno 1992: 80-83). The same applies to a group of strange figurines carved on *globigerina* limestone representing plain subrectangular bodies surmounted by human heads in various stages of carving. One guess is that the group could have been

a shaman's kit held together in some sort of bundle before they were buried (Malone *et al.* 1993: 11).

Overall, the community inhabiting Gozo during this period seems to have formed a relatively structured society, sustained by a thriving agricultural economy, making it possible to undertake ambitious public building programmes, probably at the service of a deep-rooted religious ideology.

THE BRONZE AGE

The Xaghra Circle seems to have been occupied by the Bronze Age population that settled on the two islands sometime after 2500 B.C. A grey, clayey layer that covered significant parts of the area suggests that the site was probably covered by a group of huts built of clay which eventually crumbled into dust. The site occupied one of the highest points on the Xaghra plateau and thus responded to an important requirement in the choice of settlement sites in the troubled times of the Bronze Age, that of natural defensibility. In fact most of the other *Borġ in-Nadur* phase settlements are placed on flat-topped hills - like that of In-Nuffara, opposite Ġgantija - which characterise the Gozitan landscape.

In the Bronze Age, the Ta' Ċenċ area occupies a special, even unique, place. Apart from an earlier temple, the characterising structure here is the dolmen, a single-roomed feature consisting of a large, flat and roughly-shaped slab supported by smaller vertical stones. There are at least three specimens at Ta' Ċenċ (Bonanno 1986: 39-43). As dolmens are thought to have served a funerary purpose, and since no settlement remains have ever been recorded here, the Ta' Ċenċ area seems to have been reserved for a religious, or rather non-secular, purpose.

EPILOGUE

Unlike Malta, Gozo has not yet provided us with physical evidence of an overlap between the last of the Bronze Age peoples and the Phoenician colonisers. The latter's arrival on the scene marks the end of prehistory in the Maltese islands. On Malta they seem to have exercised a gradual and peaceful penetration evolving into an almost total acculturation of

the indigenous inhabitants. It would be interesting to find evidence of the process of their colonisation of the smaller island.

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