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OF CULTURE**

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HIATUS OR CONTINUITY IN PREHISTORIC MALTA? FROM EARLY NEOLITHIC TO TEMPLE PERIOD

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This paper was inspired by the recent online publication of a 2015 Master's dissertation at a British university in which claims were made that first, the first human settlement on the Maltese islands goes back to 5500 BCE, and second, certain cultural aspects of the temple culture were inherited from the previous Neolithic culture (Dorsey 2015: i, 1-3). The following is a critique of these two claims in light of long-established chronological parameters for Maltese prehistory (Renfrew 1972; 1973: 151-2), and of recent findings resulting from a multidisciplinary research programme concluded in 2018, some results of which have already made it to the public domain (Barratt et al. 2019).

NEOLITHIC		PHASE	DATE
		GHAR DALAM	5200-4500 BCE
		GREY SKORBA	4500-4400 BCE
		RED SKORBA	4400-4100 BCE
TEMPLE PERIOD			
	ŻEBBUĠ	BCE 4100-3800	
	MĠARR	BCE 3800-3600	
	ĠGANTIJA	BCE 3600-3000	
	SAFLIENI	BCE 3300-3000	
	TARXIEN	BCE 3000-2500	

Table 1. The chronological sequence of the first two periods of Maltese prehistory at the start of the present century (after Pace 2004: 18; Bonanno 2017: 2).

The current chronological sequence (Table 1) was firmly established with the earliest extensive application of radiocarbon chronometry to Maltese prehistory after the momentous excavations conducted by David Trump on the multi-period site of Skorba in

1961-1963 (Trump 1966, in particular Table I). The respective absolute dates for each period and their sub-phases, however, were widely adjusted and pushed back by several centuries on the basis of dendrochronology calibration by Colin Renfrew in 1972 and 1973 (see above). An overhaul of the sequence was suggested by Emmanuel Anati in 1987, but it was never taken up by the Anglophone archaeological literature (Anati 1988: 17). Many more radiocarbon determinations have been produced in the meantime, mainly from the excavation of an extensive underground cave cemetery at Xagħra in Gozo (1987-1994) which shed extensive and fundamentally important new light on funerary rituals and other aspects of the temple people, but they did not alter in any way the chronological sequence and its respective dates. It seems that only with the FRAGSUS research project (2013-2018) have both of these been in some respects challenged.¹ The generally accepted date for the earliest evidence of human presence on the Maltese islands was the rounded figure of 5000 BCE. Modest attempts were made along the years to raise the date to 5200 (Pace 2004: 18, 22; Dorsey 2015: 4, contradicting her date given on p. 1), 5500 BCE (Robb 2001: 177), and even to 6000 BCE (Anati 1988: 17). In their 2019 paper, a number of members of the FRAGSUS research team raised the official figure to c. 5800 BCE on the basis of a selection of as many as 400 new ASM radiocarbon determinations derived from the project (Barratt et al. 2019: 17).² That date, howev-

1 FRAGSUS (for *Fragility and sustainability in restricted island environments: Adaptation, cultural change and collapse in prehistory*) is a European Research Council funded project involving archaeologists and scientists from various universities, including Queen's University, Belfast and the universities of Malta, Cambridge and Liverpool, and other institutions, such as Heritage Malta and the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage of Malta. Its results are in preparation for publication.

2 These new determinations were made on samples extracted mainly from excavation expeditions of a few weeks on three previously explored sites: Tač-Ċawla, a domestic settlement in central Gozo; Kordin III, the only surviving remains of a temple building from a group of three located on a broad promontory projecting into the Grand Harbour of



Fig. 1a. The Ġgantija temples, Gozo, constructed during the Ġgantija phase (3600-3000 BCE).

Fig. 1b. The exceptionally well-preserved façade of the Ġgantija temples. (source: the author)

er, was from cereal pollen analysis, that is, reflecting agricultural activity. The first cultural evidence is said to date to c. 5500 BCE and, therefore, the actual date of the earliest human settlement still requires further study. This recalls a suggestion made by Francesco Fedele in 1988. Fedele suggested ephemeral seasonal visits by scouting groups from the Stentinello culture

Malta; Santa Verna, on the Xaghra plateau in Gozo, known as a temple site from the still visible group of standing megaliths but now revealing also an earlier domestic occupation. Besides, other samples were extracted from small sondages cut in various strategic locations, such as those in the immediate vicinity of the Ġgantija temples, and from cores drilled in various flood plains and alluvial valleys.

in Sicily in a pre-colonial process lasting as long as a millennium (from 6000 BCE), followed by a fully-fledged occupation or, rather, settlement (Fedele 1988). After all, the cave dwelling at Għar Dalam and, for that matter that of Il-Mixta, did not involve any investment of time and effort, whereas settlement in open-air villages like that of Skorba did. To the latter we can now add the sites of Santa Verna and Taċ-Ċawla, both on the smaller island of Gozo (Barratt et al. 2019: 20-25).

The colonization and settlement processes of the Maltese islands by the early Neolithic farmers from



Fig. 2. The Main Hall in the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, Malta, mimicking the contemporary megalithic architecture of the temples above ground.

Sicily, and their sustained interrelations with their neighbours in Sicily and the obsidian-producing islands beyond it, were dealt with in an earlier paper in this journal (Bonanno 2016). A break from continuity of the first Neolithic culture to the second (or Late) Neolithic one around 4100 BCE was marked by the complete replacement of the pottery repertoire of the last phase of the former (the Red Skorba phase) by a completely different one of the new phase (the Żebbuġ phase), itself inspired by, or an offshoot of, the San Cono/Piano Notaro culture of eastern Sicily. After introducing its imported Sicilian cultural baggage to Maltese soil, this new people started to alienate itself from foreign influence and rely more and more on autochthonous cultural resources. Their descendants, after almost half a millennium, embarked on a new cultural adventure, that of the well-known megalithic temples (fig. 1) and their underground funerary counterpart (the Hypogeum) (fig. 2), as well as the plastic art emanating from them (fig. 3), apparently without inspiration from overseas.

This whole chronological scenario appeared very neatly set and confirmed by a perfectly explained and ordered pottery sequence, without any of the aberrations that normally bedevil other prehistoric sequences.³ Everything fitted orderly in place, mostly resulting from the careful excavations of David

Trump, especially at Skorba. It seems that that is no longer the case, because, apart from extending the Maltese Neolithic further back by half a millennium, the FRAGSUS project has revealed a hiatus of almost a millennium, from 4800 to 3900 BCE, during which the islands were progressively depopulated. Then they received a new population again from Sicily whose DNA was different from that of the Early Neolithic (Barratt et al. 2019: 16-17). This obviously disrupts the previous narrative and chronological sequence and, understandably, requires a good, plausible explanation or, even better, some further research to confirm or refute it. In the first instance, one needs to see how the new dates for this second repopulation, which is equivalent to the one previously assigned to the Żebbuġ phase (4100-3800 BCE), fit with the newly established chronology of the parent San Cono/Piano Notaro culture of neighbouring Sicily (Speciale 2011). Although the new date of 3700 BCE for the rise to the Żebbuġ phase, with its characteristic pottery, seems to fit better with that of the San Cono/Piano Notaro culture, we still need to somehow reconcile this new hiatus of c. 900 years with the Grey and Red Skorba phases, both of which have their sources of inspiration beyond the Sicilian channel, reaching Malta via Sicily: Grey Skorba from the Serra d'Alto culture originating in southern Italy; Red Skorba from the Diana culture in Lipari.

Whatever the scenarios produced by the apparently conflicting dates, the break between the Early

³ Except one outlier, the so-called 'Thermi Ware' which straddled over the Late Neolithic and the Bronze Age, but this matter will be discussed at length on some other occasion.



Fig. 3. A selection (not to scale) of the varied anthropomorphic representations (statues, statuettes, clay figurines) of the Maltese temple culture (3000-2500 BCE).

Neolithic and the Temple Period is now firmly established, irrespective of the length of the intervening hiatus. This is further confirmed by the absence of any degree of continuity of the figurative legacy

of the first period, characterized by the three zoomorphic ceramic handles of the Għar Dalam phase and the set of stylized female figurines from the Red Skorba shrine (fig. 4). In contrast with the as yet total absence of evidence relating to funerary rituals in the first period of Maltese prehistory (the Early Neolithic), the first two phases of the second period provide substantial evidence of underground funerary structures even before the emergence of the striking megalithic temples above ground. These rock-cut tombs have produced anthropomorphic representations which have absolutely no relation to those of the earlier period. They consist mainly of the heads of two anthropomorphic stone stelae (commonly known as statue-menhirs from their similarity to the Sardinian, Corsican and Breton ones) found in two separate tombs, the first one in Malta, the second in Gozo (fig. 5). In the same context of the second tomb a set of amulets carved on animal bone seem to hint at a very minimalist human form, for which there are



Fig. 4. Front and back views of a small female figurine (reconstructed from various fragments) from the so-called Red Skorba Shrine.



Fig. 5. Limestone heads of stelae (or statue-menhirs): left, from a rock-cut tomb in Malta; right, from a two-chamber rock inside the Xaghra Circle, Gozo.

no precedents, neither within Malta nor outside it (fig. 6). What is even more surprising is the discontinuation of both of these figurative expressions in the following phases that saw the efflorescence of the megalithic civilization, in spite of a degree of continuity in the evolution of the ceramic repertoire.

Even the figurative art of the latter seems to emerge from nowhere. It emerges as a fully consummate artistic expression in the final phase of the Temple Period, the Tarxien phase (3000-2500 BCE) without any hint of an embryonic origin and evolutionary process in previous phases, almost like the cave art of the late Palaeolithic in Europe. Attempts have been made to identify outside sources of inspiration for the architecture of the megalithic structures that hosted that art but, ultimately, even these seem to be a purely autochthonous phenomenon, even if the idea of the use of large stone building blocks might have originated elsewhere beyond the Maltese shores and passed on to the other members of the insular community by a privileged group that travelled abroad in search of imported lithic raw materials (Robb 2001), rather than by itinerant proselyte missionaries spreading the seed of a megalithic religious ideology from east to west, as assumed by prehistorians of the first half

of the 20th century (e.g. Elliot Smith 1929).⁴

The group of freestanding statues and statuettes that have presented a special fascination to most scholars was that representing a corpulent but genderless body, almost always without its head, which was intended to be inserted in place when required (fig. 7). Most of them were found among the temple ruins above ground (like Ħaġar Qim and Tarxien) but one was also retrieved from a rock-cut pit in the upper, open-air level of the contemporary Ħal Saflieni subterranean cemetery, better known as the Hypogeum (fig. 8). Ironically, in the same pit two heads were found of similar proportions, one of which was found to fit perfectly inside the hollowed neck of the statuette. For decades these statuettes were thought to represent mother goddesses, in the same category as the contemporary corpulent, but overtly female, figurines from eastern Europe and the Near East and connected with a universal worship of a mother goddess or goddess of fertility, a personification of the mother earth of ancient Mediterranean civilizations.

⁴ Even V. G. Childe (1950), though to a watered-down degree, was an exponent of the movement. An unsuccessful attempt to revive the *ex oriente* diffusionist idea, taking into consideration the new dates provided by radiocarbon archaeometry, was made by Euan MacKie (1977).



Fig. 7. The seven statuettes of a corpulent being found beyond the main entrance of the main temple of Hagar Qim in 1839.

The epitome of this attribution was reached with Marija Gimbutas in her richly documented publications (1982; 1989; 1991). Since then some more statuettes, equally genderless and volumetric, though markedly different in their iconography, have stolen the scene and made it to the archaeological limelight. They come mostly from burial and domestic contexts that belong to the Bonu Ighinu/San Ciriaco cultures of Sardinia (Lugliè 2018: 52-69), which date to considerably earlier (5th-4th millennium) than the Mal-

tese ones. The spiral motives of the Aegean Bronze Age have long been dismissed as the prototypes for the spiral relief decorations so abundantly present in the Tarxien temples, since they are considerably later than the Maltese ones. There are admittedly some intriguing similar patterns in the colour decoration of the *domus de janas* of Thiesi-Mandra Antine III in Sardinia (Tanda 2015: 199) (fig. 9) and the red ochre drawings of the so-called Oracle Room in the Hal Saflieni hypogeum (fig. 10). Does this similarity make them related in any way, one inspiring the other, or both being inspired from an as yet unknown prototype somewhere else in the Mediterranean?

With the recently proposed reversal of the outdated diffusionist view of the movement of megalithism from the east to another one, equally diffusionist, which sees megalithism originating in northwest Europe, from northwest France to Atlantic Iberia, Ireland and Britain and Scandinavia, and finally to the western and central Mediterranean via a maritime route (Schulz Paulsson 2019) (fig. 11),⁵



Fig. 6. A selection of amulets, probably anthropomorphic, from the Żebbuġ phase tomb at the Xagħra Circle, Gozo.

⁵ It should be noted, however, that the calibrated radiocarbon date for the Maltese megalithic culture in this article is outdated and far too low (see contra Renfrew 1972; 1973; Barratt et al. 2019). The text of the article omits Malta even in the last episode of the Mediterranean spread of megaliths. It also ignores the fact that the Maltese monuments, like the British henges (including Stonehenge which is also left out) are not funerary.



Fig. 8. Front and back views of a statuette representing an unclothed corpulent being from the Hypogeum. The two heads which fitted were found in the same pit.

the temptation now could be to see such sculptural iconography (as highlighted above) radiating from Neolithic Sardinia, with its impressive rock-cut tombs known as *domus de janas*, to the Maltese archipelago. Although the funerary rituals of the slightly later Tarxien phase is equally subterranean and rock-cut, there are substantial differences between the two: whereas the *domus de janas* are inspired mainly by domestic architecture and one can refer to them as houses of the dead the Ħal Saffieni hypogeum is essentially a replica of the architectural decoration of the contemporary megalithic architecture above ground.

The lesson that we have learned from past experience

and from the history of prehistoric studies is that we should not rush to assume any movement of ideas in one direction or another, until more stringent archaeological or other scientific evidence, like DNA and stable isotope analysis, as the FRAGSUS project seems to be hinting to provide, are available (Barratt et al. 2019). Till then, it would be safer to stick to the inquisitive but prudent stance of contemporary archaeology with its interdisciplinary and collaborative studies. Let us make our own the lesson provided to us by the historical record of archaeology as an essentially humanistic discipline, but one that also relies wholeheartedly on contributions from the empirical sciences.



Fig. 9. Colour-painted decoration of the *domus de janas* of Thiesi-Mandra Antine III, Sardinia (source: Tanda 2015: 199)



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Fig. 10. View of a limited area of the red ochre pattern decorating the so-called Oracle Room of the Hal Saffieni hypogeum (photo: courtesy of Heritage Malta).

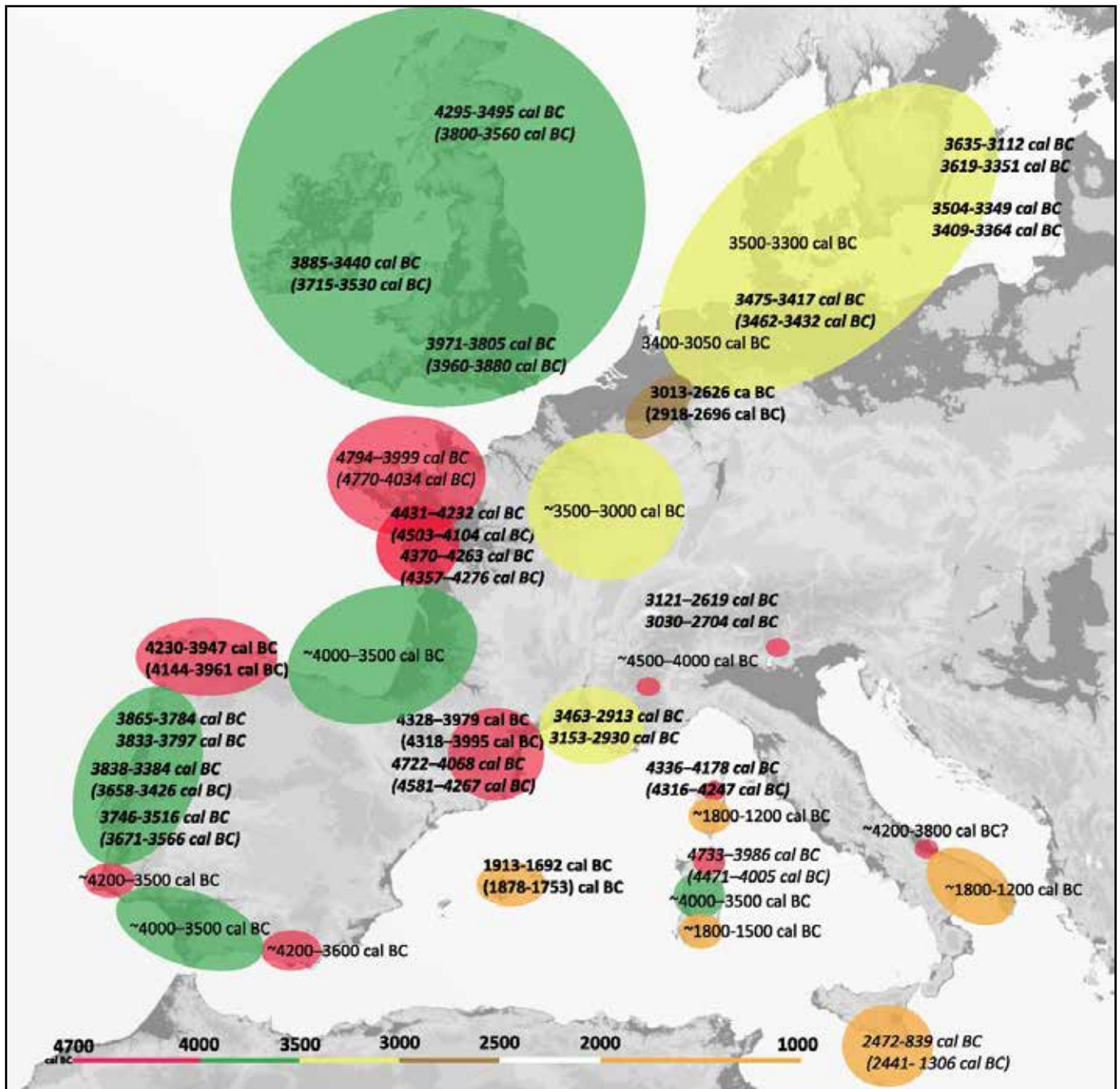


Fig. 11. Map showing estimated dates for the earliest megaliths in European and western Mediterranean regions. Colors show the hypothetical route of the megalithic expansion in three main phases (red–green–yellow), followed by an episode of megalithic Mediterranean revival (orange) in the second millennium BCE. Estimates carry 95% probability (68% probability in brackets) (Schulz Paulsson 2019).

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