



# The Death Cults of Prehistoric Malta

New archaeological excavations reveal that as the ancient island societies suffered from environmental decline, they developed an extreme religious preoccupation with life and death

Malta

By Caroline Malone, Anthony Bonanno, Tancred Gouder, Simon Stoddart and David Trump

**T**he Mediterranean region is a fine laboratory for the scientific study of early religions because so many emerged there. Everyone has heard of the mythology of Greece and the cults surrounding the Roman emperors. Yet those were the religions of city-states not far removed from our own modern societies. Far less well known are the religions of the agricultural communities that preceded the advance of Greco-Roman civilization.

In several of the latter, images of corpulent human figures played an important role. Because some of these figures are recognizably female in shape, archaeologists sometimes refer to them as “fat ladies” and associate them with the celebration of fertility, both human and agricultural. On one small group of islands, those of Malta, such figures became the object of an infatuation that was closely linked to the construction of the earliest free-standing public stone buildings in the world.

Those temples and the underground burial chambers related to them contained many images of obese humans—some no larger than a few centimeters, others the size of giants—as well as of animals and phallic symbols. A collaborative project between British and Maltese archaeologists, of which we are the directors, has made spectacular discoveries about the artistic representations of the so-called mother goddesses. These findings have cast new light on

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**SEATED PAIR** of human figures is helping archaeologists revise their views of Maltese prehistory. The statue was unearthed (*left*) from a subterranean burial complex on the island of Gozo.



how certain religious practices evolved on Malta and perhaps on why they eventually disappeared. They suggest the religion itself encompassed much more than a worship of human fecundity. They also tell a cautionary tale about what happens when a people focus too much energy on worshipping life rather than sustaining it.

Traditionally, archaeological discoveries in Malta have been interpreted—or perhaps we should say misinterpreted—against a backdrop of broad conjecture about the significance of mother goddesses. Figurines fitting that general description date from the Upper Paleolithic era (about 25,000 years ago) to the dawn of metal-using societies in the Neolithic era. A few have been found in western Europe, but the yields have been much richer at sites in Egypt, the Levant, Turkey, Greece, Cyprus and the Balkans. The most elaborate figures come from the islands of Malta in the third millennium B.C.E.

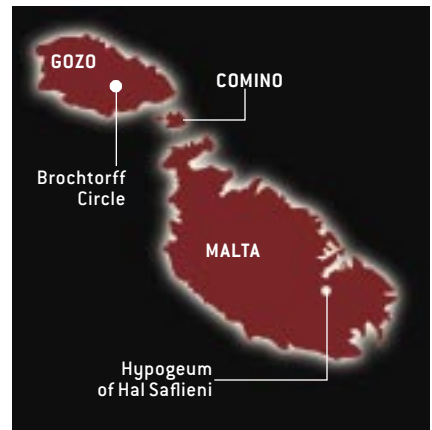
Unfortunately, many of these figurines are far less informative than they might once have been because of the unscientific ways in which they were collected. The dating of the figures is often inaccurate. The records of where and how they were situated are often incomplete, so we cannot know whether the figures were peculiar to burial sites, shrines or houses. We do know that in the Balkans such figures were kept in houses inside specially constructed niches in the walls. In Turkey, at the site of the eighth millennium B.C.E. settlement Çatalhöyük, the finest figurines of clay and stone were associated with the burials of high-status people in special shrines, whereas cruder figurines were found in houses.

The discovery of similar figurines at far-flung sites and from disparate eras

inspired a long tradition of scholarly speculation about a widespread prehistoric religion based on the worship of the mother goddess. In the middle decades of this century, for example, some archaeologists tried to show that a cult of the Eye Goddess (so called because of eye motifs on Mesopotamian idols) diffused throughout the entire Mediterranean. More recently, claims have been made that the Balkans were the center of an Old European religion.

Most modern scholars appreciate that the early cults were radically different in each prehistoric society and that the cults of domestic life were distinct from the cults of death and burial. The example of Malta demonstrates that variation most emphatically. Elsewhere in the Mediterranean, the cults generally involved simple domestic rituals; little effort was invested in religious art or architecture. In Malta, however, the worship of corpulent images gradually blossomed into a consuming passion. That fixation may have been able to take root because conditions there enabled a closed, isolated, introverted society to develop.

Today the dry, rocky, hilly islands of Malta seem inhospitable to farming communities. Little soil or vegetation is present, and obtaining fresh water is a problem. Yet the geological evidence suggests that between 5,000 and 7,000 years ago, a far more inviting scene greeted the early inhabitants. Those people probably cleared the fragile landscape of its natural vegetation fairly rapidly. Thereafter, severe soil erosion gradually robbed the islands of their productivity. The resulting environmental fragility may have caused agricultural yields to be unpredictable. That stress may well have shaped the strange and often extreme society that



**ISLANDS OF MALTA** are dotted with numerous groups of large stone temples. One noteworthy burial site, the hypogeum of Hal Saflieni (right), was discovered in the early part of the 20th century. The authors are studying another burial site within the Brochtorff Circle.

one finds portrayed in the archaeological record of ancient Malta.

The prehistoric archaeology of the Maltese islands is famed for its many huge stone temples. The number of them is staggering; some 20 groups of temples dot the islands, most containing two or three individual massive structures. Radiocarbon dating has indicated that they developed over roughly a millennium, from approximately 3500 to 2500 B.C.E. Because of their prominence in the landscape of Malta and Gozo, the two largest and most populous of the islands, the temples were always obvious targets for enthusiastic archaeological investigations, particularly during the 19th century. Those early workers cleared the rubble and other deposits from the temples long before scientific archaeology had developed. Little effort was made to specify the exact positions of the unearthed artifacts; in particular, the contexts of the cult idols were rarely recorded. Not much can be done now with that incomplete evidence, other

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than to appreciate the sculptors' high level of skill.

Though mostly stripped of its cult images and other decoration, the architecture of the Maltese temples still survives. The design of the temples is regular: each consists of a curved stone facade overlooking an open forecourt. The facade usually has a formal entrance, marked by enormous carved stones and a capstone, that leads to a central corridor. Lobe-shaped apses open onto this corridor at either side and ahead, as in a cloverleaf. The apses often had stone altars (which were frequently carved with spiral or animal designs),

were found together with drinking vessels and sharp flint knives. All these details suggest that sacrifices and feasting may have played an important part in the rituals performed in the temples.

Some information about the layout of the furnishings survived in the temples of Tarxien, which were excavated between 1915 and 1919. The lower half of an enormous statue of a "fat lady" was found in the temple precinct. Next to it is an altar within which the remains of food were found. The altar faced the carved figures of animals that may have represented sacrifices. Deeper within the recesses of the temple, ex-

and foundations for new buildings in the surrounding town of Pawla. Before any skilled archaeologist was called to the scene, most of the chambers were emptied without documenting their contents; the rich assemblage of human remains and grave goods they must have contained probably ended up as fertilizer in nearby fields. A proper study of the hypogeum was finally conducted a few years later by Themistocles Zammit, the curator of the National Museum of Malta and the father of Maltese prehistory. He attempted to salvage what information he could from the near-empty chambers cut in the rock.

Zammit estimated that a fantastic number of individuals—between 6,000 and 7,000—had been buried in the 32 chambers of the hypogeum complex. They had been interred along with grave gifts of pots, obsidian and flint tools, jewelry consisting of beads and stone pendants, and clay and stone figures of obese people and animals. One of the most striking figures is the Sleeping Lady of the Hypogeum. This statuette shows a rotund female lying on her side on an elaborate woven bed. She is clothed in gathered skirts, and her hair is dressed in a small neat bun.

The various passages and chambers of the site strongly resembled the temples aboveground, with upright stone blocks spanned by lintels, steps, hinge holes for barriers and perhaps painted decorations. Nevertheless, the primary function of the hypogeum was clearly

**A fantastic number of individuals—estimated between 6,000 and 7,000—had been buried in the 32 chambers.**

carefully plastered floors and walls, and other decorations painted with red ocher, a pigment probably imported from Sicily. They also feature tie-holes, which in some cases were perhaps for fastening animals to the walls, and holes in the ground that were evidently for draining liquids. In many instances, substantial quantities of animal bones, particularly those of sheep and goats,

cavators found the images of people who may have been priests, caches of precious pendants and even architectural models of the temples themselves.

The discovery in 1902 of the hypogeum, or subterranean burial chamber, at Hal Saflieni added another dimension to the cults of early Malta. Construction workers stumbled across this remarkable site while excavating cellars

for burial, as the thousands of bones attest. Yet it may have been more than simply a huge tomb. Its elaborately carved form, so similar in design to the temples, hints that it was also a temple for the dead, central to the rituals of death, burial and the afterlife.

The great number of figurines from both the temples and the ornate burial hypogeum of Hal Saflieni have fueled



**FAT LADY** figurines representing mother goddesses were made by many early Mediterranean cultures, but those from Malta are the most elaborate. Not all the human figures from Malta are clearly female, however, which suggests that the ancient religion there involved much more than just the worship of human and agricultural fertility.

engravings show a site that consists of a stone wall and entrance that encircle a huge rough hole at the center; several megaliths also stand within the enclosure. In one drawing, a man is shown climbing from the hole, holding an object shaped like a human skull.

That series of pictures was the only clue left to suggest that an archaeological site was located on the plateau. It served as a starting point for our team, which set out to rediscover whatever remained underneath the flat field, guided by local archaeologist Jo Attardo. Using the most up-to-date scientific techniques, such as ground-penetrating radar, we conducted topographic and geophysical surveys of the area to assess the nature of the buried rock. In 1987 we succeeded in once again locating the Bayer excavation within a circle that had been found 20 years earlier.

Since then, hard reexcavation has been done at the site. Over an area of about a quarter acre, we needed to remove not only the 19th-century backfill but also the rubble from cave collapses that had filled several deep natural cavities to a depth of more than four meters. Ultimately the true nature of the site became clear, and the rich array of recovered artifacts and human remains testified to its importance.

After the previous depredations at the site, we wanted to ensure that it was reexcavated with all the care and precision available to modern science. We therefore recorded and photographed every item at the base level of the caves in situ from several directions for a three-dimensional record of its position and appearance. Samples were taken for dating and also for studies of the local environment and subtle stratigraphy of the site. Paleoanthropological methods helped us to reconstruct a profile of the buried human population.

ideas (some plausible, some fantastic) about the supposed fertility cults and rituals of Malta. Some archaeologists have hypothesized that Maltese society may have been a powerful matriarchy dominated by priestesses, female leaders and mother goddesses. Those theories were always based on an implicit faith in the meaning of the artifacts—a faith as devout, in its way, as the prehistoric religion itself but lacking much scientific foundation.

In recent years, an excavation at the site of the Brochtorff Circle on Gozo has uncovered important evidence

about the prehistoric rituals of death. The Brochtorff Circle, a megalithic enclosure on the summit of the Xaghra plateau, was first discovered in the 1820s by Otto Bayer, the lieutenant governor of Gozo. Vague historical records suggest that a typically haphazard treasure hunt at the site followed, from which no findings or documentation survived. Those efforts obliterated all surface traces of the structure. Fortunately, though, a roving Maltese artist, Charles Brochtorff, made several sketches of the work while it was in progress. His accurate, detailed watercolors and

We kept scrupulous computer records.

Unlike the great hypogeum of Hal Saflieni on Malta, which consists mainly of artificial carved chambers, the Brochtorff site on Gozo is fundamentally a series of natural caves with numerous interconnecting chambers. Erosion and perhaps earthquakes have cracked the thin rocky roof of the caves, resulting in several meters of rockfall and jumbled archaeological deposits. The caves were crumbling even 5,000 years ago. The prehistoric community, which by that

one of the chambers stood a small upright monolith, a so-called menhir, bearing a crudely carved face that guarded the doorway.

The later burials, which were contemporary with the great Tarxien period of temple building, were different. The emphasis on small family groups appears to have been supplanted by a more ritualized and elaborate cult of the dead. Part of the evidence for that conclusion comes from the megalithic construction of the Brochtorff Circle

Inside the caves the Tarxien builders leveled the earlier burials to provide a fresh (albeit bone-riddled) surface for the installation of stone monuments. The niches and smaller caverns were subdivided with pairs of upright stones and rough walls, which created additional, enclosed places for burials. At the center of the main cavern, the Maltese builders set up megalithic slabs in a semicircle, at the heart of which was a huge carved stone bowl. The stonework surrounding this bowl was ele-

## The burial rites evidently included the progressive removal of bones from earlier burials to allow space for later ones.

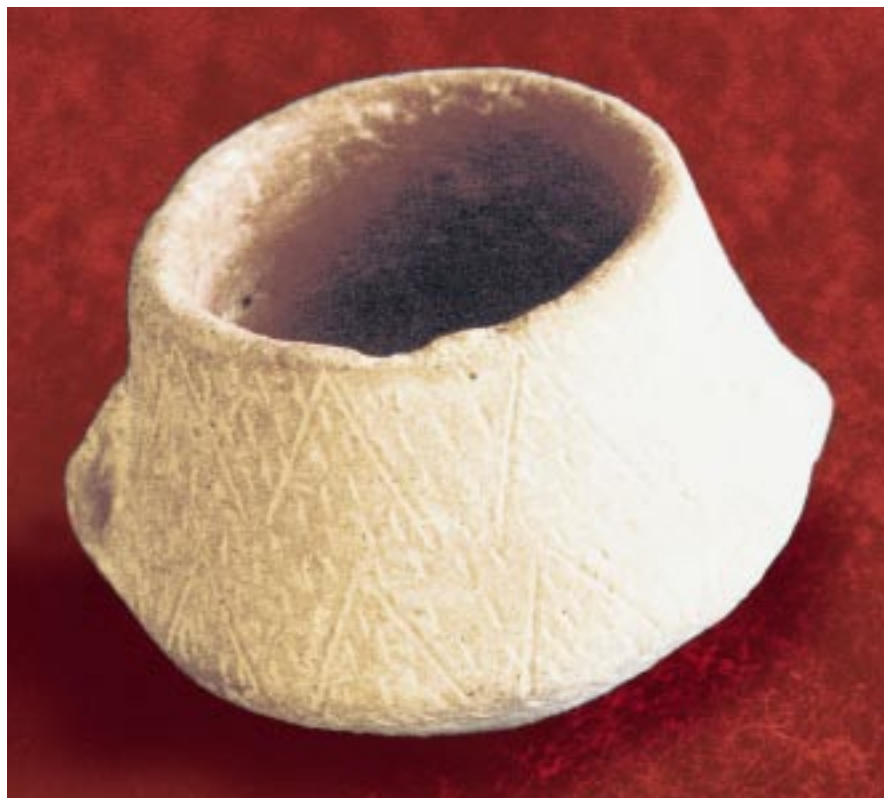
time had already been using the caves for the burial of the dead for perhaps 1,000 years, began to insert carved stone supports under the cave roof in a vain attempt to control the collapse.

The burial complex at the Brochtorff site was in use for about 1,500 years, a period spanning several stages in the evolution of Maltese religion and society. In the early Zebbug period between 4000 and 3500 B.C.E., burial rituals were simple. The dead were placed in collective chambers that were either in caves or in tombs cut into the rock. Each chamber may have held the members from a single family or lineage group. One such tomb was found inside the circle in 1988. The burial rites evidently included the progressive removal of bones from earlier burials to allow space for later ones; the large removed bones may have been dumped in other parts of the caves.

A variety of gifts were interred with the dead: pottery, bone and stone beads and pendants, stone axes made of metamorphic rocks, flint and obsidian blades, shell pendants, and shell and bead necklaces. The bone pendants often have budlike appendages suggestive of arms and heads. Red ocher was spread lavishly over the grave goods and also over the dry white bones of the dead (perhaps in a symbolic attempt to restore them to life). At the entrance to

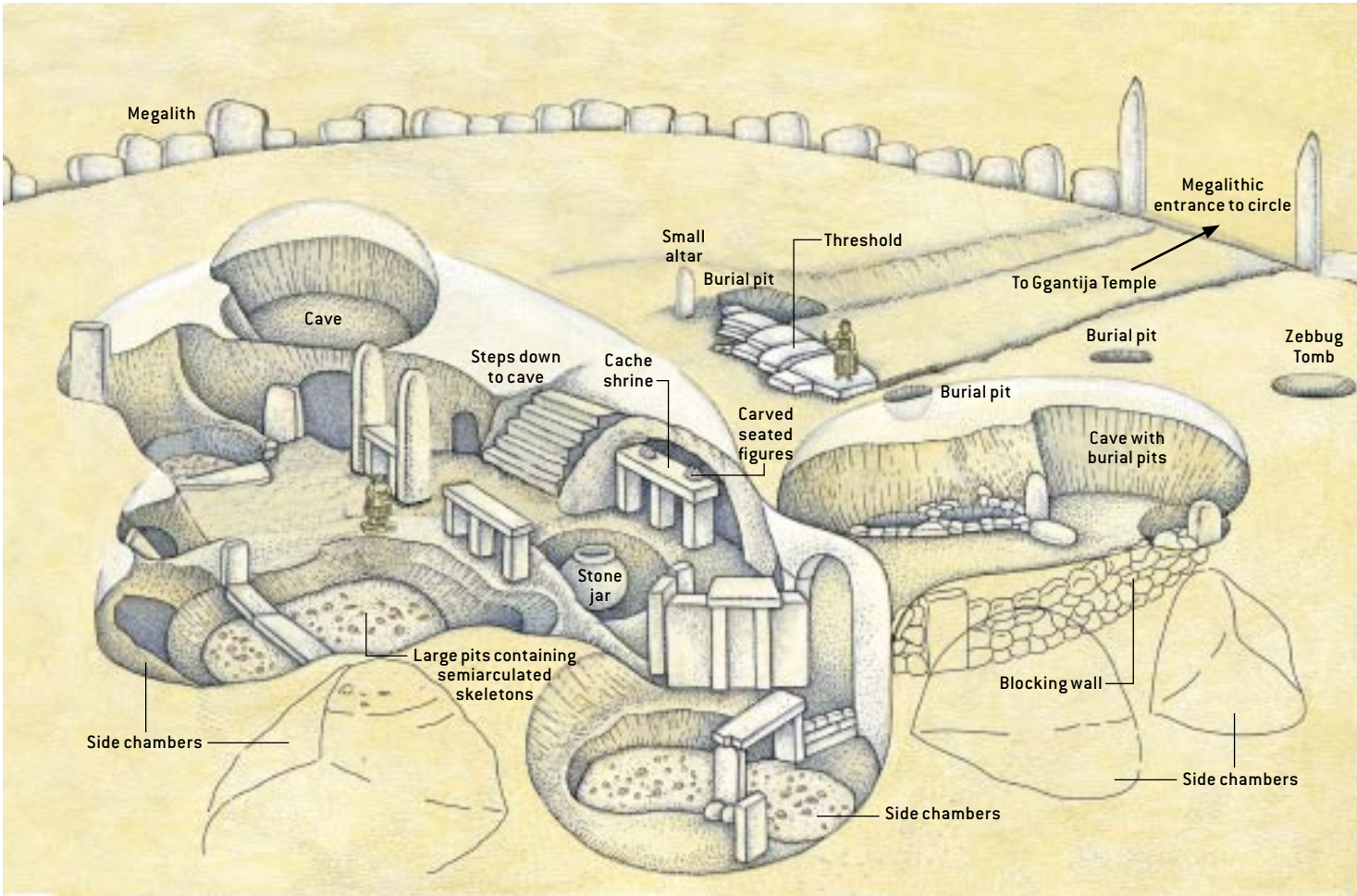
itself. The builders enclosed the opening to the cave with a wall and oriented its entrance eastward through the massive upright stones. In so doing, they integrated the entire site with the Ggantija temple, 300 meters away and on a lower terrace of the plateau.

gant, and there is evidence that some of it included animal figures and pitted patterns. The builders did not apply red ocher as liberally as their predecessors did, and they painted only a few of the nearby slabs. Available supplies were made to stretch further.



**SMALL CERAMIC POT** was used to hold red ocher, a pigment daubed on ritual figures and human bones during Maltese burial rites.

# Underground Burial Chambers



**BROCHTORFF CIRCLE** marks a cave complex that the inhabitants of Gozo used for burials between 4000 and 2500 B.C.E. Treasure hunters found the site and then obliterated it in the 19th century, but in 1987 the authors and their colleagues found it again and reexcavated it. An aerial photograph (*below*) shows the site as it appears today. The drawing (*above*), based on a reconstruction by Steven Ashley, shows a partial reconstruction of the burial complex based on the most recent work. Thousands of human remains, many still adorned with ceremonial red ochre pigment, are clearly identifiable within certain pits in the cave floor (*right*).



Bodies were buried in the compartments around this central shrine. One noteworthy burial site was a natural cavity in the cave floor where hundreds of bodies were laid to rest. At first sight, the remains seemed incomplete and in confusion. Our further work has shown, however, that the bones from many bodies had been carefully sorted and stacked by type: skulls in one place, femurs in another and so on. This pattern suggests that as part of the burial ritual, old bodies being removed from compartments were disarticulated.

Some 220,000 human bones, which probably represent more than 800 individuals, have now been studied. The early results paint the ancient Maltese as a typically Mediterranean people—stockily built and of medium height. They show some distinctive characteristics, such as a digastric fossa, a well-formed groove on both sides of the skull that is found in some other populations. Their health was apparently very good, with few dental problems or other detectable illnesses. The same anthropological features are present from the earliest Zebbug people to the late Tarxien population, which evinces little or no change in the genetic makeup of the early Maltese community. The changes in their customs and cults were therefore probably not the result of foreign immigration. Scientific studies of the bones will continue over the next decades, providing one of the first and possibly the biggest samples of research on an early Mediterranean population ever undertaken.

The only grave goods with these Tarxien people (which have been dated by the radiocarbon method to around 2800 B.C.E.) were small, carefully modeled ceramic statuettes of obese human figures. These figurines are of ambiguous sexuality, even though they have distinctive accumulations of fat on the buttocks. Most show no primary characteristics of sexuality (such as breasts). Their discovery in that location was highly significant: it marked the first secure association of fat ladies with burial sites instead of shrines or temple altars.

On the ground surface, at the monumental entrance leading down into

the caverns, another pit was also filled with human remains. Among them were many males whose body parts had been rearranged after being taken from some other burial place. Almost no grave gifts accompanied the bones. Small altars at either end of the megalithic pavement beside the burial pit may have been used for preliminary sacrifices and obeisances before the priest and the assembled mourning community ventured down into the foul, reeking caves of the dead.

### Striking Sculptures

THE MOST EXCITING discoveries from the Brochtorff site, aside from the human remains themselves, are small stone sculptures that have changed our views about the role of art in the ancient local religion. The prehistoric Maltese of the Tarxien period seem to have invested most of their artisanship and craft into cult objects that were more than mere grave gifts. For example, a ceramic strainer and a unique stone sculpture were unearthed from near the stone bowl in the megalithic shrine. The strainer was probably meant to be used with the bowl, perhaps for straining out unwanted objects or for sprinkling liquids onto bodies.

The sculpture shows a beautifully carved and painted pair of obese figures. They are seated on an intricately carved bed, daubed with red ocher, that shows woven struts on the underside and curvilinear designs on the upper. The fat figures are not explicitly male or female. They wear the familiar pleated skirts, painted black, of the finest Maltese cult figures. The head of one figure sports a haircut that includes a pigtail at the back. The other's head is missing. Both figures hold objects on their laps: one a tiny dressed person (who may be a baby), the other a cup.

Aside from the sculpture's fine craftsmanship, it is astonishing because the portrayal of several humans together is almost unknown from that period in Europe: even individual figures, other than the fat ladies, are uncommon. A few artifacts with features that are reminiscent of this sculpture have been

found elsewhere in ancient Malta, such as the fragments of carved beds and the terra-cotta Sleeping Lady of the Hypogeum. Nevertheless, this discovery is one of the earliest and most thought-provoking groups of sculpture from European prehistory.

The other major find was a cache of nine carved stone idols, which were also closely associated with the stone bowl in the central shrine. The objects must originally have been wrapped tightly in a bag or box: when they were discovered in 1991, they were all lying one above the other, having fallen from the structures surrounding the bowl. Six of the objects represent human figures: flat, triangular shapes attached to carvings of human heads. The six range from poorly detailed rough-outs to skillfully executed cult idols. Two of the most detailed figures have pleated skirts and belts, and one wears an elaborate crested circlet, seemingly of metal, around its head. The faces of both these figures show eyes and lips and well-defined noses. A third figure is simpler and has no costume other than an exquisitely sculpted cowl headdress. Two more have plain bodies and bobbed hair. The last of the six is a crude rough-out that shows only the lines that the finished sculpture was to follow.

The three other idols of the nine are small and individual. One has a pig's head, the second a well-carved human head on a phallus-shaped pedestal and the third a head supported by two legs. Along with these extraordinary objects was a miniature Tarxien pot filled with ocher, perhaps for smearing on idols.

No parallels for any of these strange objects have ever been found elsewhere in Malta or the central Mediterranean. Even so, our knowledge of the context in which they appear is informative. Whereas the figures associated with the dead in their burial chambers are fat ladies, those from the central shrine are much more complex. One cannot find an emphasis on images of female fertility in the shrine. Indeed, where the imagery is interpretable, it seems to be male and animal. The context of their discovery suggests that the shrine ob-





**SMALL STONE IDOLS** were probably used by priests or other specialists in burial rituals at the Brochtorff Circle during the Tarxien period. The three at the top representing human figures show very different levels of detail and artistic execution. The other three, which invoke animal and phallic imagery (*bottom*), are more fanciful and individualized.



jects were the paraphernalia employed by the ritual specialists or priests and that their symbolism was meant to evoke much more than just a mother goddess.

Unprecedented discoveries at the Brochtorff Circle have encouraged us to reconsider the whole basis of ancient cults and religions in prehistoric Malta and Gozo. As the old ideas had supposed, the worship of fertility may well have been a component of the prehistoric religion. But the recent findings argue that it would be a mistake to concentrate exclusively on any one facet or historical period: the prehistoric religion of Malta was not only an infatuation with fat females.

During the Zebbug period between 4000 and 3500 B.C.E., the cult focused on the provision of caves and underground tombs as burial places. Accurate depictions of people do not seem to have played a part in the local rituals: the clos-

est representations of human forms in the tombs are the very crude faces on the menhirs and the curious bone pendants with budlike arms and heads. Red ocher was the predominant decoration. Exotic axes of green stones and other objects made of flint and obsidian were also used as grave goods. In many ways, the early ritual developments appear to have paralleled similar trends in Sicily, where rock-cut tombs and simple collective burial rites were developing at the same time. The Maltese islands during this early period were still relatively fruitful and may not have been overpopulated.

But by half a millennium later, Malta seems to have been shaken by major changes. The erosion of the soil and other signs of environmental degradation may have become apparent; in this environment, population levels almost certainly began to pose problems. Artifacts from that period—the obese human and

animal figurines and the phallic symbols carved in stone or bone and modeled in clay—point to the idea that the people had an obsession with the living world and its successful propagation through the descent group or lineage. Malta seems to have become an island world under powerful economic and environmental stress, where the communities were struggling to maintain their former standards of living and to feed the population. Yet fewer materials were imported into the islands during this time of crisis than in the more fruitful era. The prehistoric Maltese society seems to have let a fixation on sculpture and art replace contact with the world beyond the islands' rocky coasts.

That debilitating fixation may explain why the temples are so numerous on so small a group of islands. Some scholars have theorized that they were built by perhaps half a dozen rival clans or tribes, each competing for land and water. The colossal size of the temples, and the later architectural additions that made them even more prominent, could have been inspired by such a competitive spirit. Religious and cult influence and social control over the population may also have been important.

Cult activities seem to have reached a feverish pitch in the final phases of the Tarxien period around 2500 B.C.E. The society was becoming increasingly dominated by a religious hierarchy in which cult specialists or priests controlled much of the industry of the people. Vast amounts of human time and energy were invested in temple building, artistic endeavors and ritual feasts. The dead were honored within cults and linked to animals and human obesity. The people seem to have expended relatively little effort on the building of villages or domestic structures, on terracing or on farming methods. The ob-

session with the cults of the temples seems to have been complete.

Such obsessions are dangerous, and so it proved to be on ancient Malta. By about 2500 B.C.E. the community of the temple builders had ceased to build and perhaps even to use the monumental burial sites prepared by earlier generations. By 2000 B.C.E. the entire culture had disappeared and been replaced by very different religious practices that favored cremation burials. The burial hypogea, the cult of the fat ladies, and the other symbols of the living and the dead were completely abandoned.

The prehistoric religion of Malta might appear to be a failed experiment in the Mediterranean laboratory. Like many failures, however, it tells us more than a success might have. The extreme religious fervor of ancient Malta shows one of the possible results when societies are placed under severe pressures.

played and displaced during the funerary rituals.

Since the original article was written, there has been much discussion about the creative context of Maltese religion. Key issues include the construction of prehistoric Maltese identity, the degree of interaction between the Maltese islands and the rest of the Mediterranean, and the fragility of the Maltese environment.

An identity of a people is generally constructed in contrast to another external identity, but when a population resides on an island, a key question is the level of knowledge achieved by the island population of their outside world, in this case some 85 kilometers to the north. In prehistory, that knowledge can be best measured by the analysis of imported material culture and the interpretation of the context where in these imports are placed.

archaeologists have excavated domestic sites on the Maltese islands, we will not know the relative importance of other imported materials, such as flint and obsidian, for a domestic economy that was essentially based on local agriculture. Without that knowledge of domestic sites, it is also very difficult to measure any demographic change on the islands. Nevertheless, it is now even clearer that the local prehistoric agriculture was practiced in a landscape already cleared of vegetation and therefore potentially vulnerable both to erosion and to shortfalls of water. Studies of landsnails from the Brochtorff Circle (as early as 4000 B.C.E.) and pollen from Marsa on Malta near Valletta (as early as 3600 B.C.E.) confirm this relatively treeless landscape, similar to that of today.

The preoccupation with religion on the Maltese islands probably had a

## The extreme religious fervor of ancient Malta shows one of the possible results when societies are placed under severe pressures.

Further careful excavations and reconstructions on Malta and at other Mediterranean sites should extend our understanding of the complexities and diversity of prehistoric society. Funerary deposits still lie intact at Brochtorff Circle and may one day offer further information.

### Postscript

AFTER THREE MORE YEARS of fieldwork and 10 years of analysis, the major task of analyzing and publishing 220,000 human bones and the accompanying animal bones and figurative art is nearly finished, and publication of the final report is planned for 2005. Further details of figurative art identified in these last two seasons included many more corpulent clay figurines, an intriguing snail figurine, a pair of enigmatic “female torso” pendants, and a broken-up finely carved standing figure, originally almost a meter in height. We have also established the varied ways in which human bodies were dis-

In prehistoric Malta, most cultural effort went into using the widely available local limestone and clay to create impressive monuments, sculptures and pottery. In the temples and mortuary sites, most imported items (greenstones, ochre and some fragments of pottery) were secreted away in their inner recesses. This suggests that knowledge of the outside world was deliberately restricted to the eyes of a few. But until

number of causes. It was clearly a means of projecting an identity for the prehistoric populations, but we suspect that knowledge of alternative (for example, Sicilian) identities was principally a preserve of the “priests” who controlled knowledge of the outside world. The religion also served, through the ideal images of corpulence, to project a sense of continuity in the community, the lineage, the family beyond the

### MORE TO EXPLORE

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short-term cycles of life that govern all humans and more particularly the prehistoric Maltese. These same life cycles of the prehistoric Maltese could have been vulnerable to disruption because of the relatively isolated island location, with its cleared and fragile landscape on which its food supplies depended. The implicit lesson for the modern world remains the same: that religious faith should not shield the eyes of the faithful from solving problems whose solutions are made clear by the use of observation, the basis of scientific analysis.