TEMPLE MEGALITHISM VS. FUNERARY MEGALITHISM. THE CASE OF THE MALTESE ISLANDS

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The General Backdrop

Europe, with its Atlantic and Mediterranean seaboards, is a region in which megalithism evolved most intensively in prehistory. In no other region in the world does one find such a concentration of prehistoric megalithic monuments (Joussaume 1985). Suffice it to review the dolmenic structures of Andalusia and Portugal, the passage graves, gallery graves, chambered tombs, cairns and dolmens of Ireland, England and Brittany, the Hunebedden in the Netherlands and the Steinkisten of Germany, the Talayots, Navetas and Taulas of the Balearic islands and the Tombe dei Giganti and Nuraghi of Sardegna, the dolmens of Corsica and finishing with the smaller format dolmens of southeast Italy.

If one were to analyse all the megalithic structures in this region one would find that all the ones that fall under the category of the megalithic phenomenon of the Middle and Late Neolithic - and, indeed, the great majority of the rest - are associated with mortuary ritual. Virtually all of them were intended, and were used as burials, whether dolmens, gallery graves, *allées couvertes,* etc. The one notable exception which I can think of is Stonehenge, which responds to a different concept of sacred spaces altogether and which was almost certainly intended as an open-air sanctuary. Chronologically Stonehenge falls on the borderline between the late Neolithic and the Bronze Age, coinciding with the last and culminating phase of the Maltese megalithic culture.

It is with the coming of the Bronze Age that megalithism (the use of large stone blocks, whether dressed or not) starts being applied to new uses, in particular to settlement and defensive structures (such as the Nuraghi of Sardegna and the Navetas and Talayots of the Balearic islands, as well as, occasionally, to worship, such as the open air sanctuaries of Maiorca (e.g. Son Oms) and the Taulas of Menorca. This form of megalithism, in particular that connected with defensive structures, is not likely to be descended from the Neolithic one (even though the Balearic monuments have astoundingly similar features to the Maltese ones) and falls well within the chronological parameters that allow it to be derived from the Bronze Age civilisations of the eastern Mediterranean. Malta too possesses prehistoric monuments that fall within this category, such as its scatter of small dolmens and the Borg in-Nadur fortified settlement. But this paper is only concerned with the cultural development which precedes the

Bronze Age and which gravitated around those complex megalithic constructions known as temples.

It has been claimed that the Maltese temples are "the earliest free-standing monuments of stone in the world". I believe it might be safer to state that they are the earliest megalithic free-standing **temples**, and even this claim might be challenged if one had to cite the open-air, partly megalithic sanctuary of Nevali Çori in Turkey, datable to the 8th millennium. What matters is, however, that this monument was probably never roofed, as the Maltese ones were, and that it is no longer extant as it was allowed to be destroyed under the waters of a man-made lake. What is, in my view, even more important is that before the Maltese temples, megalithism had never been employed in structures involving real architectural design and sophisticated architectural execution. In the Neolithic this cultural achievement took place only once, in the tiny islands of Malta and Gozo.

Historical Background

There was a time (from the 1930s to the 1960s) when the temples of Malta did not figure at all on the map of European prehistory, in spite of John Evans's excellent and widely read account of Maltese prehistory in the Thames and Hudson series (Evans 1959); but with the publication of his monumental *Survey (E*vans 1971), followed soon after by Colin Renfrew's reassessment of European prehistory in which the Maltese Temple Culture figured prominently (Renfrew 1973), they regained their rightful place in the prehistoric scene, both of Europe and the Mediterranean. As a result, most of us are sufficiently familiar with this singular cultural and archaeological phenomenon, to be spared a descriptive introduction.

Allow me to point out, however, and to emphasise that the Maltese megalithic phenomenon evolved, and eventually collapsed, in virtually complete cultural isolation during a span of time ranging from circa 3600 to 2500 BC, and that it was developed by a population that had initially set out from the larger neighbouring island of Sicily around 4000 BC, carrying with it a cultural baggage that was identical to that of the area of origin (the San Cono - Piano Notaro - Grotta Zubbia culture), and which over the passage of centuries evolved into a unique culture deeply infatuated with an enigmatic religious ideology.

Origin and Evolution of Temples

Right from the early 16th century observations, the Maltese megalithic buildings have always been held to be temples, with the exception of G. Lilliu (1968; 1970), followed by J. Guilaine (1981), who suggested they might be princely palaces. The absence of burials anywhere inside and close to them excludes a funerary purpose. Moreover, the furniture found in them, in particular the altars and the sculptural decoration, tends to confirm their religious function, even though the occurrence of certain items of equipment connected with weaving and corn grinding, and the presence of obvious and ingenious systems of security, suggest another purpose, albeit a secondary one, namely that of a depot for redistribution of surplus food.

There seems to be unanimous agreement about the logical and progressive evolution of the form of the Maltese megalithic temple that was proposed by John Evans in 1959. This evolved in five distinct stages, from a simple, trefoil design of semicircular "apses", preceded by a more irregular arrangement of lobe-shaped chambers, to as many as six "apses" symme-

trically aligned along a central axis, the whole system being consolidated by a massive outer wall of alternating headers and stretchers. [As an aside, this evolutionary pattern renders senseless the idea of the inner form of the temples reproducing the contours of the numerous fat statuettes that characterise the artistic production of the temple builders]. Equally logical appears to be the progressive evolution of building techniques which become increasingly sophisticated, making use of building blocks of increasing size.

What remains somewhat debatable is the origin of the internal shape of the temples for which there are currently two opinions: either **1)** that it might have been inspired by the simple round or circular domestic hut; or **2)** that the irregular arrangement of roughly circular lobes around a central area was a translation above ground of the same type of arrangement of lobed burial chambers of the underground collective burials. Although the first theory remains quite possible, unfortunately, there are only three recorded specimens of domestic architecture for the Temple period, one at Skorba (Ggantija phase), another at Ghajnsielem, Gozo (Ggantija-Saflieni phases) and Tac-Cawla, Gozo. These huts were unconnected circular, or oval, structures built of mud brick with, at most, a mud brick pillar in the centre to support the roof.

The second theory is much more plausible and is supported by a substantial amount of recorded and surviving evidence: in the first place, the groups of collective underground tombs from Zebbug and Xemxija, appropriately dating to the phases immediately preceding the rise of the surface megalithic structures; secondly, the monumental underground communal burial complex of Hal Saflieni complemented by the recently excavated underground cemetery inside the Xaghra Stone Circle of Gozo, both of which display the constant reciprocal exchange of architectural, as well as religious, ideas between these mortuary structures on one hand, and the temples above ground on the other.

There is absolutely nothing remotely connected with megalithism in the collective subterranean tombs of Zebbug and the contemporary ones recently discovered inside the Xaghra Stone Circle, as well as the later, more complex ones explored by Evans in the 1950s at Xemxija. These consisted of clusters of two or more lobed chambers hewn out of the rock around a central area reached from the surface via a circular shaft. No detached stone architectural features were introduced inside the tombs at this stage.

When the ground plan of these underground structures was translated to stone constructions above ground, it had to be realized in some building material that was easily accessible and easily manipulated. This is when the inhabitants of the Maltese islands decided for the first time to dress stone blocks to improve their stability in the erect position and the adherence between one block and another, both in the horizontal and in the vertical planes. The first temples were thus conceived and accomplished, modest in size and plan, but with immense potential for further development. The most representative of these are: the small 'lobed' temple at Ta' Hagrat; the small trefoil temple at Mnajdra; and the five-apsed temple to the east of the Tarxien complex.

At first the dressed stones were of relatively small, more manageable, size, often used in combination with undressed, roughly shaped boulders. The latter, whose rough shape was probably dictated by the hardness of the coralline limestone, was mostly reserved for the outer wall, thus making the whole structure more weather resistant, while the dressed stones were generally employed for the inner walls since the softer globigerina limestone was more susceptible to atmospheric erosion and permitted a much smoother surface. This choice of material implies an extraordinarily precocious understanding of the building qualities and physical properties of the two types of building stone available on the islands.

From then on the process of progressive evolution was quite linear and unswerving, involving building blocks of bigger and bigger dimensions, arranged according to preconceived

architectural designs of increasing complexity and perfection to reach the culmination of the Maltese temple architecture in the six-apsed central temple of the Tarxien complex. The distribution of spaces inside these temple complexes and their hierarchy of access undoubtedly reflect an increasingly complicated religious ritual, probably based on an equally complex social structure. Given the manifestly outstanding predominance of religion and religious expression in the life of the Maltese temple builders, we are justified to surmise that this social structure was most probably based on religious power that was wielded from these formidable structures.

Funerary Megalithism

Most of us are familiar with that extraordinary underground structure known as the Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni, and most of us associate it immediately with the Maltese temple phenomenon, and rightly so. Unfortunately, this quite unique archaeological treasure house was excavated at the beginning of this century with the minimum archaeological record, for the most part without any record at all. Although it has often been credited also with a temple role - so much so, that one feature has been labelled the "Holy of Holies" and another the "Oracle Chamber" - its main function, in my view its exclusive function, was that of a cemetery and its various components were devoted to the rites and ceremonies connected with the passage from life to death. If an area of worship was at all present, this was probably confined to the upper, open area in front of the entrance to the underground cave, where standing stones were erected. This is born out by a reassessment of the contextual evidence of the various finds made therein in the light of the information provided by the underground cemetery which has been painstakingly excavated and carefully documented in Gozo between 1987 and 1994.

The most cursory examination of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum reveals the obvious attempt of its creators to reproduce underground the architectural forms of the temples above ground, even if these have no structural function at all. There are trilithic structures made up of separate stone blocks, mostly intended to emphasise the separation of individual spaces. But the most impressive are the 'trilithic' niches and entrances, as well as the corbelling of some of the walls, carved out from the living rock.

In contrast to the Hypogeum, the Xaghra Circle cemetery exploited an already existing system of interconnected underground caves in the crumbly coralline geology of the Xaghra plateau. The surfaces of the caves were therefore left in their natural state and practically no attempt was made to carve them or smooth them. The reproduction of the temple architecture and the use of "megaliths" were limited to the introduction of well dressed blocks of globigerina limestone to form decorative trilithic niches and walls of separation or screens, as well as, in one instance, to support two natural arches which otherwise threatened to collapse. In a coralline limestone geological context, the imported globigerina limestone blocks had to be quarried several kilometres away and carried uphill to the site at a considerable expense in terms of physical labour. The same applies, but on a much larger scale, to the temple complex of Ggantija on the same plateau, some 300m to the east of the cemetery, where huge, well-dressed globigerina limestone blocks line the internal passages along the main axis.

But megalithism does not stop there at the Xaghra Circle. As its name implies, the subterranean cemetery was at some stage, probably during the Tarxien phase, further 'monumentalised' by a circular enclosure wall of upright megaliths built with a technique of alternating headers and stretchers that is identical to that of the outer wall of the Ggantija temples. A wide entrance, flanked by two tall pillars, faced in the direction of the temples as if to emphasise the interrelationship between the two different monuments.

Conclusion

We are thus confronted with a full cycle of inspiration of ideas: the idea of arrangement of spaces in the first temples being inspired by the earlier underground collective tombs, and the later, large collective cemeteries reproducing the architectural forms of the surface temples for decorative purposes. This might suggest an intimate connection between temple architecture and mortuary architecture. Whether this should be interpreted as an intimate connection, or even identity, between the "rituals of life" conducted in the temples and the "rituals of death" performed in the underground cemeteries is another matter that needs to be discussed in the light of the evidence provided by the material contents of these two distinct megalithic structures. Prima facie, the passage of inspiration from the collective tombs upwards to the temple constructions suggests that the religious idea behind the latter was likely to be intimately connected with, if not centred on, ancestral worship, whereas the reproduction of temple architectural features in later communal subterranean cemeteries has generally been interpreted to represent an extension of the cult of the Mother Goddess to the world of the dead, the underground structures representing the womb of Mother Earth to which all men return at death.

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