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Maltese Prehistory

Early life on the islands

ANTHONY BONANNO

When the first settlers arrived on the Maltese islands, around 7000 years ago, most probably from nearby Sicily, they found a very different landscape from the denuded, rocky and arid one we see around us today. Although we have reason to believe that the process of soil erosion had already started through natural agents, namely wind and the alteration of increasingly differentiated dry and wet seasons, the natural environment of the islands was as yet untouched by man. No records have yet been taken from excavations that could throw light on the ecosystem prevalent on the archipelago at the time when man started interfering with it. We therefore cannot tell what kind of trees and plants thrived on the islands. It would be safe to say, however, that they were much more wooded than they have been since, although this assumption requires confirmation. Nor are we in a position to tell exactly what kind of animals roamed that virgin landscape except, perhaps, that they must have remained more or less the same as those obtaining just before the final retreat of the glaciers and the consequent definitive rise of the sea level at the end of the last Ice Age, some 10000 years ago, which left the Maltese archipelago detached for good from the continent. Some species, such as the bear, seem to have gone extinct already by then, while others, like the wild boar and deer, survived for much

longer. There were definitely no domestic animals, and the first specimens of goats, sheep, cattle and swine had to be shipped over the relatively long stretch of sea that separated the new home from Sicily, together with the first range of domestic seeds for cultivation.

The foremost preoccupation of these early farmers after setting up home on the islands was the reclamation of agricultural land for farming. Presumably this could only be done at the expense of the tree cover. Slash-and-burn methods must have accelerated the process of denudation which in time led to soil erosion and the loss of precious water into the sea.

However, these problems do not seem to have become acute before the end of the following period of Maltese prehistory, some twenty-five centuries later. During this early Neolithic period there were no phenomenal rises in population. Nor were there any astounding cultural achievements such as were experienced in the following age. Malta's earliest inhabitants lived in natural caves, such as that of Ghar Dalam, which abound in the Maltese limestone landscape, and in scattered small villages only one of which, that of Skorba, has been extensively explored. Their houses consisted of small oval huts built of sun-dried mud-brick and wattle-and-daub over low stone foundations. The same type of construction technique was extended to religious architecture, the only example of which was discovered in the same village at Skorba. Inside the so-called "Skorba shrine" fragments of the earliest representation of the human form were found – small, unmistakably female figurines which have been connected with a belief in a Mother Goddess, a goddess of fertility representing the earth which is commonly believed to have been the object of worship

among most Neolithic farming communities.

The Megalithic Phenomenon

Things start to become more complex and sophisticated in the second period of Malta's prehistory, which is characterized by those astounding buildings, shaped with Gargantuan stones, that are known as Megalithic temples. A new migration wave, again originating from southeast Sicily, seems to have replaced or completely subdued, at least culturally, the previous early Neolithic population. This new population brought some new ideas with it, a new cultural background. Its first recorded manifestations are collective underground tombs, examples of which were first discovered at Zebbug and very recently at Xaghra, Gozo. This type of collective tomb was to develop in time into huge underground complexes like the eerie Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni. From the Zebbug tombs comes a mysterious piece of sculpture, a stylized, highly abstracted human head with the facial features suggested by incised lines and holes. What is stranger still is the fact that it has nothing in common with the characteristic anthropomorphic sculpture

Top: Frieze with domestic animals from the Hal Tarxien site (3rd millennium BC). Right: Headless statue of a "great goddess" from Hagar Qim (2800 BC).

Oben: Fries mit Haustieren, aus Hal Tarxien (3. Jahrtausend v. Chr.). Rechts: Kopflose Statue einer «Grossen Göttin» aus Hagar Qim (2800 v. Chr.)

En haut: frise décorée d'animaux domestiques, de Hal Tarxien (IIIe millénaire av. J.-C.). A droite: statue acéphale d'une «Grande Déesse» de Malte, provenant du site de Hagar Kim (2800 av. J.-C.).

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of the Temple culture which developed gradually from this new population, from the Zebbug people.

Isolation, but a Stone-moving Belief

What is obvious about this cultural development is that while contacts with the outside world, namely Sicily, Lipari and Pantelleria, as well as Italy and perhaps even beyond, were maintained, these were limited to the continued importation of raw materials for tools and even some ritual objects (like the green stone axe pendants). In brief, traffic in either direction was restricted to the material culture. For the rest, starting from the third phase of this period, the Ggantija phase, this people of farmers initiated a cultural development of great consequence, but in total isolation, without inspiration from outside and without any apparent influence directed towards the outside. This cultural development, made possible by an efficient, surplus-producing agricultural economy, an equally efficient, even if primitive, social organization and a deeply-rooted, literally stone-moving belief in a great religious idea, brought about the conceptualization and the realization of such feats of architectural ingenuity as the Ggantija temples and those of Tarxien, Hagar Qim and Mnajdra.

In their efforts to understand the processes of the cultural evolution of mankind some students of antiquity – be they historians or prehistorians, archaeologists, social anthropologists or historians of religion – find it difficult to accept that such a grand culture could have possibly developed independently of the great cultural currents that were brought to bear on virtually all the lands bordering the Mediterranean at that time. It is within this mental framework that we must consider diffusionist theories prevalent in the first half of our century, from Worsaae and Montelius to Gordon Childe's view of "the irradiation of European barbarism by Oriental civilization".

The widespread theory of the diffusion of ideas, of civilization, from east to west did not exclude the formulation of at least one theory that the cradle of Mediterranean civilization was not to be sought in the east but at the centre of that sea, in Malta. L.M. Ugolini, writing in the 1930s (*Malta, Origini della Civiltà Mediterranea*), favoured the view of an irradiation of civilization from the centre (*ex medio lux*) rather than from the east. Of course this idea has never taken root in the scholarly world, but the very fact that it occurred to a serious archaeologist such as Ugolini as a possible

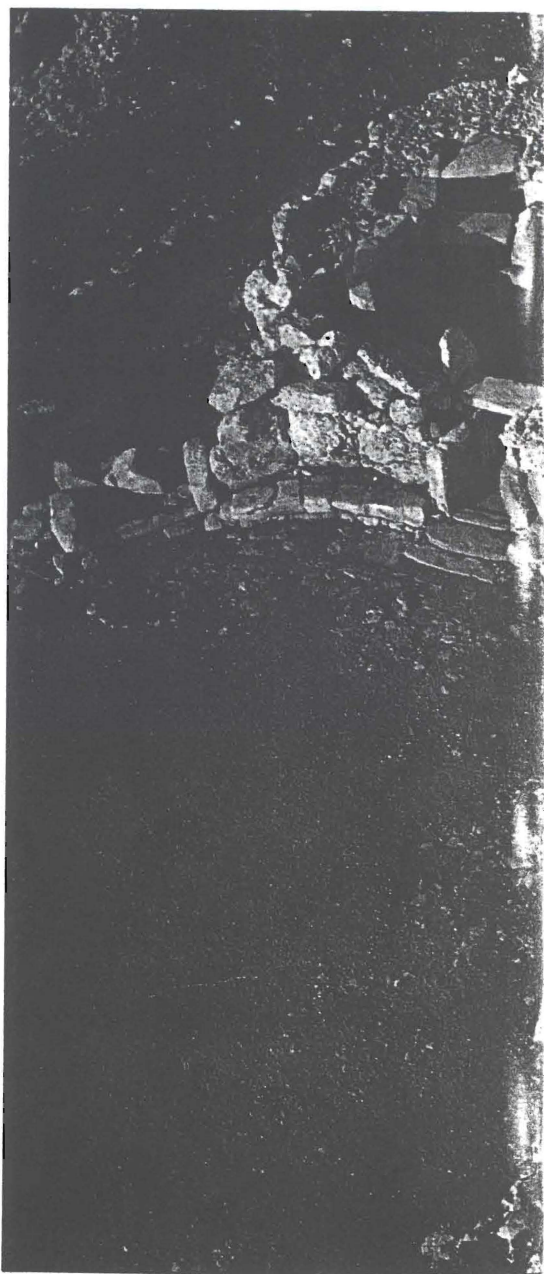
explanation of the Maltese phenomenon is a reflection of the impact produced by this surprisingly advanced prehistoric culture on the modern mind.

An even more bizarre explanation of the Maltese Megalithic monuments was proposed in the nineteenth century by another writer on Maltese antiquities, G. Grognet de Vassé, whose much more lasting and valid merit is that of having designed the architecture of the splendid Mosta church. Grognet believed that Malta, with its queer Megalithic remains, must be the last surviving remnant of the lost Atlantis. His writings on this subject are found in a published volume entitled *Compendio della Isola Atlantide della quale le Isole di Malta, Gozo e Comino sono certissimi resti* (1854) and in a beautiful manuscript preserved in the National Library of Malta (Bibl. Ms. 614). The manuscript incorporates a large number of colour drawings, including a map of Atlantis, plans and elevations of the Ggantija, Hagar Qim and Mnajdra temples, and a self-portrait. Grognet went so far with his theory as to "invent" a script – incidentally very similar to that of the Phoenicians – which he claimed must have been in use among the inhabitants of Atlantis and, therefore, the builders of the temples.

An Extraordinary People

Whatever our conclusions on the origins of the ideas inspiring the building of the Maltese prehistoric temples and the social and religious forces that made them possible, we cannot entertain any doubts that between 5500 and 4500 years ago the Maltese islands were inhabited by an extraordinary people, extraordinary not because they were giants or were supported by some visitors from outer space – two other wild ideas suggested in the past, the first one in the seventeenth century, the second only a couple of decades ago – but because they were intelligent and resourceful people, as I believe the Maltese people still are. They must have been both technologically as well as artistically endowed. Evidence of the first quality lies in the sheer size of the stone blocks used, and in many cases, such as Hagar Qim, Tarxien and Mnajdra, the perfect interlocking between them to produce a solid structure according to a preconceived architectural design. It will suffice to observe the finesse of the sculpture that used to adorn the temples, both the statuary and the carvings in relief, as well as the perfection of design of the hand-moulded ceramic production, to convince oneself of the artistic genius of this people.

The Temple Culture came to a mysterious, probably sudden, end towards the middle of the third millennium BC, although some see signs of cultural decline before the final collapse. Many explanations have been proposed for this collapse. Some suggestions are more plausible than others, but all remain based on varying



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degrees of conjecture. What is certain is that the Temple people were at some stage replaced by a succession of three migratory waves originating from different sources on the European littoral of the Mediterranean, either from the north or from the northeast.

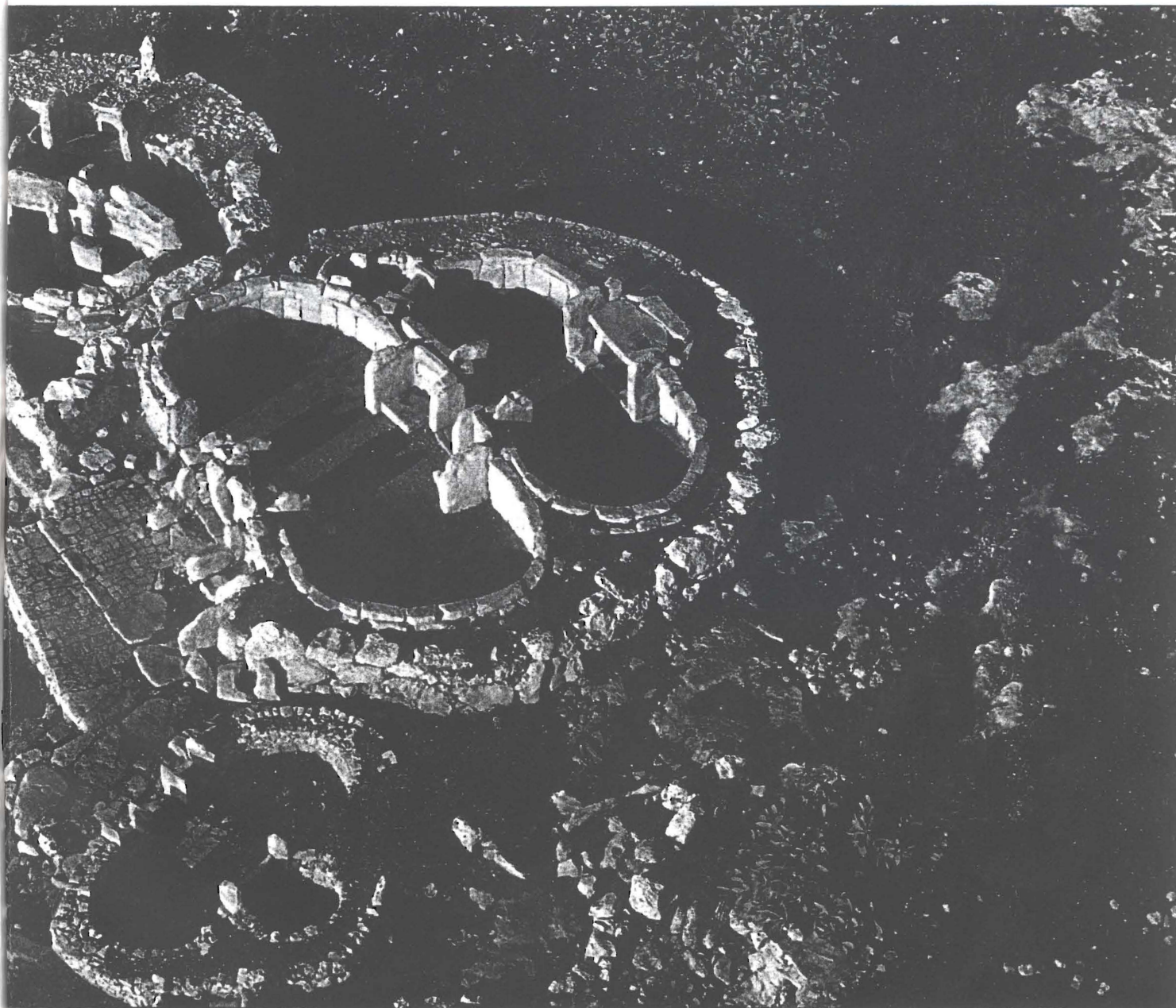
All three successive cultures show clear signs of the insecurity of the times (in contrast with the peaceful tranquillity that predominated in the previous period): cop-

per weapons, naturally defensible settlements on flat hilltops, at times even fortified villages. So far scholarly research has mostly focused its attention on the most spectacular feats of the previous period, but it may well be that the Bronze Age reserves for us some unexpected surprises as to the dénouement of the Maltese scenario on the

characters of the Minoan script, and a fragment of a Mycenaean cup.

The *Tarxien Cemetery* people cremated their dead and deposited their charred remains in urns inside the ruins of the Tarxien temples. As yet we have not discovered any of their settlements as we have for their successors, the *Borg in-Nadur* people, who

by the gods from reaching their homelands after the siege and destruction of Troy. Callimachus identifies Gozo, the second largest island of the Maltese archipelago, with the Homeric Ogygia, the island of Calypso, on which Odysseus was shipwrecked and spent seven years of his *nostos*. Ovid connects the legendary reign of a



eve of history, when Crete was already the seat of the earliest European civilization – the splendid civilization named after the mythical king Minos, followed immediately and absorbed by the Mycenaean one which dominated the whole of the Aegean area. There are sure signs of close contacts between the Bronze Age inhabitants of the Maltese islands and these two civilizations, such as the dark green stone bead with symbols in gold inlay identical with some

lived on flat-topped hills and ridges which were sometimes fortified by “Cyclopean” walls on the more vulnerable sides. Finally we find allusions in later classical literature, such as Lycophron, Callimachus and Ovid, which can be interpreted as distant reminiscences of these contacts between the Aegean world and the contemporary inhabitants of these pelagic islands.

Lycophron makes a group of Greek refugees settle in Malta, as they were prevented

Bird's-eye view of the temple of Mnajdra, with three groups of circular sanctuaries. The 4500-year-old architecture is unique in the Mediterranean.

Der Tempel von Mnajdra aus der Vogelperspektive. Diese 4500 Jahre alte Architektur ist im Mittelmeer einzigartig.

Vue aérienne du temple de Mnajdra. Cette architecture monumentale, vieille de 4500 ans, est unique en Méditerranée.

king of Malta, Battus, with Anna, sister of Dido who, according to one legend, gave hospitality to another classical hero, Aeneas.

Maltese prehistory is brought to a close, however, by another people, this time of Oriental origin, the Phoenicians, who seem to have used the islands initially (around the beginning of the seventh century) as a

ta in order to promote archaeological excavations on two already identified prehistoric sites on the island of Gozo. The first excavation season took place in June 1987, and a preliminary report on one of the sites (modest, albeit important, remnants of a domestic settlement of the Temple Period) has been published in *Antiquity*. The sec-



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port of call in their long voyages from Phoenicia to their settlements and outposts in the western Mediterranean, and later established a more permanent and consistent base, a "colony".

New Discoveries

We are probably on the threshold of important archaeological discoveries with far-reaching consequences for the prehistory of Malta. With the holding of an international archaeology conference at the University of Malta in September 1985, new interest was revived in Maltese archaeology, in particular in the islands' prehistory, among international institutions and researchers. The Centro Camuno per gli Studi Preistorici di Valcamonica, Italy, under the directorship of Professor Emmanuel Anati, has been conducting several itinerant seminars in Malta, and the results of the first three seminars have appeared in a handful of publications culminating in the volume *Missione a Malta*, edited by Emmanuel Anati and his wife Ariele. Soon after the 1985 conference the writer of this article started negotiations with Professor Colin Renfrew, Disney Professor of Archaeology at the University of Cambridge, who had also given one of the plenary papers in that conference, on a joint research project between his university, the Maltese Antiquities authority and the University of Mal-

ta. The second excavation was completed last September, with results of extreme interest.

Professor Anati and Professor Francesco Fedele have already expressed their belief, admittedly as yet on the theoretical level, of a human presence on Malta before the Neolithic. Recent developments in prehistoric studies in other parts of the Mediterranean have revealed that man had started to brave the seas as early as the Mesolithic, and not, as used to be believed, in the Neolithic. Therefore he could have reached these islands equally well in that period. Photographic documentation in the hands of the Anati consorts, taken during their expeditions on Malta, has been advanced as evidence for the arrival of man on this farthest and southernmost tip of the landbridge that extended from continental Italy and Sicily in the last Ice Age, when sea levels fell more than 100 metres lower than they are today.

The other Gozitan site on which excavation is being conducted by the Cambridge-Malta research group is what is known as the Brochtorff Circle, conventionally named after Charles de Brochtorff, the artist who in the 1920s, during the "excavations" of the Ggantija temples by the Lieutenant-Governor for Gozo, painted a couple of watercolours showing clearly the circle of megaliths now being investigated. The Brochtorff Circle has revealed itself to be of extraordinary interest because it is the

only funerary enclosure of the Temple Period of its type met with so far on the islands. The other burial sites of the same period, e.g. at Zebbug and Xemxija, are purely underground features without external structures, although the Hypogeum at Hal Saflieni did have a monumental entrance, reminiscent of the temple struc-

Left: The Mnajdra Temple by the sea with its megalithic "tabernacle". Right: The "pronaos" of the prehistoric temple of Hagar Qim, with oval rock doors giving access to further sanctuaries.

Links: Der am Meer gelegene Tempel von Mnajdra mit seinem megalithischen «Tabernakel». Rechts: Der «pronaos» des prähistorischen Tempels von Hagar Qim mit ovalen, in den Stein gehauenen Toren.

A gauche: en bordure de mer, le temple de Mnajdra, avec son «tabernacle» mégalithique. A droite: le «pronaos» du temple préhistorique de Hagar Kim. De chaque côté, de grandes dalles percées d'une porte ovalisée permettent d'accéder à des sanctuaires secondaires.

tures, leading down to the underground cemetery itself. Besides underground tombs of the Xemxija and Zebbug type, consisting of a vertical shaft and several lobe-shaped side-chambers, all cut in the living rock, the Circle has produced what might be called "cist graves", that is, burials in small, circular depressions in the ground, a type which had been unknown in the Maltese prehistoric context.

What to me seems to be of even greater importance than the structures are the "small finds" made in connection with the different burials, finds that are bound to throw much light on the religious beliefs as well as the social and economic characteristics of the culture that built the temples of Ggantija close by, and of the rest of the island. In this respect a confirmation of the homogeneity of culture between the communities of the two islands comes from the discovery in one of the tombs of another "statue-menhir" almost identical with that discovered in the Zebbug tombs in the 1950s. Though of smaller dimensions, the Xaghra statuette conserves a little more of the body, but the few lines and holes that suggest the anthropomorphic face are identical.

Conclusion

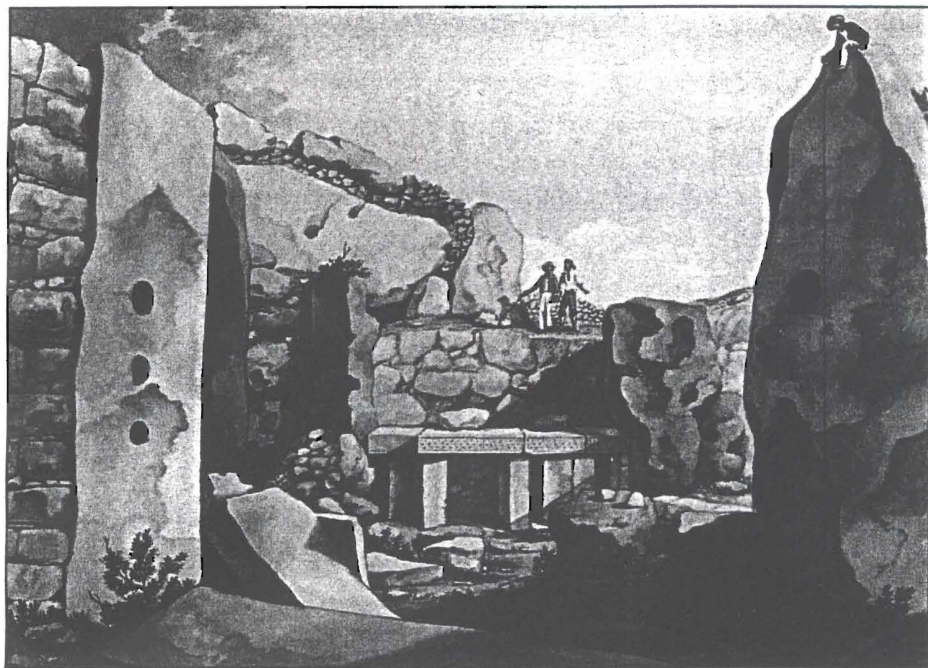
There is no doubt that the two periods in the history of the Maltese islands which

have left behind them the most remarkable architectural and artistic legacy are the period of the Knights of St. John and that of the prehistoric Temple builders. Both cultures were attracted to the islands, and their development was made possible by a number of common factors: the islands' geographic – in the case of the Knights, even

from nearby lands. But for building purposes the first inhabitants of Malta found an inexhaustible source of excellent, easily worked stone. What is surprising is the fact that they took a couple of millennia to realize its potential, and when they did they limited its use almost exclusively to the awe-inspiring religious buildings we are all

ments in the minds and hearts of the Maltese when they examine their past.

Although no one doubts that the Knights contributed enormously towards the strengthening and confirming of the European and Christian identity of the Maltese – one can well imagine how easily the African and the Muslim element could have taken



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strategic – position; excellent harbours and numerous smaller landing-places; and very limited natural resources, namely, agricultural land and building stone.

Of course, these factors determined the formation of the two cultures in very different ways. The insularity of the archipelago was decisive in making possible the “solitary splendour” of the prehistoric Temple society. The self-contained geographical boundaries of the islands, placed as they were at the crossroads of maritime traffic in the Mediterranean, must have been the most important asset which convinced the Knights of St. John to accept the islands as their new base in 1530. Their organization made possible the convergence on a very limited geographical space of members of the noblest and wealthiest European families, along with their rich cultural heritage and a sizable portion of their wealth.

Even for a prehistoric community the natural resources available in Malta were insufficient for the most rudimentary agricultural economy. In the absence of metal technology, which was a later development, the essential material for tools (and weapons) was hard stone, such as flint and obsidian, which was not available on the islands and had, therefore, to be imported

familiar with. I need not explain how the Knights exploited both kinds of building stone to engineering and artistic perfection in their palaces, churches, and fortifications. This is done in another article in this issue. As to the agricultural potential of the island, although we cannot tell for certain how and to what extent the available arable land was exploited in prehistoric times, there is no doubt that the economy of the Temple people was almost exclusively agricultural; and the cultural, architectural and artistic achievement of the people would never have been possible had it not been founded on a good and efficient economy. There is a widespread belief, indeed, that the Temple Culture collapsed out of sheer over-exploitation of the same agricultural resources, possibly compounded by other natural and anthropogenic forces. On the exploitation of agricultural land by the Knights we are, of course, much better informed through the excellent manuscript documentation which is conserved in the National Library of Malta and elsewhere.

There is also one other difference, of fundamental importance, between these two periods of Malta's history, a difference of a political and social nature that is bound to generate different reactions and senti-

The first archaeological excavations in the temples of Ggantija on the island of Gozo in 1827, as recorded in a coloured engraving by Brocktorff. The investigators are here measuring the megalithic blocks and have uncovered a rock altar.

Die ersten archäologischen Ausgrabungen in den Tempeln von Ggantija auf der Insel Gozo im Jahr 1827, hier festgehalten auf einem kolorierten Stich von Brocktorff. Die Forscher messen eben die megalithischen Blöcke, unter ihnen ein freigelegter Altar.

Les premières fouilles archéologiques conduites dans les temples de Ggantija, sur l'île de Gozo, en 1827, selon une gravure aquarellée de Brocktorff. Les chercheurs sont en train de mesurer les blocs mégalithiques; ils ont mis au jour un autel.

over without their presence and with the presence of that other formidable power in the Mediterranean, that of the Turks – the Knights in Malta were the masters, the ruling class, while the Maltese were a subject population with at least two distinct social categories. The well-off upper-middle class lived in palaces and spacious country houses with orderly gardens and orange groves, while the lower class lived in substandard housing in towns (mostly servicing the needs of their masters) and in the more vernacular architecture in the rural areas.

In prehistory, on the other hand, especially in the Temple Period, the inhabitants of these islands were their own masters, forging their own destiny, even though one cannot explain the architectural achievement of the impressive Megalithic temples without the existence of an internal social stratification. There is no evidence in Maltese prehistory of a foreign domination before a Phoenician commercial outpost planted in the islands turned itself into a full-fledged colony between the seventh and sixth century BC. It is then that Malta entered the sphere of international politics as a result of its strategic position right at the point of contact and division between east and west, between north and south. ○