

## **The stone age temples of Malta**

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During the first half of the present century European archaeologists, puzzling over the similarities between ancient cultures, came up with the diffusion theory: a steady spread westwards of ideas, skills and inventions from the early civilizations of the Near East. In this way the mud-brick ziggurats of ancient Sumeria (the first temples known to man) had influenced the Egyptian pyramids (the oldest stone monuments in the world) and Malta's megalithic buildings were a mere reflection of the glories of ancient Greece.

There was only one problem. They had no way of confirming exactly when anything had happened. Then came radio-carbon dating, an offshoot of the research that produced the atomic bomb. The first radiocarbon dates did little to disturb the basic fabric of the theory, but when the technique was refined in the mid-1960s it blew holes through the entire edifice. Small communities, previously considered to be talented imitators, were shown to have been ingenious innovators astonishingly advanced for their time.

The Egyptians could no longer be said to have created the oldest free-standing stone monuments in the world because the Stone Age temple builders of Malta had beaten them to it.

The new dating showed that in the tiny cluster of Maltese islands, way out in the middle of the Mediterranean, a people without a written language or knowledge of any kind of metal had raised vast, highly sophisticated structures several hundred years before the Egyptians began work on their own triumphs in stone. They had begun building around 3600 B.C. and continued for over a thousand years.

They built their temples singly and in groups, added to them, embellished and enlarged them. Their richly decorated interiors were previously thought to have been inspired by the great Greek civilizations of Crete and Mycenae, but it is now clear that Malta's temple culture had flourished and died before the Greek civilizations were born.

Today four of the largest temple complexes figure on the tourist trail. At least forty more survive in various stages of disarray. Others have disappeared completely, spirited away into boundary walls and house foundations. They were built on a small archipelago with a total land area of little more than 300 square kilometres: a massive stone construction for every seven square kilometres. As British archaeologist David Trump has written: "there is probably no other area of this size in the world with such a number and variety of antiquities."

The oldest and best preserved of the temples is on Gozo, the second largest and most northerly of the islands. As with all their other temples the builders selected a choice site. Its great, grey mass stands on one of the island's distinctive flat-topped hills above a fertile valley. Its vast megaliths, never completely covered by the silting up of time, led to folk stories of a female giant who, by day, strode the land carrying the great slabs on her head, and built by night. It is still called Ggantija, the Maltese word for giantess.

The builders found on the islands an abundance of two kinds of limestone: a durable grey upper layer and beneath it one that cuts and looks like butter. They put both to good use in nearly all of their temples but nowhere else did they build a surrounding wall quite as astonishing as the one at Ggantija. Massive blocks of hard grey stone, one of them the size of a small cottage, are laid alternately upright and sideways to form a first course eight metres high. Above them smaller blocks teeter upwards for a further two metres.

Two temples, with great lobed chambers, built of smaller stones, share this colossal overcoat. The two entrances stand side by side on the concave facade, flanked by pillars of soft, golden limestone once doubtless capped by lintels of equally impressive dimensions. The oldest temple has a threshold made of one enormous slab of golden stone and beside it lie round rocks, the size of cannon balls, that rolled it into place. The interior walls were originally plastered and painted with red ochre, the remains of which could still be seen clinging to the stones until only a few years ago.

Unhappily, Ggantija was the first of the temples to be uncovered. In the 1820s it was dug out (rather than excavated) by enthusiastic but untrained hands. Many treasures must have disappeared with the rubbish. A carved snake climbing a stone, another rather more phallic stone, and two finely modelled stone heads give some indication of what else might have been there. A charming piece of pottery, part of a bowl incised all round with two lines of birds in flight, is difficult to associate with the term Stone Age.

Two more temple complexes, Hagar Qim and Mnajdra, which stand within sight of each other above the southern cliffs of the main island of Malta, received only slightly better treatment. But it was here, at Hagar Qim, that were found the statues which have become a symbol of the temple culture. They are known as "fat ladies", though whether they really are ladies is still in dispute. They have massive hips, thighs and upper arms, and neat little hands and feet, and they sit in lady-like positions, but very few of them have female breasts.

Fortunately, Tarxien, the last great temple to be built, and the Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni, an underground cemetery in use during almost the entire temple period, remained undisturbed until Malta had produced an archaeologist worthy of them. Both of them were discovered at the start of this century by builders digging foundations. Both of them now stand in the middle of housing developments, but at least most of their treasures were preserved.

If there had ever been any doubt about the importance of the fat ladies in temple culture this was dispelled by the discovery of their giant sister at Tarxien. Local farmers, tired of catching her in their ploughs, had done their best to break her up, but her elegant feet, massive calves and outsized pleated skirt survived the onslaught. When complete she would have stood nearly three metres high. Placed on a richly carved plinth, and given the prime position, she was, breasts or no breasts, undoubtedly the deity--the Earth Mother, Life, the Goddess of Fertility, or whatever it was they called her.

It had long been thought that animal sacrifice had played a part in temple rituals and Tarxien appears to have confirmed this too. When the excavators removed a small flap, cut by the temple

carvers into a richly decorated altar front, they found in the cavity behind it a long flint knife and a bundle of animal bones.

Tarxien displays the apex of the temple-carvers' art. As well as elaborately branched and running spirals and the stippling of incised dots on the stone, there are fine reliefs of bulls and horned sheep or goats and a sow followed by her piglets. A pair of particularly dense spirals stares sternly from a step leading up into what was probably the most sacred of the inner sanctums, like a pair of eyes keeping a watch for trespassers. The temple builders carved all this, as they did everything else from megaliths to underground caverns, with nothing to aid them but stone tools.

The Hypogeum, a man-made series of caves that reaches through several levels deep into the earth, is considered to be even more remarkable than the temples on the surface. An estimated 7,000 bodies were buried here, along with their grave goods of pottery, shells and polished stones, but the most astounding thing about it is the large circular chamber, cut from the living rock to imitate the interior of the temples above ground. Many of the temples contained small models of themselves, but here, sheltered from the elements, is a full-size replica unwithered by time.

### Peaceful farmers

What kind of people could they have been who created all these riches? Where did they come from and what happened to them? Some of the answers are now emerging from another subterranean burial site, the Brochtorff Circle, near Ggantija on Gozo. An Anglo-Maltese team of archaeologists, meticulously probing and recording, has been working there for the past six years and from long buried grain and pollen, bones and artifacts, they are beginning to piece the story together.

It seems that around 5000 B.C. the islands' first inhabitants made their way across the sea from Malta's nearest neighbour, Sicily, ninety kilometres to the north. They were farmers, growing barley and wheat and bringing with them cattle, goats, sheep and pigs. They appear to have been a remarkably peaceful people, fearing no threat from each other or from the outside world. They lived in caves and mudbrick houses without a trace of any kind of fortification. The only things found from this period even resembling a weapon are two tiny arrowheads.

They also appear to have been unusually healthy with strong bones and teeth. Rather touchingly a few of them had bunions and one small child was buried with a puppy. It could be that only the privileged few were buried here, but several skeletons seem to indicate otherwise. These were men with particularly thick, strong limbs and distinctively craggy faces.

The same team (Doctors Anthony Bonnanno and Tancred Gouda of Malta, and Caroline Malone, Simon Stoddart and David Trump from England) has recently tentatively put forward a theory which might explain the whole temple phenomenon.

For a thousand years or more the new settlers seem to have maintained links with the outside world. They had tools of flint and obsidian, which could never have been obtained on Malta itself, and the tiny greenstone axes that were common exchange goods of the time. Their pottery

remained similar to that on Sicily and the mainland of southern Italy. Then a distinctive local culture began to emerge. The pottery changed completely, unique bone pendants were made, of a shape found nowhere else, and local chert began to be used instead of the superior imported flint and obsidian. It was at this stage that the first temples were built. As the temple culture flourished, the temples themselves appear to have become the guardians of what remained of these now rare, imported goods.

The thinking is that, as the islands became increasingly isolated, the rivalry and prestige involved in foreign trade was transferred to the building of great monuments. As the population grew, every settlement not only had to have one of its own, but one bigger and better than all the rest.

Until recently it was assumed that the temple builders, after their last fine flourish at Tarxien, had been replaced by a very different race, who brought with them tools and weapons of copper and bronze. But there is now some evidence to show that the two cultures may have overlapped and that not all the temple builders were driven off the islands. It would be pleasant to think that Malta's modern building skills were a talent inherited from such remarkable ancestors.

## THE IMPACT OF TOURISM

The influx of tourists over the past twenty years or so has been both good and bad for Malta's neolithic remains. Temples built to receive only a select few are now daily bombarded by coachloads of sightseers. However, the enthusiasm of foreign visitors does seem to have contributed to a growing local awareness of the inestimable value of these national, indeed world, treasures. The listing in 1993 as World Heritage Sites of all the buildings of Malta's Temple Period (which are now regarded as a single unique phenomenon) has given this awareness an additional boost.

The islands' prosperity, to which tourism has been a large contributor, means that more funds are available to help preserve the monuments. Rescue archaeology is well organized, and Malta's university is providing more archaeologists to deal with it.

## PRESERVATION

The preservation of so many sites is an undoubted burden for a small nation with a population of only 350,000, but in the last few years great strides have been made and the help of world experts enlisted.

UNESCO has funded the plans for a comprehensive scheme for the preservation of the Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni and is contributing to the costs of putting them into effect. Within a year this unique subterranean complex should have its own microclimate and a carefully controlled number of visitors.

For years the main temples have been caged in unsightly iron railings but these are now coming down and the buildings are gradually being protected instead by archaeological parks. The aim is again to set them in an appropriate landscape and to tactfully discourage all but the seriously interested visitor from exploring the actual remains. Last year the entrance fees were raised from

a sum hardly worth collecting to one comparable with museum prices in other European countries. The number of visitors has gone down while income has increased considerably. With free entry on Sundays this still leaves the sites accessible to all, but cuts down on wear and tear.

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