Chapter 10

FROM *CABIRI* TO GODDESSES: CULT, RITUAL AND CONTEXT IN THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF MALTESE ARCHAEOLOGY

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1985 is a date certainly familiar to most of us who have gathered in Cambridge to discuss interdisciplinary approaches to the study of cult and ritual. Colin Renfrew's archaeological report of the Phylakopi sanctuary on the island of Melos was published, proposing a methodology for the recognition of the archaeological manifestations of religious ritual (Renfrew 1985). Also in that year, a gathering of scholars was convened on Malta to discuss the theme of Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean (Bonanno 1986). The conference was intended to cast a wide net, analysing the theme diachronically throughout the Mediterranean to include also the Classical period. Although explicit cross-cultural comparisons and multidisciplinary approaches were notably few during the eclectic gathering, the conference showed the complexities and diversities of the archaeological record related to ancient Mediterranean religion. This was a point made by Renfrew (1986) in his intervention when he reiterated the argument made years earlier by archaeologists for debunking the myth of a pan-European, pan-Mediterranean goddess, and the need for a clear framework of inference in archaeology. But for the doyen of Goddess studies, Marija Gimbutas, who was present at the conference, such caution was anathema to a belief that she consciously felt she had to preach, especially after the summer of 1985 - when she had 'to fight with the boys' about the Goddess (Noble 1989, 6). 'I don't say I can prove on paper that this is the owl goddess', Gimbutas retorted to a remark from Renfrew as to whether she intended to test her hypotheses. 'I shall not prove [this] to many of the archaeologists of modern times but I think that mythologists or historians of religions will believe. We are divorced from each other and archaeologists cannot see', she concluded to the applause of like-minded followers.

It is not the intention here to look at on-going debates dealing with the Goddess movement or contemporary meanings of Maltese prehistoric goddesses. Recent publications (Rountree 1999; 2002) have done just that, exploring social contexts and helping to trace the cultural biographies of objects that continue to be potent symbols of Maltese prehistory in the present. It is towards a consideration of the spatial context of three-dimensional anthropomorphic representations from Late Neolithic Malta that this paper is geared. It is inspired by work in progress related to the study of unpublished works on Maltese prehistory by the Italian archaeologist Luigi Ugolini (1895-1936). In 2000 the archive was traced in the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico 'L. Pigorini' in Rome (Pessina and Vella 2005). Ugolini's work, undertaken in the early 1930s, had consisted of a thorough description of the megalithic monuments and of all the objects that had been excavated over the previous century and which could be located in the showcases and stores of the Valletta museum. A study of these papers shows that Ugolini intended to study the objects in the context of spatial distribution and other artefactual associations. One of the volumes, the largest, was to build on Themistocles Zammit's seminal work at the Tarxien complex for it is here that Ugolini saw the potential of moving from contextual descriptions to interpretation. Ugolini's work was not only based on a close reading of Zammit's interim publications but, more importantly, on his notebooks and on questions Ugolini could ask the aged gentleman before Zammit passed away in 1935.

An appraisal of Ugolini's survey methodology got me to explore the extent to which an explicit attention to context to guide interpretation was a novel approach during the formative years of Maltese archaeology. In particular, I was interested to see the extent to which interpretation of prehistoric anthropomorphic representations was tempered by contextual information. This paper considers this matter after a brief prelude on the significance of context in archaeology.
The significance of context

That anthropomorphic representations – figurines, statuettes, statues – were evocative, expressive objects, potent tools to the men, women and children who used them in the past has long been recognised in the archaeological literature. Interpretation was sometimes considered as counter-intuitive, the context providing the right clues, as when Robertson Smith (1927, 208) remarked in one of his seminal lectures on the religion of the Semites dealing with Phoenician sacred representations that 'an image in like manner [i.e. with accompanying inscription] declares its own meaning better than a mere pillar, but the chief idol of a great sanctuary did not require to be explained in this way; its position showed what it was without either figure or inscription'. But in prehistoric studies generally, interpretation and explanation of anthropomorphic representations has set scholars at opposing ends of the discipline: from those supporting totalising narratives (of the Goddess type, for instance) to those who acknowledge that it is naïve to assume that archaeologists can reconstruct the meaning when ethnography tells us that society might have entertained several. Bailey (2005), for example, has argued that the paradox of figurine meaning is that several proposed interpretations could be correct and incorrect. He considers two levels of meaning for prehistoric figurines, one relating to particularities associated with use and function, in which the original archaeological context of individual figurines matters for the interpretative exercise, and a second one where meaning is related to the contemporary social context and may have nothing to do with archaeological findspot. In this case, Bailey is interested in the reactions of people to visual representations, in particular the body with its significance as a cultural, social and political object.

The recognition of two levels of contextual analysis was explicitly made by Schiffer more than thirty years ago, although in a manner that was predominantly concerned with the problems inherent in identifying patterns related to site formation processes through formalized middle range verification (Schiffer 1972; 1987). For Schiffer, the distinction between archaeological and systemic contexts was necessary in order to understand the life history of artefacts, from the time of discard to the moment they are recovered by archaeologists. Although this useful approach has been criticized for ignoring, for example, the 'issue of whether discard is meaningfully constituted' (Hodder 1992, 5), it is clear that rigorous studies of formation processes on a site – how layers and objects come to be – are essential for interpretation, not least on sites where ritual activity is suspected (e.g. Hill 1995). In putting into practice apparently diverging principles, archaeological theoreticians converge when they infer ritual activity from the archaeological evidence. Whether we are dealing with Flannery's (1976) or Renfrew's (1985) contextual analysis of ritual paraphernalia at Oaxaca or Melos respectively using a proclaimed hypothetico-deductive method (dubbed 'essentially inductive' by one reviewer – Warren (1986) on Renfrew), or Hodder's hermeneutic spiral at Haddenham (1992, 213-40; 1999, 34-40) and reflexive method at Çatalhöyük (1997), the majority of research excavation reports go to great lengths to provide a thorough description of contextual data. Detailed and painstaking plotting of macro- and micro-artefacts is often followed by quantification within and across contexts in an effort to see how artefact patterns might have been affected by formation processes. A rich narrative often written by the project director, explores the cross-cutting relationships between artefacts, even of different classes, and the deposits which contained them. Such integrated analyses make possible the interpretation of the materials recovered and allow different levels of meaning to be explored. As an example of such work I can single out the archaeological report of the Runnymede Bridge (London) research excavations by Needham and Spence (1996) which explored the formation of refuse and the meaning of midden deposits. In a résumé of their work they make it clear that a definition of ritual depends on context: ' […] insights into the frequency of certain kinds of deposits, their regularity or otherwise, the way material was treated prior to incorporation, ultimately the balance between the commonplace and the unusual' (Needham and Spence 1997, 86).

I want to come back to figurines, in particular those from Malta's Late Neolithic. I would like to show that in studying figurines as bounded entities there has been a strikingly general lack of attention to the spatial context in which they have been found. In what follows I suggest reasons for this state of affairs and explore the resultant implications.

Discoveries and definitions

Malta's megalithic monuments have long been the subject of antiquarian interest. A long list of local and foreign historians, antiquarians, naturalists, surveyors, clerics, and visitors more generally has been perplexed by the ruins, offering explanations for their origins well before the idea of prehistory had been accepted in the early twentieth century (Leighton 1989). Several left notes, letters, or full-blown accounts of what they observed; few engaged artists to depict the ruins and their landscape setting and had drawings, woodcuts or lithographs made to illustrate their travels (Attard Tabone 1999; Bonello 1996; Grima 2004). As stories of giants and diluvial theories associated with the monoliths at Ħagar Qim (Abela 1647, 145) were gradually dropped, eventually in the face of new palaeontological discoveries, Phoeniciomaniacs crept in as an alternative. Ġgantija, excavated between 1821 and 1823, visited by de la Marmora in January 1834 and reported in
a letter to the superintendent of antiquities in the Bibliothèque in Paris, was described as a temple dedicated to a goddess of nature, Astarte, or to a moon goddess. A tapering monolith found there conceivably be associated with the aniconic representation of Astarte at Paphos in Cyprus (de la Marmora 1836, 11). The association of other similar monuments with a female divinity was sustained by discoveries made in 1839 during excavations at Ħagar Qim by J. G. Vance.

In what is, I believe, the first lengthy account of an excavation of a Maltese megalithic building, accompanied by a plan and several elevated views prepared by Lieutenant William Foulis of the 59th (2nd Nottinghamshire Regiment) of Foot stationed in Malta, Vance takes the reader carefully through the reasons why he believed the building to be the remains of a place of worship (Vance 1842). The narrative is exacting and sequential as most reports read to the Society of Antiquaries in London, like this one, had to be (cf. Hodder 1989). Indeed, I see here much of the rigour in formulating interpretations on the basis of contextualized evidence which is characteristic of modes of archaeological writing of the 1980s and 1990s to which reference was made above. Vance knew that without inscriptions he had to rely on what he found to explain the relics of antiquity, and although he looked at other sites in Malta to look for similarities (including Ggantija and Mnajdra) he refrained from pressing too far comparisons with Avebury and Stonehenge in Wiltshire and Carnac in France because the Maltese monuments were 'quite unique and dissimilar to any discovery hitherto treated of' (Vance 1842, 231). He was careful to identify unwarranted interpretation of the monuments as conjecture and thought that 'the interior arrangement [...] the style of the altars, and other appendages to a place of worship [...] are the only guides by which we may hope to unravel their history' (1842, 231). He interpreted two 'rudely cut tablets' located in the northern division of the building, at the entrance of chamber No. 4, as altars for sacrifices on account of the evidence for fire and the traces of bones and ash discovered there in great quantities, especially in chamber No. 12 (1842, 229). The southern division exhibited no signs of fire, 'but contained nine images, (five of which were lying near the foot of the altar), and four in the semicircular chamber adjoining', also many fragments of very ancient pottery in the adjoining, also many fragments of very ancient pottery in the shape of bowls, small jugs, lamps, and other utensils' (1842, 229) (Figure 10.1). Vance identified the headless limestone statuettes with deities or mythological heroes, suggesting that the heads could be changed 'according to the innumerable forms under which a polytheistic people might wish to picture their deities or heroes' (1842, 231). He concluded that the heads may have been broken off by their possessors – the Phoenicians – with a view of preserving their worship in other countries. Another representation, in terracotta, of a naked upright figurines of a beautiful shape was identified with ‘Venus Urania’, the goddess adored by the Phoenicians. Vance interpreted this area of the building, chamber No. 2, with its ‘peculiar’ doorways cut out of the centre of large blocks, with that entirely devoted to the vocal adoration of the deities (1842, 232); a conical hole cut in a stone slab opposite the altar ‘doubtless connected in some way with the service of the altar, but for what purpose I can form no idea, except that of containing a libation’, he wrote (1842, 237).

Even if it is a far cry from modern reports, the text is crisp and rigorous and I think that later archaeologists were particularly unkind in describing the report 'extremely inadequate' and the images 'poorly executed' (Evans 1971, 81). The narrator is present in the text, toing-and-froing between ideas and contextualised data as he moves about the monument, explores the spaces, and enters some of them through holes with a moderate inclination of the head and back; the method of inference is clear and the reader can accept or refute his ideas, hypotheses and conclusions. The report contains many descriptive labels and interpretations that more than a century and a half later are still found in the literature on Maltese prehistory. Only the labels changed over the years: for successive public librarians (Vassallo 1853, 222; 1872, 5–6; Caruana 1882, 11–13), dilettanti (Furse 1869, 412) and travellers (Tallack 1861, 117), the pantheon included the grotesque cabiri, gods described by Herodotus (III, 37), which became Phoenician through a mix of legendary genealogy and myth (cf. Perrot and Chipiez 1885, 315). When the idea of prehistory was belatedly accepted in Malta by Albert Mayr and others in the early twentieth century (Vella and Gilkes 2001, 355–6), the statuettes were identified with anonymous, fat, obese, steotypagus, sometimes female or asexual and genderless deities. The challenging and novel interpretation of the 'temples' as tombs with ceremonial halls for celebrating the dead (Fergusson 1872, 425–6) and aniconic pillars or betyls representing them (Evans 1901, 200), or as abodes for princes and chiefs (Riccio 1951, 111) did not have any consequences of note.

Although Ugolini resurrects Vance’s Venus (Ugolini 1931), taking care to regard its temporal context that was often ignored by Venus theorists (cf. Antonielli 1925), the infatuation which Europeans had with the Goddess (Hutton 1997) failed to find a home in Malta, perhaps because the sexual attributes of the stone and clay representations were rarely unambiguous. Zammit, the excavator of the Tarxien megalithic complex, remained cautious in his publications: the Ħagar Qim statuettes were identified with “‘fat’ deities” in his guide to the Valletta museum (Zammit 1919, 29) and in his Tarxien monograph he wrote of a divinity cult without specifying the gender of the transcendent (1930, 15). He identified numerous clay and stone figurines with miniature representations of corpulent deities. Their gesture was telling: ‘a ritual attitude with one forearm bent on the chest.
Figure 10.1. The findspot of the limestone statuettes recovered at Hagar Qim in 1839: (a) the ‘septem kabiri’ photographed for an album Antiquitates Phoeniciae in Insulis Melitae et Gaulos compiled by the Society of Archaeology, History and Natural Sciences of Malta in 1868 (courtesy of the National Library of Malta); (b) elevated view of the chamber No. 2 at Hagar Qim from a litograph prepared for J. G. Vance (1842: plate 24).

and the other hanging by the side’ (1930, 44). His framework of inference to identify the purpose of the buildings in which they were found – sanctuaries of the Stone Age period – was made clear for all to follow (1930, 42–44). Although he kept abreast with major publications of his day and was in touch with numerous foreign scholars, he was careful in seeking comparisons with sites abroad even if explanatory models at the time were largely diffusionistic. Parallels sought with Arthur Evans’s Neolithic Crete, for instance, were made in passing, posing questions ‘for the future to answer’ (Zammit and Singer 1924, 78) while a note on the pleated skirts and posture of Sumerian or Chaldean priest figures was jotted down in an unpublished notebook in order ‘to compare with the clay statuettes from Tarxien’ (Zammit 1906–1921); when he made use of the information he did not press the connection
Displacement and display

The deadlock reached in offering interpretations of the anthropomorphic representations was compounded, in my opinion, by three facts. I look at them in turn before I conclude.

First, excepting the investigations at Mnajdra in 1910, one excavation after another at minor megalithic sites—Kordin (1908–1909), Santa Verna (1911), Xrobb il-Gagin (1913), Hal Ginwi (1917), Borg in-Nadur (1921–1923; 1926–1927), Ta' Hagar (1923; 1925–1926), Tal-Qadi (1927), Bugibba (1928), Kuncizzjoni (1938) (details in Evans 1971; Pace 2004b)—failed to uncover figurines that could have offered an interpretative challenge to the excavators, in their majority anything but prehistorians by training. By the time that new discoveries were made—in 1949 at Hagar Qim (Baldacchino 1951) and in 1964 at Tas-Silġ (Mallia 1965)—the Mother Goddess view was upheld in Hawkes's seminal work on European prehistory (1940, 153) and later in the work of Gimbutas (1989) and her followers (Biaggi 1986). Archaeologists working in Malta remained reticent to use the label despite seeing a clear connection between the statuettes and a fertility cult (Evans 1959, 143; cf. Crawford 1957, 49). The real challenge only came about as a result of the 1985 cult conference held in Malta when a joint Anglo-Maltese team agreed to start research excavations at the Xaghra Circle in Gozo (Malta) to explore the archaeological context of prehistoric art objects (Stoddart et al. 1993, 3).

Second, in describing, drawing and photographing...
single objects according to type or material – the most common of archaeological practices (cf. Conolly 2000) – the unity of the archaeological context was pulled apart, often when the scale of analysis shifted from a spatial unit to an entire site. In their catalogue of Neolithic representations of the human form, for instance, Zammit and his medic friend from University College London, Charles Singer, failed to appreciate the interpretation tempered by a consideration of context which Vance gave for the Hagar Qim statuettes. Instead they erroneously take him to task for ‘failing to tell us in what part of the building they were found’ (1924, 71). The inconsistency with which the importance of an object’s archaeological context was recognised can be seen in the case of the damaged limestone statue found in the Hal Saflieni hypogeum in 1908 (Figure 10.3). Whereas, in a note in the museum annual report for the same year Zammit made it clear that the statue was found in a rock-cut floor pit in association with two limestone heads (Zammit 1909, E4), in the catalogue of small objects from the site (Zammit et al. 1912, 5) and in the guidebook to the hypogeum (Zammit 1926), this important datum disappears. The objects were published against a black background, a non-space, continuing a tradition that started in 1868 when the Society of Archaeology of Malta compiled an album of photographs which it presented at the International Congress of Prehistoric Archaeology held in Norwich that year (Furse 1869, 411). Compelling interpretations of these objects were made years later, even by Zammit (Zammit and Singer 1924, 75), when this singular association was taken into account, and in most cases the explanations are not dissimilar from Vance’s (e.g. Vella Gregory 2005, 162).

It is clear that the removal of body parts, especially the head with the gaze and the power of looking, may have been a significant act in Late Neolithic Malta.

The practice of singling out objects for archaeological study brings me to my third point: the display of objects now and in prehistory. In transferring objects from sites to museum showcases, a practice that flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century and was often inspired by nascent forms of nationalisms (cf. Skeates 2005), curators robbed the figurines of that vital spatial context which often allowed the first level interpretation to take place. Over a century that context has often been forgotten, indeed, physically changed in the case of Hagar Qim’s chamber No. 2 (Figure 10.4). Today’s encounter with these figurines occurs generally through books and the displays at the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta. In different
Figure 10.4. The 'altar' and decorated slab at Hagar Qim: (a) set-up (circled) as shown in a lithographed plan appended to J. G. Vance's report (1842: plate 23); (b) set-up missing from a plan of the same area prepared by the Society of Archaeology, History and Natural Sciences of Malta and reproduced by one of its members (Adams 1870: plate 5); view of the 'altar' and slab in a lithograph (Vance 1842: plate 27); (d) view of the altered set-up with copies of the 'altar' and slab, 2006.
rooms visitors see displays of objects that have been separated from other objects with which they were originally found. The Temple-period displays favour a breakdown of prehistory in terms of themes with relevant classes of materials: pottery, lithics, anthropomorphic representations (including body parts), zoomorphic representations, low relief sculpture, architectural models (cf. Camilleri 2001, 122). Except for the 'Sleeping Lady', the figurines, statuettes, and statues have all been placed in the same room dedicated to the 'Human Form' some carefully propped up because they lack body parts, with no indication where exactly in a monument – burial hypogeum or 'temple' – they were found (though as I write plans are unfolding to change this situation). The heads recovered during excavations are placed in a separate showcase, one next to the other in a line, some with their characteristic upturned gaze. Certainly, the objects have exhibition value but quite what message the curators wanted to convey here is not clear to me, other than the fact that the juxtaposition of different heads can allow visitors to appreciate better symmetrical appropriations of form, more generally qualities of craftsmanship, aesthetic and cultural achievement. A provoking critique of museum displays has pointed out that "aesthetic" exhibitions' assume that

our visual perception is a somehow coherent, even objective process, as if all that is necessary is 'to see properly', without taking any account of how complicated and problematic a process "seeing" is, nor how easy it is to misconstrue even the most elementary kinds of visual experience. (Vergo 1989, 49)

Such assumptions pose problems relevant to this study. Hayden (1998) and Grima (1999) have argued that particular codes of representing the human figure in Malta several millennia ago may be different from those with which we are accustomed today. For Grima, for instance, the curvilinear proportions associated with several of Malta's prehistoric figurines may have less to do with oft-quoted qualities of fatness, obesity and fertility – qualities which some would like to see acknowledged in the museum's display (e.g. Rountree 1990, 218) – and more to do with representations of perceptual sensations and physical sense-experiences. One could argue that such an explanation would probably require an over-contextualised display, laden with texts that viewers are ill-prepared to read. It is nonetheless frustrating that the display does not extend a helping hand to the viewer eager to make sense of this class of objects even if it is to elicit questions or to suggest that gesture and body might have been fundamental to figurine function in prehistory. I have already made reference above to one archaeological context where the unequivocal connection between heads and body exits. Zammit noted that one of the heads from the Hal Saflieni entrance pit fitted into the cavity of the statue (Zammit and Singer 1924, 87). Recently the body and the second head have been joined together in several photographs (Vella Gregory 2005, figure on p. 45) and reproduced in a recent guidebook to the museum (Sultana 2006, 27). The association between the finds would be clearer if the museum display were to place the objects together – as Zammit had done years ago (1919, 28) – rather than in separate showcases.

This plea for re-contextualising anthropomorphic representations in the museum can be extended to the group of four limestone statuettes which Baldacchino found grouped below the largest step leading to a raised apse at Hagar Qim in 1949 (Baldacchino 1951) – an intentional cache, as most concur (Malone et al. 1995, 9) not objects forgotten by the original excavators below 'modern steps' as has been suggested (Evans 1959, 143; 1993, 54) (Figure 10.5).

Museum displays bring this paper to a close by way of a final thought. It has been noted that display of objects is not a post-Renaissance phenomenon, originating only in cabinets of curiosities (Pearce 1992, 89–91). Gosden (2004) has in fact argued that in British prehistory a complex dialectic between concealment and display, between hiding and revealing things, including artefacts and human bodies, may have existed as a vital basis for social power. It is a short step to complement this suggestion with the possibility that older, prehistoric forms of display can be recognised also in Malta if we start considering categories of objects in the context of the structured space of the megalithic buildings, not least Tarxien for which we have the contextual data: for instance, large (or miniature) ceramic and stone containers or caches of cattle bone and horn. In this view, anthropomorphic representations in clay, stone and exotic alabaster become one part of several expressive, technically-enchanted (to follow Gell 1992) objects that may have been displayed prior to deposition and concealment inside the megalithic monuments: in pits, below floors, below thresholds, behind screens – spatial contexts recovered archaeologically. Phenomenal engagements with megalithic buildings can go beyond narratives elicited by experience structured mainly by empty space (e.g. Tilley 2004) to include also the symbolic potential of the material world, portable objects now housed in museum displays or in storage. The potential has already been explored by Grima with exciting insights related to how an island cosmology may have been embodied in the megalithic structures people built in the Late Neolithic (Grima 2001; 2003). Moreover, Turnbull has provided us with a definition of the Maltese megalithic monuments – "theatres of knowledge" in which the Neolithic Maltese knowledge traditions were performed (Turnbull 2002, 137) – that can challenge stereotyped labels, including the ubiquitous 'temples'. Looked at in terms of the esoteric knowledge associated with transforming raw materials into objects (e.g. taking ceramic pyrotechnology to new limits; cf. Bailey
Figure 10.5. The findspot of three limestone statuettes discovered by J. G. Baldacchino below steps leading to an elevated chamber at Hagar Qim: (a) the statuettes, courtesy of D. Cilia; (b) the original steps as they appear in a photograph taken by L. Ugolini in the early 1930s (courtesy of the Museo "Pigorini", Rome); (c) the same area photographed in 2006 showing the replaced steps; (d) photograph from the Sunday Times of Malta of 30th October 1949 showing J. G. Baldacchino looking over the spot where the statuettes were discovered.
2005, 5) or the regenerative power often attributed to animal bones (cf. Helms 1998, 29), the varieties of definitions and values that can be attached to objects increase. We can start moving beyond archaeological contexts to explore multiple meanings, which is what this conference did, a lasting gift from its organisers.

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