Twin seated mother goddesses from the Brochtorff Circle, Malta (see page 3)
This paper examines the cult practices of the Tarxien period on Malta (c. 3000–c. 2500 BC) within the wider context of island societies. A model of ritual organization is developed which emphasizes the isolation of Malta during the major phases of temple building. A comparison is made between two pairs of sites each comprising a temple and burial component, Tarxien and Hal Saflieni, Ġgantija and the Brochtorff Circle. A more detailed comparison is made between the more recently excavated examples: the Tarxien temple and the Brochtorff Circle mortuary complex. The latter is the subject of an ongoing Anglo-Maltese project directed by the authors. The analysis moves in turn from the constituent units (or modules) of which these sites are composed, to their overall configuration, and finally to their place in the landscape and to the place of Malta in the central Mediterranean.

The study of prehistoric cult is frequently cited as a neglected, even dangerous area of archaeological study. Recognition and/or separation of the ritual sphere can be difficult and, once established, hard to interpret (Renfrew 1985, 1; Garwood et al. 1991, v; Alon & Levy 1989). Nevertheless, certain prehistoric societies stand out for the incontrovertible evidence of ritual performance, that is, repeated actions connected with divinity. One such society was to be found on the Maltese islands between the fourth and third millennia BC. Furthermore, this particular society provides many of the important ingredients for the reconstruction of ritual as defined by Renfrew (1985) and Alon & Levy (1989): elaborate ritual architecture and specific ritual furniture and artefacts, including attention-focusing devices and cult images. Many of these elements provide indications of performance and consumption and are organized in a repetitive, structured manner. These special circumstances lead us to pose two interrelated questions. First, can the habitual problems for the reconstruction of ritual be overcome in a prehistoric context with elaborate material culture such as this?; and, secondly, can the repetitive structure and associated iconography be read without the aid of written texts?

Our aim here is to explore these possibilities in the light of recent work at the Brochtorff Circle, a mortuary complex on the Maltese island of Gozo. This work is the product of a joint Anglo-Maltese project which has begun to redress the balance of knowledge between life and death ritual in the Maltese islands. The Brochtorff Circle has proved to be a series of natural caves adapted for burial near the Ġgantija temple. The site was first opened in the 1820s and was only rediscovered in 1987. Until these excavations of the late 1980s, the context of many items of ritual furniture, both funerary and temple, were extremely uncertain. The Zammit excavations of the Tarxien temples provided the one relatively certain context, as the temple contained substantial quantities of artefacts still in situ (Zammit 1930). Unfortunately, the finds from the more recent excavations at Skorba, a smaller temple complex, were relatively sparse and the architecture less elaborate (Trump 1966). The knowledge of prehistoric Maltese funerary contexts and finds was even more uncertain, given the standard of the Hal Saflieni excavations at the turn of the century (Evans 1971, 44–67); human bone from the site was redistributed as fertilizer and artefacts retained for museum display on a
selective basis, without accurate knowledge of their original location. The new excavations thus provide rare information in the form of good datable assemblages for the pre-Temple Zebbug (4100–3800 BC) and Temple climax Tarxien (3000–2500 BC) phases, supported by new radiocarbon dates. They also provide the first Tarxien period evidence for the layout of ritual furniture in a funerary context to compare with the broadly contemporary phase of the Tarxien temples.

In order to investigate the role and nature of cult on Malta, several objectives need to be outlined. First, the specific context of ritual in an island society needs to be defined. Secondly, the processual context of Maltese socio-cultural development has to be addressed. Thirdly, comparison must be made between the two aspects of Maltese ritual, for the living and for the dead. Ultimately, we argue that the cause of this ritual florescence can only be understood by placing Malta back within its central Mediterranean location: an isolated archipelago entering, leaving and re-entering the exchange processes of the Mediterranean world.

Ritual in island societies

Island societies in the Mediterranean and beyond provide numerous cases of elaborate ritual practice (Renfrew 1976, 174–82), but the Maltese islands present a very specific instance of a cycle of ritual elaboration, which is unequalled in antiquity, and which can be matched in elaboration by few other prehistoric contexts. In the period between c. 3500 BC (some 1500 years after initial human colonization) and c. 2500 BC, this island society went through a profound cycle of elaborate ritualization and insularity. The postulated cycle started and ended with Maltese society in full contact with the rest of the Mediterranean. Why should this island society have been transformed so drastically over this period in a manner that runs counter to previous and subsequent development?

Anthropological studies of exotic products abound in evidence for the linkage between access to exotic power, exotic materials and religious/political authority. Appadurai (1986, 38) emphasizes that the register of luxury consumption 1) is linked to elites; 2) may involve ‘unreal’ scarcity; 3) often signals complex social messages; 4) requires specialized knowledge; and 5) is often associated with particular individuals. He goes on to emphasize that many of these qualities may be accentuated with increasing ‘spatial, cognitive or institutional distances between production, distribution and consumption’ (1986, 48). Helms (1988), without reference to Appadurai, has taken a more general approach by studying the linkage of power, knowledge and geographical distance. She emphasizes that geographical distance is frequently associated with the heroic deeds of founding ancestors (Helms 1988, 262), and that ritual specialists often have (or claim to have) knowledge of such distant places.

Island communities provide the most emphatic case of this type of context. Much research has been directed recently towards Mediterranean islands as ‘targets’ of colonists (e.g. Cherry 1990), but relatively little research has been undertaken on the effects of island biogeography on the development of more mature agricultural societies. Islands have in-built geographical constraints which remain constant, although varying in their effect, through periods of cultural and political change. It is even possible that some cognitive patterns may be structured by these geographical constraints, so as to retain a certain stability. In the Trobriand Islands, for instance, a tripartite spatial division is made between the stable land of agricultural production, the unstable sea and the even more unstable sky. The horizon, the meeting place of sky and sea, was the source of the exotic
products made famous in the Western world by Malinowski (1922). The *kula* of the Trobriand Islands is one of the longest established fields of study of these phenomena (Malinowski 1920; Leach & Leach 1983). Key to this study is the concept of the *keda*, the route or path to wealth, power and fame created through the exchange of valuables. As Appadurai (1986) puts it, a commodity can itself have a biography which is linked to the associated person even after death. The debt of exchange continues after death and is carried with the bones of the dead (Weiner 1983). The role of exchange partner left vacant by a person’s death needs to be filled and mortuary ritual may be linked to this process of replacement. Furthermore, intense competition exists at the intra-community level to establish exchange with external communities (Campbell 1983, 203). The most extreme example of the introduction of exotic raw materials into a society is represented by the cargo cult, operating in a context which assumes major differences in socio-political development between source and destination. Nevertheless, this extreme, almost deviant, case emphasizes the potential power of the exotic amplified by distance and the ritualization of transport.

The geography of Malta

Any discussion of the Maltese islands should start with a measure of their isolation and poverty of resources. The Maltese islands are on the peninsular shelf of Italy (200 m below present sea level), but located some 90 km to the south. Within the Maltese archipelago, Gozo, the second largest island, is located marginally to the north, and therefore slightly more accessible to the outside world in terms of distance, but not of harbours. The islands of Gozo and Sicily are mutually intervisible from the safety of high land, but this intervisibility would have been lost at sea-level once land had been abandoned (Held 1989, 92–3), except on occasions of unusual activity by Mount Etna. Any activity on Mount Etna would have added to the exotic quality of the distant island on the horizon as well as acting as a distinct marker.

The three principal islands are Malta (28 x 13 km), Gozo (14 x 7 km) and Comino (2 x 2 km) (Fig. 1). The islands are not only small but composed largely of clays and limestones, and they are lacking in all resources other than the agricultural basics of sun, soil and water. Even these last could easily have been brought under pressure by seasonal fluctuation, erosion or excess population. In modern climatic conditions, water is least available when plant growth is highest, and most available when plant growth is slowest. In addition, the frequent occurrence of non-average conditions (drought or flash flood) can be disastrous (Mitchell & Dewdney 1961). It was this fragility of local resources (including biomass) that prevented successful colonization before the development of full agriculture. Available evidence from molluscs and pollen suggests a largely treeless landscape at a very early stage; timber was not as widely available as in other Neolithic societies. The scarcity of timber would have had important consequences, making it a precious resource, less readily available for both construction of buildings (including, most probably, the roofs of the temples) and for other forms of material culture, most importantly ocean-going craft, the only link with the wider Mediterranean world. The potential availability of skin stretched on wooden frames for boat construction may have reduced the need for large trees, but not for a reliable supply of timber. The very link with exotic resources of the extra-insular world would have been dependent either on external visits or on the conservation of timber to make return visits in valuable craft. In the periods of most extreme insularity, those local resources which were plentiful were exploited to the full; clay and soft globigerina limestone proved to be highly suitable media for an insular artistic florescence.

The biogeographical status of the islands, we suggest, provided the potential for a crisis in small scale societies under certain conditions. In a suitable political and economic context, the underlying geographical isolation would have enabled the development of cultural isolation. This same cultural isolation could have stimulated an internal dynamic which developed its own momentum. When taken too far, the stress of isolation may have produced a crisis in socio-cultural operation which reached breaking point and ultimately collapsed. In effect, socio-political development turned full circle so that when a power vacuum had developed within the archipelago the isolated islands re-entered the broader Mediterranean system. One such cycle may have occurred between the fourth and third millennia BC. The demonstration of this awaits analysis of human bones from the Brochtorff Circle and effective analysis of settlement distribution and remains. At present, it remains at the level of a working hypothesis based on our current state of knowledge.

The cultural history of prehistoric Malta

The early prehistory of Malta was very much linked
to the processes of cultural development in the rest of the central Mediterranean. The pottery of Ghar Dalam (c. 5000 BC) is very similar in style to that of the contemporary Stentinello on Sicily and in southern Calabria. Current archaeological evidence thus suggests that the ancestral populations of the Maltese islands most probably arrived from the north and colonized a previously unoccupied archipelago. From this same direction, cultural prestige continued to be drawn in the later, more isolated, periods of Maltese prehistory.

The major socio-economic distinction to be stressed is that, once enabled by agricultural production, the Maltese islands required an influx of people as well as new economic practice. Whereas there is clear evidence from Grotta del’Uzzo in western Sicily that many of the processes of adoption of agriculture on larger land masses entailed gradual change amongst locally based populations (Tusa 1985), the first permanent occupation of the limited and fragile environment of the Maltese islands necessitated a more fully developed agricultural production. Biogeographic constraints explain this very well (Cherry 1990). However, this model of colonization does not necessarily entail sudden population movement into unexplored territory, but may easily have incorporated an increasing intensity of agricultural activity which was initially seasonal in scope.

The Late Neolithic Skorba phases of prehistoric Malta (c. 4500–4100 BC), preceding the construction of the temples, show a continuing stylistic contact with the central Mediterranean. In socio-economic terms, they represent a consolidation phase of agricultural production (Lewthwaite 1987); the restricted size of the islands precluded the existence of sufficient faunal and floral resources to support a permanent hunting and gathering population. Full agriculture was almost certainly required. The increasing size of villages is revealed by recent archaeological survey where several settlement sites have been located on the upper flanks of the prominent mesas of Gozo. The social organization shows every sign of having remained egalitarian in scope and the investment in ritual was apparently restrained. The only tentative evidence for ritual is from the Skorba site where, in the pre-temple Late Neolithic levels, an oval room

Figure 2. Layout of the Tarxien temples.
8.40 x 5.40 m was found in 1962, with stone footings 60 cm high supporting adobe walls on the very irregular bedrock. Among the broken pottery and animal bones were fragments of five stylized female figurines, a number of cattle tarsal bones ground smooth at one end, and six goat skulls with horns attached (Trump 1966). Ritual can only be very tentatively identified here, and, even if the identification is correct, this was no more than a domestic shrine.

In the Zebbug phase (c. 4100–3800 BC), still preceding the construction of the temples, the biographical potential for cultural isolation had yet to become effective. The shift in ceramic style marks something of a break in the Mediterranea cultural continuity of Maltese islands, although the dark incised pottery shows a general similarity with the San Cono-Piano Notaro styles of Sicily (Evans 1953, 78; Malone 1986; McDonnell 1985). Two small statue menhirs (from tombs at Zebbug and the Brochtorff Circle) suggest stylistic divergence more strongly, a conclusion which is reinforced by the discovery of a new class of anthropomorphic figurine from the Brochtorff Circle. These are simple segmented bone pendants with budding limbs (Fig. 5), associated with burials. In spite of their simplicity they are an artistic form remarkably different from any earlier or later examples. Funerary evidence from the Brochtorff Circle suggests that the underlying social structure of the island populations during the Zebbug period took the form of enlarged family groups who chose to be buried together over several generations in the company of a common ancestor.

In the Zebbug phase there appears to have been continuing cultural contact with mainland Italy, coupled with strong contact through exchange processes. A twin chambered tomb in the Brochtorff Circle has produced exchange products from as far afield as the Alps (Dixon, pers. comm.). Obsidian from the Lipari islands and Pantelleria, ochre from Sicily and greenstone axes from Calabria were also present in some abundance. Ethnographic evidence from island communities suggests that rival families (in the Maltese case, each most probably with their small chambered tomb) would have engaged in competitive exchange with the distant Sicilian communities able to offer exotic products. Caches of ochre, collected for transport perhaps to Malta, have been found at Serra del Palco near Milena in Sicily (Maniscalco 1989). At the same time, local materials such as bone and stone were also being carved. In two significant cases, the shape of a greenstone axe was effectively modelled in local limestone. Thus a process that became accentuated in the temple building period was already under way: the elaboration of local materials to compensate for a shortfall in exotic products.

In the Ġgantija phase (c. 3600–3000 BC), a cultural repertoire developed that finds few parallels outside Malta (Evans 1971, 217). Cultural distinctiveness and, we hypothesize, isolation, was not restricted to ceramics, but was apparent in the ritualization of the landscape. It was in this phase that the temples were founded which are a unique achievement of the Maltese islands. We would argue that the rivalry between families in pursuing exchange outside the Maltese archipelago in the Zebbug period was transferred in the Ġgantija phase to rivalry between factions in the construction of temples. Temples do not appear in isolation but as related clusters, differing in size and long-term development. Evidence for exchange processes is difficult to quantify since the appropriate levels of the Brochtorff Circle have not yet been encountered (except as a final deposit in one chamber of the otherwise Zebbug period chambered tomb), and there are no other sites on the islands with appropriate evidence. There is some evidence from Skorba that obsidian may still have been in circulation (Trump 1966, 50, table IV).

The Tarxien period (3000–2500 BC) seems to represent an accentuation of this hypothesized trend towards physical and cultural isolation. The temples were also adapted and transformed. Particular temples within pre-existing clusters appear to have become pre-eminent, matching associated hypogea, and we suggest that principles of exclusion of members of the congregation began to be applied. The evidence for deposition in a funerary context (from the Brochtorff Circle) indicates that exchange processes also became severely restricted. As the Maltese islands became more culturally isolated, the import and deposition of greenstones and obsidian and other foreign materials became increasingly rare. Temples such as Skorba and Tarxien may have continued to be depositories of some imported items such as Iblei flint and greenstone axes but there was an apparent decline in obsidian at Skorba (Trump 1966, 50, table IV). We suggest that effort originally invested in exchange processes was redirected towards artisan production in the artistic elaboration of local, more readily available, materials, most particularly clay and limestone. Current archaeological evidence (most effectively from the Tarxien temples) suggests that it was in the Tarxien period that the peak in elaboration of ritual architecture and image was reached, contrasting with the modest investment of labour in domestic architecture (Malone et al. 1988). This artistic elaboration is reflected equally in the funerary
sphere, as convincingly demonstrated by Hal Saflieni and the Brochtorff Circle, where images were created from both clay and soft globigerina limestone. We propose that cultural isolation and its associated introverted spirit were accompanied by physical isolation in many significant dimensions.

We also consider significant the images created in these local media. If our model is correct, that late Tarxien society can be envisaged as stressed and isolated, preoccupied with its own predicament, then the chosen images of corpulence, often deliberately asexual and exaggerated, would have contrasted with physical and biological reality. Agricultural production is a constant theme in the animal imagery. Certain artefacts were probably associated with the dispensing of agricultural produce. Large stone bowls most probably contained liquids. Other more shallow hollowed-out stones were plausibly grinders for grain (examples at Tarxien and Kordin). Furthermore, much of the pottery found in the temples consists of standardized bowls which would have been suitable for the distribution of agricultural produce in the form of drink and food. The temples might have been perceived as centres of ancestral stability in
what appeared to the inhabitants of Malta as a stressed and rapidly developing world where agricultural wealth and fertility could no longer be relied upon. In this context, the orientation of the temples towards the north and west (of which more below) could be interpreted as pointing towards a source of ancestral security and exotic power, respectively the realm of the ancestors and the provenance of increasingly rare exotic products. This argument links Maltese ritual back into the Mediterranean world and is discussed further below.

Rituals of life and death in the Tarxien period

The Tarxien period is the last phase of full ritual use of the temples and thus the only intact ritual horizon left to us to analyze. Earlier ritual phases, such as the Ggantija period, have been corrupted by later ritual activity. Later phases, such as Tarxien Cemetery (c. 2500–1500 BC), represent a ritual tradition radically different from the temples' original use.

Two pairs of monuments survive largely intact from the Tarxien phase. On Gozo, there is the mortuary monument of the Brochtorff Circle and the nearby Ggantija temples. On Malta, the Tarxien temples are placed close, but less strictly related, to the mortuary monument of Hal Saflieni. Although it would be most appropriate to attempt an analysis of all four of these monuments, the vagaries of archaeological research already alluded to require us to compare the mortuary complex of the Brochtorff Circle with the temples of Tarxien. Whilst at the present time we have knowledge of only two large subterranean burial sites, Hal Saflieni and the Brochtorff Circle, it seems likely that other temple groups on Malta will in time yield evidence of similar hypogeia.

We have chosen to develop this analysis by what may initially seem an artificial approach. The analysis proceeds from the smallest unit to the overall layout of these units. The effect is deliberate, to allow appreciation of how ritual artefacts, furniture and space were combined. Thus first of all, without describing their setting

Figure 4. Artists reconstruction of the Brochtorff Circle.

Figure 5. Zebbug bone pendant.
or spatial relationships, a selection of individual modules of ritual activity from these two well-preserved sites will be described. These modules will then be combined to form the internal organization, the architecture of each monument. Next, the monuments will briefly be placed in their ritual landscape. Finally, the orientation of the temples will be employed to suggest a relationship with the extra-insular seascape or more specifically the exotic landfalls beyond. Cognitive horizons can perhaps be revealed that extend beyond the physical boundaries of the islands themselves.

Internal organization of ritual furniture and architecture

Maltese monumental architecture is divided into separate more-or-less demarcated modules. These modules occupy the distinctive lobes or apses of the Maltese temples, which are interlinked to form a complex of partly intervisible curved spaces. The effect of these separate modules is best appreciated in the burial hypogeum of Hal Saflieni, which has retained intact the three-dimensional space of the different compartments, even if unfortunately stripped of the furniture, artefacts and corpses which gave meaning to each module. This monument survives as almost seventy units of space arranged in eleven levels of access (Bonanno et al. 1990, 200). Even in its denuded state it retains much of the painting that would have added an extra quality to the two sites described in more detail below.

During the first phase of the excavation of the Brochtorff Circle (1987–91), two rich modules, packed with ritual furniture were partially excavated (Fig. 3–4). One is the burial module that might be expected in a mortuary complex. It is an open, originally natural, cavity in the bedrock floor of the main cave filled with both articulated and disarticulated bodies and small terracotta obese figurines, presided over by a [smashed] stone skirted statuette which would have originally stood at least two feet high. The symbolism associated with this module is of (probably) female obesity in contradistinction to the death directly associated with the artefacts. A second module was closed and demarcated by curved screens of pitted and painted globigerina architecture made up of at least two sets of three uprights and capstone. It is loosely designated as a shrine in this paper. Located within it was a large stone bowl with a ceramic strainer alongside. Two groups of ritual paraphernalia had collapsed within the ruins. The first was a small (13 cm high) attention-focusing device which might have been perched on the internal capstone and knocked forward onto its front (Fig. 6–7). This was a unique polychrome, globigerina limestone sculpture portraying a pair of obese, probably female figurines seated side by side on a wickerwork couch. One figurine holds a small representation of itself (or conceivably a baby), the other a small cup. Distinctive Tarxien skirts (clothing) swathe the seated pair, confirming the date of the ritual assemblage. These images provide a link to the figurative sculpture of the temples. Traces of a pair of standing, probably
female statues of human scale have been found at Haġar Qim.

Another informative group of globigerina limestone sculptures might originally have been suspended in a bundle, but was found fallen to the floor of the cubicle. The sculptures were packed close to one another, as if they had originally been held within a container of perishable material. Their findplace suggests that they were the possession of the ritual specialist or shaman who had access to the enclosed module or shrine. The sculptures consisted of six, probably male, stick figures (Fig. 8), one head on a stand (Fig. 9: 6), a head attached to two feet (Fig. 9: 5) and what appears to be a pig’s head on a stick (Fig. 9: 4). Two of the stick figures have Tarxien skirts and a small Tarxien bowl full of ochre was found underneath. These curious and unique objects appear to be the material culture of ritual action. At c. 16 cm high, they are of just the right size and weight to be held by the hand, or more precisely, in the case of the stick figures, held by the undecorated torso area around their limbless bodies, so that they could be used in rites of some kind. Decoration focuses on the finely detailed heads of the figurines, all of which have individual identities, and in two cases this is picked up once more by the finely modelled Tarxien style skirts. The twin footed head (Fig. 9: 5) could have been perched on a finger, whereas one stylized head could have stood alone without any support (Fig. 9: 6). A dramatic indication of ritual action is conceivably glimpsed in the stages of production in which three of the stick figurines have been left (Fig. 8: 1–3). One is a mere rough-out whose features are only beginning to emerge from the soft limestone (Fig. 8: 1). A second has distinct facial features, but the details of neck and hairstyle are yet to emerge (Fig. 8: 2). The most elaborate is a masterpiece of detail from the finely wrought skirt at its base to the delicately carved features of face, headdress and hairstyle (Fig. 8: 3). Close study of the manufacture of these three objects shows that they do not appear to represent different levels of craftsmanship, but stages in the process of production. It is difficult to determine whether this production took place on site, since its by-products would not be easily recognizable. It is reasonable to suggest, however, that the very manufacture of the shaman’s kit was part of the ritual action, conceivably a metaphor for the most traumatic rite of passage of human experience taking place in the other compartments of the cave. The final gaunt image of the most elaborate stick figurine is impassive and lifeless, a fitting reflection of death, at least subjectively to modern eyes. The imagery is not like any other yet found in the temples and can, on these grounds, be connected specifically with the rituals of death.

Other modules in the Brokhtorff Circle await further excavation and analysis, but similarly designated spaces have been known for much longer from the above ground temples, most elaborately and richly at Tarxien (Fig. 2). The best preserved examples include the following, which could have been repeated in less well-preserved temples excavated before modern times:

- The open Apse 2 (Evans 1971, 119–122, plan 30A) contains an elaborate plinth bearing a large, female statue originally 3 m high, though the upper torso has now been truncated, surrounded by panels of low relief, depicting subtriangular, curvilinear and C-scroll motifs. Immediately adjacent to the north is a spiral altar decorated with a double row of branched spirals. The front of the altar was provided in antiquity with an inner recess, fashioned by cutting out and replacing with a semi-circular block which matched the covering frieze decoration. When this recess was re-opened in 1915, remains were found within which can be most easily interpreted as a burnt sacrifice of sheep and cow bones, a flint knife, a bone spatula and marine shells, land-snails and flint chips.
- The open Apse 3 (Evans 1971, 119–20, plan 30A) contained an altar supported by a frieze of six probably male animals, a fine ram (?) leading a pig and four horned ovicaprids. A rope hole, strategically placed nearby, might have served as a tether for animals. To the left is a longer frieze with twenty-one ovicaprids arranged in two rows. Complementary support for interpreting the figurative representations as sacrificial offerings is provided by the discovery of domestic animal bones lodged in recesses.
- A more enclosed Room 6 (Evans 1971, 124–5, plan 30A) had a central niche behind which was found a midden of animal bones. Phallic figures and an engraved pebble were placed in this niche and the nearby area. In addition, several small temple models were found to the south-east and what might be interpreted as a large, but moveable, tethering stone for animals placed at the front. The possible tethering stone is a 14 kg block of limestone about 23 cm in height, of triangular shape with two perforations showing some signs of ‘rope’ wear. A carinated pottery bowl with cover was found under the pavement.
- The even more secluded Apse 10 contained fragments of a stone statuette and a curious human head carved from local stalactitic stone, as well as a pair of two-handled bowls and an impressive stone bowl.
The similarly secluded Apse 15 (Evans 1971, 129) contained an exceptionally large carinated bowl, two footed bowls, a miniature amphora, a probable ladle, the head of a limestone statuette and at least four terracotta ‘priestly’ figures dressed in the distinctive Tarxien skirts as well as a further stone basin. This apse has similarities to the secluded shrine found at the Brocthorff Circle and may perhaps have had a

Figure 8. Stick figurines. From roughout to completed object.
similar importance and function: a cache of the equipment for the ritual specialist. A further cubicle of note is the so-called oracle room, where a cache of stone amulets was found, some of which certainly had an exotic provenance.

These are examples of some of the significant modular blocks of Maltese ritual architecture, selected for description here because of their good preservation. What is perhaps even more significant, and has been deliberately delayed until this point in the analysis, is the arrangement in which these blocks were placed architecturally. From the evidence of the other temples and the Hal Saflieni hypogeum, the modules identified above may recur more widely. The Maltese temples are generally preceded by an impressive, concave facade. The modules already described are hidden behind that facade, concealed either by distance or circumscribed line of sight from anyone outside the monument. Furthermore, there is a distinction between the restricted space within the monuments and the unrestricted space outside. If these monuments attracted the worship of more than a hundred people, which seems a reasonable assumption, then at any one time the majority would have had to be outside. There would simply have been too little room inside for large numbers of participants and ease of access through the relatively narrow entrances in the facade would have been extremely difficult.

In the final Tarxien stage, therefore, we envisage the vast majority of the population to have been excluded from these monuments (Bonanno et al. 1990). By processes of addition and accretion the depth of the monuments appears to have been increased since the Ġgantija phase and physical divisions seem to have been put in place. The organization of architectural space suggests a range of restricted activities, which may perhaps entitle priestly, taking place inside them. This implies two types of participants in the general ritual performance: priests and others. If this reading of the evidence is correct, one type of symbolism might have been developed by the ritual specialists inside and another, more generalized, by the audience outside. Much of the activity within the temples would have been just outside the line of sight from the entrance. Exotic artefacts appear to have been kept at the extreme range of vision of the outside audience or to have been concealed in distant rooms, such as the so-called oracle room.

The interpretation of the liturgy and internal symbolism of the Maltese temples can be explored still further. The first open space within the western temple at Tarxien is flanked by apses 2 and 3. This architectural symmetry appears to have been accompanied by a striking structural division between male animals to the west and female fertility and sacrifice to the east. Animals tethered to the west would have been fleetingly glimpsed from outside as they were taken across to the altar to the east. The ritual practitioners within the apses would have been visible to each other, but not so readily visible to those outside. This is one of the locations where decoration is concentrated, that is around the altars and structural components. These are the zones of the temple interior most visible and accessible from the outside. A second location where art is concentrated is around the narrow entrances, steps and thresholds between the inner areas of the temples, which form a visible divide between one zone and another and are more specifically on the line of sight from the entrance. In the apse 6 beyond, behind an impressive display of curvilinear designs, the temple models and the phalli would have been difficult to identify clearly (at a distance) and would thus have achieved an increasingly secretive quality. The most secretive quality of all was reserved for the innermost recesses such as apses 10, 15 and the oracle room, which generally received a concentration of art and where cult images, bowls and symbolic artefacts were in use. These are also areas with door jambs bearing evidence of door fixtures (rope holes/bar holes) which would allowed them to be closed to the outside, preventing even visual access to the rites taking place within.

The Tarxien arrangement does not correspond to one preconceived temple plan since it has clearly undergone a complex development. There are three adjacent temple structures of which only the most westerly has a fully formed facade. This most westerly five-lobed temple is connected to a central six-lobed structure. To the east a smaller four-lobed temple fills the space between the western temples and a curious square structure with smaller outbuildings. The two western temples contain the bulk of the ritual furniture and decorated slabs, perhaps for the simple reason that these continued in active use until the phase of abandonment. Different uses can perhaps be hazarded for each of these three temples. The most westerly appears to have been the active centre of public ritual, open to at least the gaze of the hypothesized external audience. The door jambs show little sign of fixtures that could have blocked the line of sight into the monument. The central temple appears to have had a more restrictive role, in part perhaps employed to store ritual paraphernalia. Evidence for door fixtures is prominent and visual access is not on line from the entrance. The easterly temple appears to be largely devoid of ritual furniture (moveable or
otherwise), able to be closed from the outside and thus perhaps made redundant in the final stage of ritual practice, except for access to the port-hole of the so-called oracle room in the walls of the north-eastern apse.

The internal organization of the two known underground funerary monuments appears to have followed a parallel pattern, but one necessarily constrained by the local geology and greater difficulties of overall planning. In the temples, modification and enlargement of the monument were absorbed within an overall lobed architectural design. In the hypogea, new excavation of the bedrock extended earlier excavation and was to a greater or lesser extent facilitated by fissures or cavities in the bedrock. At Hal Saflieni, the monument was simply extended by a process of tunnelling over more than one thousand years in easily carved, soft globigerina limestone (Bonnano et al. 1990). Some of the modules show architectural similarities to the temples above ground, but the distinctive overall lobed plan was never implemented, if indeed ever intended. At the Brochtorff Circle the tunnels, caves and cavities were almost all present naturally and temple-like modules were inserted within this pre-existing structure. Again the regular structure of a lobed temple was never effectively implemented, if intended, and the relationship of the constituent modules was very different. There was no ready access to these underground chambers and visibility would have been impossible from outside, and difficult once inside.

The Brochtorff Circle lies at the centre of a megalithic stone circle some 45 m in diameter. The impressive entranceway, originally marked by two flanking monoliths, could have been approached uphill from the nearby temple of Ġgantija (Fig. 3). The site occupies a near level sub-plateau of the large Xaghra plateau, overlooking both Ġgantija and much of the island of Gozo with views to Malta beyond. The stone circle itself was almost certainly a Tarxien-phase construction erected to enclose an extensive series of superficial caverns. After entering the circle (Fig. 3-4), the ritual participant would have crossed a megalithic threshold flanked by small burial pits and simple shrines composed of small upright stones and, most probably, a massive stone sphere on a plinth. Access to the lower levels, at least four to five metres below, might have been by simple steps on the same line as the formal entrance, although only a few possible traces of these steps have survived the nineteenth-century excavation of the site.

The caves were of variable size, but the most significant compartments were quite small, not much larger than four to six metres in diameter and originally covered by a thin rock roof perhaps one to two metres thick. The roofs were continuously crumbling and collapsing throughout the use of the site, requiring continuous maintenance to achieve some form of

Figure 9. Miscellaneous objects from ‘shaman’s bundle’.
stability. Some of the measures taken entailed architectural sophistication, in particular a tapering globigerina megalith imported into the site for the purpose of propping up the roof. When in use, modules, often pre-determined by caves, were interconnected by rough natural passages which were partly converted into a spatial configuration loosely resembling the architecturally interlinked modules of the temples. At present, only one vertical level is known, but further fieldwork may reveal lower levels such as are already known at Hal Saflieni.

By the Tarxien phase, the general area had already been used for burial for about a thousand years. The more recent burials had filled the cave cavities with deep deposits (at least one metre thick) of human bone and white limestone-derived sediment. Later, more elaborate architectural elements were then bedded into this partly levelled deposit. The various small caves and the niches opening from them were marked off with rough walls and more elaborately finished entrances of standing stones. Each compartment was thus demarcated and appears from initial excavation to have been reserved for different burial rites. The module of the ritual specialist already described was located immediately to the left of the entrance, directly adjacent to the burial deposit presided over by the stone statuette. A deeper burial chamber was reached by passing between these two distinct compartments and turning left under an arch of bedrock in part supported by the tapering globigerina support. In this inner enclosed area, set back in the dark, was a tapering stone betyl surrounded by niches into which were tucked the disarticulated bones of the dead (Fig. 3–4).

The regional organization of the ritual monuments

The regional organization of the temples has already received considerable attention (Renfrew 1976; Renfrew & Level 1979; Bonanno et al. 1990). It is nevertheless important to restate some of the basic elements. There may be a fundamental contrast between the single focus burial monuments and the clusters of temples. Only two burial monuments are so far known, one from each island, but, in the light of our model, we predict that others will be found on Malta. Our model, however, we predict that each cluster of temples should have a burial hypogeum. The clusters of temples at Mnajdra/Haġar Qim and Ta Haġrat/Skorba are likely candidates for future discoveries. At present, only two such clusters (Ċgantija and Tarxien/Kordin) have recorded evidence. In the case of the Brochtorff Circle there appears to be a clear relationship with the local Ėgantija cluster of temples which collectively dominate the whole of Gozo. The entrance of the mortuary site is approximately aligned on the temple and located close by. In the case of Hal Saflieni, the relationship to the nearby temples of Tarxien, Kordin or another temple is more difficult to assess, since the surface remains have been largely destroyed by urban development. For the present, it appears that the mortuary complexes were the unified focus of a local community, paired with a cluster of temples. Further fieldwork will need to be directed towards establishing a more convincing relationship between these two types of ritual monument.

Orientation

The interpretation of the orientation of the temples of Malta (Fig. 10) has tended to follow the pattern applied to other megalithic monuments. Increasingly accurate measurements have been made of the alignment of the principal entrances. These have then been correlated with potential astronomical observations, making the appropriate corrections for their time of construction, and employing astronomical models to do so (Foderà Serio et al. 1992). The major assumption in these interpretations is that an observation was being made from the body of the building out through the entrance and over the horizon, even though this is the reverse of the direction of alignment of many later monumental constructions such as Christian churches.

The local geographical and cultural context of the Maltese islands raises the question of whether astronomical observation was the key to the alignment. The facades of the monuments were visually impressive and, we suggest, intended to be faced by the majority of the congregation who filled the space within the curved courtyards. In our model, a major intention of these monuments was to limit the visibility of the inner recesses, which in their final form were only accessible to the few. The direction of sight, at least for the majority of the worshippers, was therefore diametrically the reverse of the line of sight available for potential astronomical observation from the interior. A more probable orientation for the vast
majority of the congregation would have been towards the focus of liturgical intensity, that is into the interior of the monument itself.

Recent studies of the orientation of the Maltese temples have considered fifteen monuments. These have been selected not only for their good preservation, but also because the location of the facade and the direction of their orientation is very clear. One of these temple complexes, Hagar Qim, is less clearly structured than the others, including subsidiary entrances. This can be best understood as reflecting a very complex history of development which may have modified its original ritual purpose. The most recent measurements at Hagar Qim (Foderà Serio et al. 1992) considered only the two alignments behind clear facades. Since a line of site to the horizon beyond is not necessarily relevant, and precision of measurement is less important, in the present non-astronomical exercise it has been possible to include other more ruined monuments where alignment and direction can be established. Approximate orientations have been obtained for Temple 2 at Tarxien (Evans 1971, 281, plan 30A) and the apsidal structures at Borg in Nadur (Evans 1971, 261, plan 1), Xrobb il-Ghagin (Evans 1971, 263, plan 7), and the subsidiary, possibly earlier structure at Ta Hağrat (Evans 1971, 264, plan 8). Much uncertainty hangs over the megalithic structure of Tal Qadi (Evans 1971, 42) and it is therefore excluded from the analysis. Other megalithic structures such as Kordin 1 and 2 and Borg ta’ l’Mramma cannot be classified strictly as temples and certainly lack clear lines of orientation. The orientations presented here, therefore, combine the data of Foderà Serio et al. (1992) with additions where appropriate from Evans (1971).

In the model of ritual we have proposed above, the primary orientation of most temples was towards the north-west rather than to the south-east. Given the cultural context of the Maltese islands, this might be interpreted both as an orientation towards Sicily in terms of ancestral origins and towards Pantelleria, Sicily and Lipari in terms of the exotic products brought into the island. As already outlined, there are indications from the excavation of the Brochtorf
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Circle (subject to further confirmation) that exotic products, which were common in the pre-temple building Zebbug period, were increasingly scarce in the precise period during which most active temple construction and elaboration occurred. If one considers the combined biogeographical and cultural context of an isolated island, increasingly conscious of less frequent contact with the ancestral mainland which had formerly been the source of exotic products, one has a plausible scenario for the placing of the Maltese temples.

The alternative interpretations of orientation, although geometrically opposed, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. We suggest that the temples in their later complex form emphasize the presence of two principal perspectives in society: that of the priests and that of the congregation. The priests inside might have elaborated a protected and exclusive astronomical lore derived from observations over the shoulders of the congregation. The congregation could have retained a more general concept of a broadly conceived ancestral direction given distant but tangible form by the precious exotic fragments housed in the inner recesses of the temple.

Conclusion

The ritual elaboration of the Maltese islands is, we suggest, most easily understood in its isolated island context. We propose that the intra-community rivalry of the Zebbug period, operating through exchange, might have been transferred into intra-community rivalry in temple construction in the Ġgantija phase. Isolation and cultural fragmentation are trends which can be identified throughout the early third millennium BC in Sicily, southern Italy and Sardinia (Malone 1986). Malta, the smaller and more vulnerable island unit, was more likely to be at the extreme end of this spectrum. As Malta became more isolated in the economic, political and ideological sphere, the ability of a few members of its society to control access to materials and knowledge from outside the islands increased. Travel to the outside world required mastery of navigation and access to materials for boat construction. In an increasingly over-populated and sparsely vegetated island system, these resources may have been at a premium. As exotic materials became more scarce, overseas trips more restricted and pressures on society more severe, the promise of the increasingly forbidden outside world, and the difficulties of gaining access to it, may have increased simultaneously. If this reading is correct, it might be no accident that the rival navigators and priests aligned their temples on alternative routes to the outside world. During the course of the Tarxien period, we suggest that single temples began to dominate each temple cluster and access to the rituals within became increasingly selective. At this point a new level of elaboration of meaning may well have been developed by a more restricted elite who faced through the entrance portals over the far (generally southeastern) horizon. A new astronomical significance for the alignment of the temples may have been adopted opportunistically by the priests of the temples, along with more elaborate developments within the temples themselves.

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Notes

1. The project began in 1987 under the joint direction of the present authors. A further two years of fieldwork are planned in 1993–4.

2. The Mgarr and Saflieni phases are too poorly defined to allow chronological or cultural characterization at present.

References


