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The Temple Builders of Malta

How an isolated island culture became Europe's most sophisticated Neolithic civilization

by ERIC A. POWELL



FIFTY MILES SOUTH of Sicily, the dry, rocky islands of the Maltese archipelago were first colonized by Neolithic people in the sixth millennium B.C. They lived relatively simple farming lives that closely resembled those of their Sicilian neighbors for almost 2,000 years. But around 3600 B.C., something changed. For reasons that are still unclear, people on Malta and the nearby island of Gozo began to construct massive limestone temple complexes and went on to create large underground burial chambers. Other Neolithic people in Europe would eventually also create large megalithic monuments such as Stonehenge in England, but the prehistoric architects on Malta and Gozo were the only ones to build structures on such a large scale. In trying

to comprehend these sites, some archaeologists emphasize their astronomical alignments, while others believe they were centers of political power or places where fertility rites were celebrated. But just how and why this spectacular culture developed on two small islands with an arid climate and limited resources remains unknown. "We still need to learn how these people managed to sustain such a rich and complex life for over a thousand years," says Queens University Belfast archaeologist Caroline Malone. "They created the most sophisticated architecture and culture in Neolithic Europe. But how did they do it in this relatively isolated and ecologically fragile environment?"

In an effort to better understand the Neolithic world of Malta and Gozo, Malone is leading an interdisciplinary project

The walls of a temple at Ggantija, one of some 30 Neolithic ritual complexes that were built on the Maltese archipelago, still rise as high as 20 feet.





The temple complex of Mnajdra (above), one of Malta's best-preserved Neolithic sites, is shown here before conservators erected a protective shelter. The faces of some temple walls (right) are decorated with regular small pits and spiral patterns.

that is bringing together dozens of Maltese and British specialists to generate new data on the islands' prehistoric past. Thus far the team has conducted four small-scale, targeted excavations at temple sites. The project's bioarchaeologists are studying around 900 burials from the so-called Temple Period excavated in the 1980s and 1990s from an underground complex, and geoarchaeologists are working to reconstruct the details of the prehistoric environment from a series of soil cores taken at sites on both islands. The project is ongoing, but it has already yielded new information that may both fuel the debate over this precocious civilization and help answer the central mystery of what role the temples played in the lives of these people.

WHILE MANY OF MALTA'S temples are in ruins, a few are still in an excellent state of preservation. Three of the biggest, Mnajdra, Hagar Qim, and Tarxien, are now sheltered by enormous tents that resemble white sails. Even though their significance has been lost for millennia, the temples remain striking features on the landscape and the islands' residents have probably always been aware of them. In the Middle Ages there was speculation that they were built by an extinct race of giants. Two of the biggest surviving temples make up the complex of Ggantija, which in Maltese means the Giant's Tower. In the nineteenth century, antiquarians proposed another origin story for the temples, suggesting that the seafaring Phoenicians, who colonized the island around 800 B.C., erected them. Later, archaeologists noted similarities to Mycenaean megalithic sites, and reasoned that the temples were built under the influence of Bronze Age Greeks. It wasn't until the advent of radiocarbon dating and the 1960s excavation of Skorba, a half-ruined temple in northern Malta, that archaeologists realized the temples dated to

the Late Neolithic, and are like no other monuments known from that era. "It really did come as a shock when archaeologists realized how old this culture was," says Malone.

Between about 3600 and 2400 B.C., at least 30 of the structures were built throughout the islands, often in clusters of two or three, at sites that offered access to the sea or were close to productive farmland. There is considerable variation in their architecture, and there is evidence that they were rebuilt over and over and became more complex through time. But the buildings all share certain important features. In front of each temple's curved stone facade is a forecourt where people could



have gathered for public ceremonies. Most also have a large entrance that faces south and leads to a series of three to six lobe-shaped chambers known as apses. Often the temple walls are decorated with regular pitting. In other cases, walls are embellished with elaborate friezes bearing spiral patterns and plantlike forms, as well as depictions of livestock and other animals. Stone images of phalluses and figurines of plump people are often found in the temples, leading to speculation that fertility rituals took place there.

The discovery of a prehistoric graffito of a temple, as well as stone amulets depicting the structures, suggests they once had roofs. Entering a stone temple with a domed roof, then, may have been reminiscent of entering a cave, which were often used in the Neolithic not only for burial but to celebrate rites. "It's possible the temple builders initially constructed the temples as ritual substitutes for caves," says Malone.

BY 3100 B.C., AS THE TEMPLES were growing ever more elaborate, the Neolithic residents of the islands were carving enormous underground burial chambers out of natural caves and bedrock. The first to be found was discovered in 1902 during construction of a new neighborhood in south-

ern Malta. The site was a labyrinthine series of three levels of rooms that resemble the apses of the islands' aboveground temples and reach as deep as 90 feet. Known as the Hypogeum, it was excavated by the father of Maltese archaeology, Themistocles Zammit. While Zammit kept numerous artifacts such as figurines, including an iconic clay depiction of a sleeping woman, he unfortunately discarded the thousands of human bones he unearthed. Zammit estimated that as many as 7,000 people were buried in the Hypogeum, but it's a figure that is impossible to verify.

In the 1980s, Malone and her collaborator Simon Stoddart of the University of Cambridge joined Maltese colleagues led by archaeologist Anthony Bonanno to excavate a second burial complex, a collapsed limestone cave network on Gozo known as the Xaghra Circle. Though the project was originally slated to be brief, the team eventually dug for seven years, unearthing 220,000 bones as well as several spectacular works of art.

By carefully excavating the dense jumble of bones, they found that an elaborate sequence of rituals had been played out at the site. People brought remains of the newly dead into

been brought into the cave with symbolic representations of themselves, such as stone figures depicting stylized human torsos, clay models of large women, or animal bones carved into the shape of human heads. The team found several of these artifacts in the central display area, where they had been left behind in antiquity when remains were moved. One particularly striking limestone figurine depicts a couple seated on a couch, one of whom may be holding a child. Says Malone, "You can imagine them symbolically presiding over the mortuary rituals."

Just what relationship the rituals at the Xaghra Circle and the Hypogeum had with nearby temples is still an open question, but they were likely intimately connected. "The temples are part of the everyday landscape, where rituals celebrating life would have happened," says University of Malta archaeologist Rueben Grima, a project member and leading authority on the temples. The Xaghra Circle, however, would have been more remote, on the edge of the agricultural heartland, and not a place a person would go during their daily business. Grima thinks these ancestral burial sites could have played a role in justifying ownership

In 1902, an underground Neolithic burial chamber (below) was discovered on the island of Malta. It held the remains of thousands of people as well as artifacts such as a clay figurine (left) of a sleeping woman.



the central area of the cave, perhaps a display chamber where relatives could visit or mourn their loved ones. Once the flesh had decayed away, most bones were taken to more peripheral areas of the cave. The team found thick deposits of bone in these sections. Some of the deceased, however, apparently remained in the central chamber and in their correct anatomical positions. More remains were later placed over these intact skeletons. "We think these men at the bottom of the sequence were founders of important lineages," says Malone, who suggests that by the late Temple Period social and religious hierarchies had emerged and a class of people, perhaps priests, exerted control over the rest of the population. One older woman was buried with an intricate headdress made of cowrie shells, which likely means she had attained an important status, either for her age or her membership in an important lineage.

Some of the displayed bodies may have



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of the land, but they may have had more symbolic roles. He has recently studied how architecture and geology interact in the Hypogeum and thinks that natural features found at the site, which were long assumed to have been incidental to the construction of the chambers, were actually integral to their creation and use. He focused particularly on how fault planes, fractures in stone caused by earthquakes, were incorporated into the walls. "These features were part of the design of the chambers," says Grima, who believes they had a cosmological significance. "I think they were gateways through the boundaries of the underworld, a way to travel through the realm of the dead." These elaborate chambers may have offered the living a way to symbolically journey to the world of their dead ancestors and still be assured of a safe return.

MORE INSIGHT INTO the lives led by these Neolithic people will come from reanalysis of the remains of the dead discovered at the Xaghra Circle, which is being led by physical anthropologists Bernardette Mercieca of Malta's Superintendence of Cultural Heritage and Ronika Power of the University of Cambridge. Working at a lab at the National Museum of Archaeology in Malta's capital, Valletta, the team is subjecting the most important of the 220,000 bones found to close scrutiny. They are focusing on those that can best tell the story of how the people lived, such as ones that show evidence of trauma or disease, as well as some 11,000 teeth.

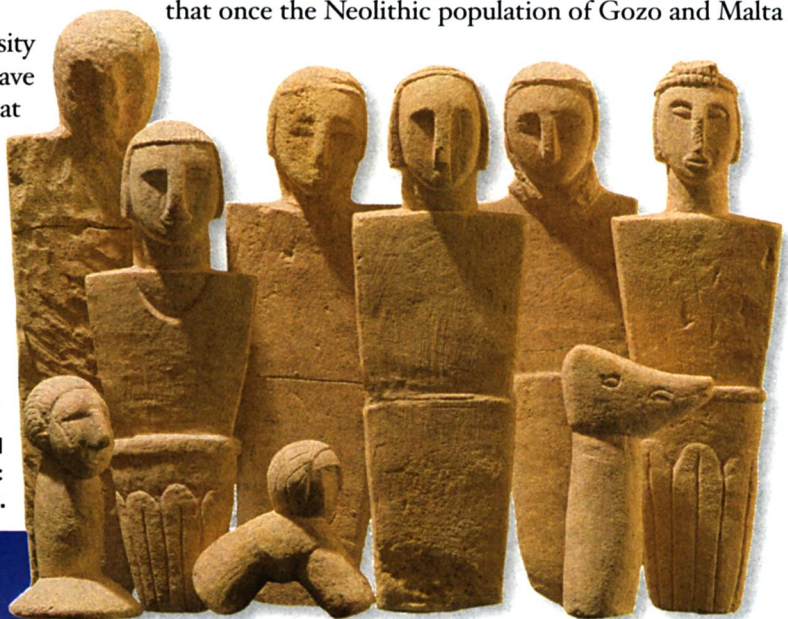
Overall, the team has found surprising evidence for diversity in the people buried in the chambers. While some may have been central to the rituals and controlled who was buried at the site, many of those who were put to rest at the Xaghra Circle were people who led very difficult lives that involved backbreaking labor in the fields. "The burials begin to tell a story of resilience," says Power. "We have evidence from some of the bones that people were pushing their bodies to the absolute limit." Along with healed fractures on many of the bones, there is also evidence for chronic, painful arthritis in finger bones, suggesting people were engaged in repetitive activity that involved grasping tools. Wear marks

In addition to human remains, archaeologists found stylized stone depictions of humans (right) in another Neolithic burial chamber (below) that was dug in the 1980s and 1990s.

on some female teeth suggest women often used their own teeth as tools, perhaps to process fibers. But overall most of the teeth are relatively healthy, perhaps a byproduct of high natural levels of fluoride in Gozo's groundwater.

Though much work remains to be done, the team has reached some tentative conclusions. "We have people living to a very advanced age for the Neolithic," says Mercieca. "Life was difficult, but you could live to be quite old." There is also evidence that some people had better diets than others, supporting the idea that there was a privileged group within the community.

IN RECENT YEARS, the team has conducted excavations at two temple sites on Gozo not far from the Xaghra Circle. One of them is Ggantija, which rises over a hilltop near the center of Gozo and whose walls still stand as high as 20 feet in places. The team conducted a radar survey of the area around the site and found evidence for an outer wall surrounding the temples, suggesting they were once part of an even more massive complex. Last year, during a small-scale excavation at the site, the team unearthed a 10-foot-long stone-and-earthen ramp that must have played a role in how people approached the site during celebrations. The project geoarchaeologists have also located intact ancient soils there, analysis of which will help them reconstruct how the fertility of the soil on Gozo changed over time. Archaeologists speculate that it's possible that once the Neolithic population of Gozo and Malta



reached close to 10,000 people, they began to exhaust the agricultural potential of the soil, making life on the islands even more difficult. Previous pollen studies show there would have been relatively little vegetation during the Temple Period, meaning soil could have been vulnerable to erosion.

Just under a mile from Ggantija lie the scant ruins of Santa Verna, one of the earliest temple sites. There, the team excavated the temple's original floor. They were able to confirm that Santa Verna's layout was nearly identical to that of one of the temples at Ggantija. Even more importantly, they collected radiocarbon samples from an early dwelling that lay beneath

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the temple. The discovery suggests the islands were colonized up to 300 years earlier than previously thought, and that a settlement at Santa Verna lasted from 5500 to 5000 B.C. There was then a break in occupation at the site until construction began on a temple around 3600 B.C. To Malone, this suggests that the people responsible for the temples may not have been descended from those who initially colonized the island.

One of the most abundant finds made during the excavations has been animal bones. “You often have animal horns and butchered and burned bones in apses on the right side of the temples,” says Stoddart. He and Malone believe the right sides of the temples may have been associated with cooking, hearths, and feasting. Stone basins and bowls found on the left side of the temples suggest that the chambers to the left may have been associated with water, and perhaps with purification rituals of some kind. “The way the left and right sides are organized suggests they may have symbolized fire and water, fundamental opposites,” says Stoddart. He points out that altars are found both in front of the temple and in the apses, which could mean that some offerings were made in full view of crowds gathered in the forecourt. “There would have been a certain amount of theatricality associated with the public rituals,” Stoddart explains. Other ceremonies may have been concealed, perhaps conducted in private in the apses by priests. Holes in the sides of the temple entrances may have held rods

A figurine depicting two seated people, one of which may be holding a child, was found at the second burial complex.



for curtains to shield such private rites from public view.

The precise nature of the rituals will never be known, but Malone feels that the focus on feasting was important. “I’m beginning to think there may have been an everyday aspect to what was happening here too,” she says. Malone points out that Malta has just endured its driest winter in 50 years, straining the island’s agriculture. In an unpredictable environment such as that found on Malta and Gozo, perhaps the temples were used for food storage and for rituals deeply connected with surviving stressful climatic periods. In a landscape full of uncertainty, the temples could have been secure



An altar in one of the chambers, or apses, at the temple complex of Ggantija would have been concealed from the public and may have been used for private ritual sacrifices.

points, places where death could be held at bay.

Malone draws an analogy with modern-day Maltese celebrations known as *festas*, which occur in each village. “A group called a band club organizes the festas,” says Malone. “People come from all over for fireworks displays and the band club is responsible for feeding everybody who comes.” She believes that similar communal rituals may have been staged at the Neolithic temples, managed by priests who may have functioned much like band clubs. “Meat and death make people go mad,” says Malone, who thinks the prehistoric equivalent of fireworks displays may have been the stage-managed ritual slaughter of animals. “All the meat was consumed—the bones were smashed, the meat boiled, and everyone would have eaten it, probably as a kind of soup.” When food was very scarce, this may have been how it was distributed. “The entire island may have gathered to eat,” says Malone. “In the midst of scarcity, you could have had celebrations of conspicuous consumption.”

But at some point either the rituals or the environment itself ultimately failed the people of the Temple Period, which ended abruptly around 2500 B.C. After that date there is a long hiatus in the archaeological record—perhaps as much as 400 years—until Bronze Age people began to make their home on the islands. There is currently no evidence for a gradual transition from one era to the next, and it seems the Neolithic people may have simply abandoned Malta and Gozo, leaving behind their lavish temples and the tombs of their ancestors. ■

Eric A. Powell is online editor at *ARCHAEOLOGY*.