

## **NNAS Lecture 14<sup>th</sup> September on the ARCHAEOLOGY OF MALTA in the Town close Auditorium at Norwich Castle by Ms. Patricia Camilleri**

On 14<sup>th</sup> September, Ms. Patricia Camilleri, Vice-President of the Archaeological Society of Malta, gave what she admitted was a “reductive description from Neolithic times to Phoenicians, Romans and Arabs” but her main focus was the Megalithic tomb and temple sites. Whilst there is no evidence of human occupation on Malta until about 5000 BC. pottery found in a cave called Ghar Dalam, the cave of darkness, is identical to that found in Stentinello in Sicily, so most likely the earliest people came from there. They cultivated the land, grew wheat and barley and practised animal husbandry. The best archaeological remains were found at Skorba – domestic textiles, spindle whorls, sheep bones and seeds for carbon dating.



Ghar Dalam, the cave of darkness

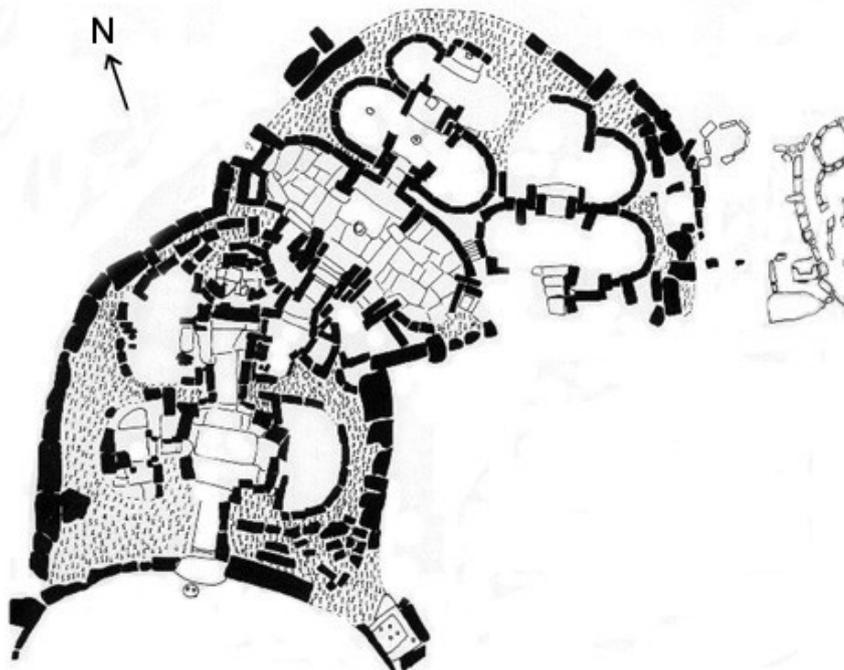
The rock cut tombs at Zebbug produced small clay anthropomorphic figurines; The top layer of the Xaghra Stone Circle on Gozo (above the later cave cemetery), provided 65 internments mostly disarticulated bones plus one whole skeleton, pendants, stone axes and metatarsal pendants. Stages of settlement are characterised by pottery; first the ‘heads’ and pots of Ghar Dalam have geometric patterns; second the grey Skorba and third the Red Skorba and lastly the Zebbug. These developments do not indicate a people change but more likely one of influence. Despite the dangerous sea crossing obsidian glass and red ochre must have been imported, from Lipari or Pantelleria. Sicily is 80 kilometres north of the island of Gozo and this may have contributed to the isolation, both physical and cultural, which stimulated the development of the Maltese temple-building tradition.

Between 4700 and 3600, there appears very little change. During this time Malta is similar to other Neolithic sites but after 3600BC it becomes unique. The huge and elaborate Ggantija Temple in Gozo (3600-3000 B.C) pre-dates Stonehenge by over 1,000 years and is the earliest free-standing building in the world [Dr David Trump recently stated that Gölbeki Tepe in Anatolia, Turkey although estimated to be 11,000 years old, isn't free-standing].



Ggantija Temple in Gozo

Patricia provided ground floor diagrams of temple development and photographs of construction showing the characteristic limestone walls roofed over by horizontal courses with large stone concave facades (a good example at Hagar Qim, the most complete of the temples). All have the “lobed” arrangement of apses (three, four or five) usually paired on either side of a passage sometimes with an additional lobe at the apex. The central temple at Tarxien has six apses. The outer walls are usually slabs of coralline limestone, difficult to work but durable, whilst inner walls are sometimes dry-stone covered with painted plaster (with numerous abstract designs of scrolls and running spirals ) or, as at Tarxien, carefully worked slabs of the softer, golden-coloured, globigerina limestone which was also preferred for more finer sculpture. Between the walls is an infill of earth and rubble for solidity and the floors are stone slabs or a limestone cement known as torba, or simply bedrock. No domestic debris and no burials have been found within the temples themselves. Pottery and statues provide a clue that the structures are temples or sacred places.



Plan of the Temple Complex at Tarxien showing apses



Hagar Qim temple



Tarxien temple

The nature of rituals and beliefs is not understood. On a limestone plateau one mile to the south of the Harbour at Valletta is the temple complex of Tarxien where the remains of a larger-than-life-size standing statue was found. All that survives is a fringed skirt and a pair of enormous legs supported by dainty feet. There is no indication of sex but it is seen as a mother goddess. Several small female figurines have their heads missing but others such as the Venus of Malta, the Tarxien Statue and the 'Sleeping Lady' discovered at the Saflieni Hypogeum, are quite exquisite. At the Tarxien temples there are 'altars' decorated with a procession of animals rams, pigs, goats and a hollow altar which was found to contain animal bone and pieces of an obsidian knife. Numerous artifacts have been uncovered at Mnajdra and Hagar Qim such as splendid foot high statues.



'Sleeping Lady'

Less than half a mile from Taxien is Hal Saflieni, a rock cut hypogeum or underground complex of burial chambers, begun possibly in the Zebbug phase (4100-3600 B.C.). Discovered 1902 by workmen cutting a well into the rock underneath a house, the monument was investigated by a Jesuit priest, Fr Manwel Magri, whose original notes on the site have been lost, after thousands of bones were cleared and discarded from the chambers. The hypogeum is arranged on three main levels and shows remarkable parallels to the Tarxien temples in the painted and the trilithon structures, carved or made of separate stones. The original entrance has been badly damaged by near-by house building. The middle level was accessed by descending a vertical fall in the rock floor and the lower level by a flight of rock cut steps. These contain decorated rooms which may have had shrines but the main purpose was for burial: it is estimated that the hypogeum contained the disarticulated bones of seven thousand individuals. These early Neolithic communities depended upon animal husbandry and subsistence farming. The skeletons show people in good health and yet the whole society mysteriously disappeared.



Hal Saflieni, a rock cut hypogeum

This is a World Heritage Site and Patricia pointed out that to visit Hal Saflieni only ten visitors are admitted at a time so one needs to book online two months in advance. Covers have now been erected over the exposed roofs of the open air temples to preserve the stone and help monitor temperature changes. Most of the original carvings, etc. have been removed to the Museum at Valetta and replaced with copies. With 36 temple sites on the islands there is still much to be excavated and recorded.

Patricia ended the lecture with a quick over-view of later developments. The people of the Bronze Age were a new influx probably from Sicily. The cemetery at Tarxien reveals cremations in urns placed under dolmans plus new types of jewellery and sacred figures. Their buildings are on defensive plateaus, as at Borġ in-Nadur in the south, which might imply fear of attack. The famous 'Clapham Junction' of cart ruts is probably from this time. These are pairs of parallel channels cut into the surface of the rock, and extending for considerable distances, often in an exactly straight line. No one has a proper explanation for their exact use. The society that built these structures eventually died out or at any rate disappeared. Phoenicians colonised the islands in the 7<sup>th</sup> century but Punic graveyards from this time show no pottery of the Bronze Age people. There is no evidence of Greeks having settled in Malta which came under the control of Carthage in 400 B.C. and then the Roman Republic in 218 BC (2<sup>nd</sup> Punic War). In AD 60 St Paul supposedly shipwrecked on an island named Melite but no archaeological evidence for Christianity exists before the 4<sup>th</sup> century. After the Romans, Malta was under Byzantine control until around 870AD it was invaded by the Aglobite Arabs from Sicily and then in 1091 Roger the Normans took over. In 1530 Charles V gave Malta to the Knights of St John.

Brian Ayers thanked Patricia for an absorbing lecture magnificently illustrated with numerous diagrams and colour photographs by the Maltese photographer, Daniel Cilia. Having visited the sites himself he stressed the emotional charge of experiencing such buildings and sculptures.

Edmund Perry  
Hon Secretary  
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