

The Female Figure in Neolithic Malta

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An uninhabited island with fertile land and a pleasant climate, Malta offered the idyllic setting to a peaceful community venturing for a place to set up a new home. Archaeological evidence shows that the first people who came over to settle on our islands travelled by sea from Sicily around 5900 BC. Using basic rafts as means of transport, they brought over their families, animals and basic necessities to start a new life. When people migrate, they not only take with them their belongings but also their culture. What is remarkable, in the case of our islands, is how this culture evolved into something quite unique and unparalleled, culminating during the later Neolithic period (3600 – 2500 BC).

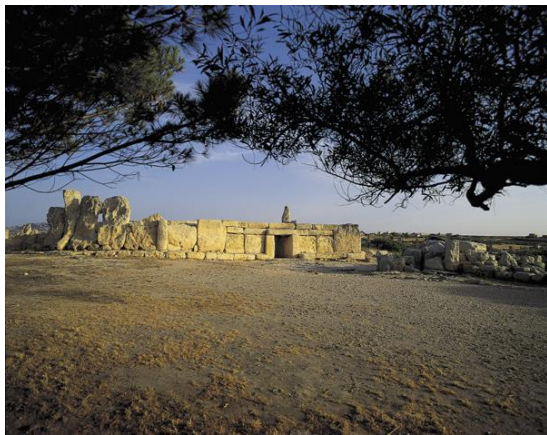


Fig. 1

Using mostly basic resources found on the islands at that time; mainly local stones, clay and bones, their achievements are astounding. Around 3600 BC a cultural phenomenon developed on the Maltese islands. Megalithic structures, which must have surely taken a lot of coordinated effort to build, were being erected in a manner that has withstood the test of time. Six main megalithic temples are found on the islands of Malta and Gozo, each the result of an

individual development. Ġgantija, Ғaġar Qim, Mnajdra, Tarxien, Kordin, Skorba, and Ta' Ғaġrat, to mention the main ones, are megalithic structures with no parallel elsewhere in the world. (Fig 1) They are not only remarkable because of their originality, complexity and striking massive proportions, but also because of the considerable technical skill required in their construction, earning them the privilege of being recognised by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites.

One might wonder what these megalithic structures were used for. These have been called temples since they were unearthed, some of them as early as the 1800s. Since the prehistoric period does not provide us with any written evidence in the form of inscriptions, we cannot proclaim with certainty what was taking place in and around these temples. Evidently built through communal effort and great coordination, it seems that the aim was that of accommodating, definitely in the outer forecourt, a

large number of people. The temples' internal layout however indicates that less people could access at the same time. The main passages, which although not extremely wide were easier to access, at times become more complex in the side apses with decorated stone blocks acting as thresholds. The artefacts found inside, especially the statuary, seem to attest to some type of rituals which to date elude us. However, one can safely say that some sort of ceremony with offerings for better harvests and safe sea crossings offer good hypotheses.

The artistic legacy of the Temple period people also extends to a number of artefacts found both inside the temple complexes and also in the underground burial sites. Apart from the abundant pottery, which could vary from every day use to more specific ritual one, a number of statues and statuettes were discovered.



Fig. 2

Statues are an indication of rituals or ceremonies. The size of these human representations varies from a 4mm face carved out of bone discovered at the Xaghra Circle (Fig 2), Gozo, to the colossal statue found at the entrance of Tarxien temples, and which would have originally stood at 3 m high (Fig 3). Synonymous with the Temple period are a number of corpulent stone statues which, in the past, used to be referred to as 'Fat Ladies', 'Mother Goddess' or Goddess of Fertility'. (Fig 4) This female inference was mainly due to belief by some academics that several Neolithic communities were matriarchal. Apart from this, the vast majority of these statues have large thighs, a physical attribute usually associated with post-partum women, and moreover, some of these artefacts which are carved out of stone or moulded from clay are portrayed in a semi-clothed manner – wearing a skirt. When such characteristics are put together, it is easy to assume that the majority of the statues represented a female figure, hence possibly indicating rituals being practiced to appease a Mother Goddess.

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Fig. 3 – 4 © Daniel Cilia

However, if one looks at this repertoire of seated or standing statues closely, one will be to see that it is very difficult to ascertain the gender. Compared to the corpulence of the body the breasts are relatively flat, and nowadays we tend to refer to these statues as being asexual, meaning that they could have been a representation of either a male or a female being. Their corpulence could be an indication of abundance and fertility and for these agrarian prehistoric societies, whose economy was based on producing and maintaining crops and animals, their sustenance depended on fertility; of the land and of the animals they were rearing. The prevalence of phallic representations in prehistoric societies attest that even human fertility was important.



Fig. 5

Nearly all statues are headless, some with a carved hole instead of the head, indicating that the head was probably interchangeable. A number of heads carved out of stone or moulded from clay were found in temple contexts but unfortunately none of them fit in the empty sockets of the corpulent statues. There is only one exception - a head found close and which fits the body of a statue from the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum (Fig 5). This is the only evidence we have of how heads would have fit with the rest of the bodies.

The materials used to create these statues vary but they are mainly carved out of the local globigerina limestone or moulded from clay. Alabaster, an imported resource, was also used to produce a few statuettes. However, irrespective of the material used, it seemed that there was a standard posture how these artefacts were rendered. All the seated statues have the same posture, with legs slightly tucked under the body, either to the left or to the right and hands on lap or thighs (Fig 6). On the other hand, the standing statues, irrespective of size, mainly have one arm by the side touching the thigh and the other one under the breast. (Fig 7) Such postures provide yet another enigma as to their meaning.



Fig. 6 – 7a – 7b

Considering the context of these statues, one is inclined to hypothesise that they were used as part of a ritual. However, notwithstanding the amount of research made, it is still not certain what these statues represented. Did they portray a living or a deceased person? Were they carved to be idolised as deities, or did they embody ancestors or relatives?

After having given the context of the statues, I shall now proceed to describe some of these artefacts which clearly and undoubtedly represent the female figure, the most iconic of which being 'The Sleeping Lady' (Fig 8). Discovered at the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, an underground burial site, and moulded out of clay, this statuette represents a woman in a very natural sleeping position. Undoubtedly



Fig. 8

female, since one can visibly see her breasts, she is naked from the waist upwards and the lower part of her body is covered with a skirt, which, apart from seeming pleated has other pitted decorations. A close look at her head will show that the topmost part of the crown of her head is shaved and that the hair starts from half the back of her head and runs shoulder length. The couch, which gives the impression that it is sagging under her weight, is also rendered in a very meticulous manner, giving us an insight of how the beds / couches of these communities were made (Fig 9).

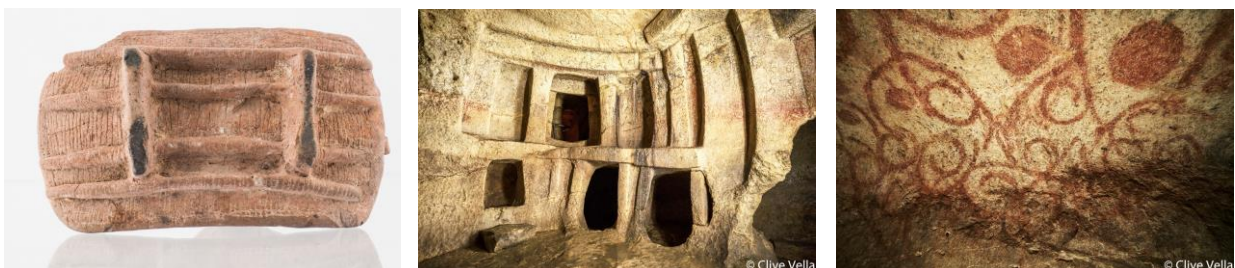


Fig. 9 – 10a – 10b © Clive Vella

Considering its context, the most common hypothesis for this masterpiece is that it was a personification of death, representing a person resting on a couch for her last and eternal sleep. The context, the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum is an underground prehistoric burial site, made up of interconnecting rock-cut chambers passage ways and niches set on three distinct levels. The architecture, which was hewn out of the rock mimics that of the above-ground temples and unique red ochre paintings showing spirals decorate the walls of this sacred place which was the resting place of many dead people and 'The Sleeping Lady' amongst other artefacts until they were discovered in 1903. (Fig 10)

The 'Venus of Malta' from the megalithic temples of Ħaġar Qim, is another remarkable representation of a female figure which reflects a high level of artistic achievement in clay modelling. Unfortunately, its head is broken but the beautiful and realistic renditions of particular anatomical features such as the shoulder blades are astonishing. (Fig 11)



Fig. 11 © Daniel Cilia

Two particular artefacts show statuettes with large breasts and extended bellies. Normally interpreted as representing pregnant women, an extended stomach could also be a sign of malnutrition or an indication of an abdominal tumour. The first of these statuettes, from Mnajdra temples (Fig 12) has a very conspicuous vagina but seems to have been deliberately made with stumpy arms and legs and a featureless face. Even more puzzling is another 'pregnant' statuette from Tarxien Temples. (Fig 13) One hand is pointing towards her vagina while the other seems to be holding her head which is tilted backwards. It has pieces of shell stuck in various parts of her body; in her mouth, under her arms, between her breasts, in her vagina and also at the back, on her shoulders and in the spine. Was it used during some ceremony as part of a healing process or was it conversely made to inflict pain like a voodoo doll?



Fig. 12 – 13a – 13b – 14 © Daniel Cilia

A very minute rendering of a female figure also from Tarxien temples, takes the form of a seated figure with her feet tucked up towards her breasts (Fig 14). It only has one arm and a slight indication of a pony tail at the back. It is difficult to say if the artefact was intentionally moulded from clay without one arm or if it broke throughout the years since the stump is quite worn.



Fig. 15

The descriptions above and the images give us some indications of the way of life of people during this period. Their clothing, as most of the skirts attest, seem to have had a pleated design. (Fig 15) No actual clothing was found in excavations since the material would have perished, however a number of artefacts like

sewing needles made of bone and buttons made of shell indicate that these people were quite sophisticated in their garments.

Apart for the artefacts, bones of the people themselves shed quite a bit of light on this civilisation. Based on the studies from the people buried in the Xagħra Circle hypogeum, it is clear that the Neolithic community were very resilient and worked hard. The dominant pathology seems to have been arthritis of the vertebrae of the neck and lower back, as well as bones of the feet and hands. Some bones show the most severe stages of this disease, which is an indication that the people who suffered from this joint disease continued with their daily tasks despite the chronic pain they must have been in. On the other hand, healed fractures and bones of elderly persons show that the sick and elderly were well cared for.

The teeth are in very good condition, with just some evidence of tooth decay and hardened plaque. Some upper and lower jaws show evidence that people lost their teeth long before they died. Some teeth, especially the front incisors, show evidence of intentional chipping, while others show evidence of wear from the use of the teeth as a tool or accessory in repeated actions.

Since the Neolithic period does not present us with supplementary written evidence, one has to try to extract as much factual information possible from the archaeological sites and the artefacts found within them. We cannot, and probably never will be able to say whether the people of the later Neolithic period in Malta were a matriarchal society or not. What we can however say is that it seems that this community was a

peaceful one, with all the people, irrespective of gender and age, contributing towards building magnificent megalithic structures for a particular purpose, whilst tending to the land and taking care of the families.



Fig. 16

I would like to end this paper with a very minute but evocative artefact. Named 'The embracing couple', this 2 cm high Neolithic artefact, which dates back to ca. 3200 BC. was found at Tarxien Temples (Fig 16). It represents two people hugging and possibly kissing each other and is the only artefact dating to the Maltese Neolithic period which shows human emotions immortalized through artistic expression. The hug is a universal and time defying sign of human expression of love and affection and may also express a sign of support and comfort. This artefact proves that emotions are an integral part of human relationships, irrespective of the era one is living in. The humane aspect of this Neolithic period is embodied in this minute artefact. These people who built and made use of the extraordinary megalithic temples had feelings and primary needs just like us nowadays and notwithstanding that fact that they just did not possess the resources we do, they have managed to leave us a legacy of great significance.