

Headless 'Venus figures' of Stone-Age Malta

*Text and photos
by Paul Almasy*



THE Maltese archipelago, consisting of the islands of Malta (the largest island of the group), Gozo, Comino, Cominotto and Filfola, lies 60 miles off the southern tip of Sicily in the central Mediterranean.

Strategically placed between Europe and Africa, Malta has a long history. In ancient times the archipelago was occupied successively by the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Carthaginians and the Romans. But Malta's megalithic monuments, not isolated as elsewhere in Europe, but grouped together, bear witness to a flourishing Maltese civilization in prehistoric times preceding, according to some archaeologists, the Aegean, Cretan and Mycenaean civilizations.

One thing is certain, the men who built the great megalithic temples with enormous blocks of stone must have used well advanced techniques for lifting and transporting slabs that weighed many tons.

Where did the earliest people of Malta come from? To which ethnic group did they belong? When did they first tread the soil of Malta? These are questions which to this day remain unanswered, although it is thought that the first peoples must have settled in the island some 6,000 years ago.

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PAUL ALMASY, of France, has gained an international reputation as a photographer-reporter of unusual artistry and vision. His work is well known to readers of the "Unesco Courier" from the many photographic assignments he has carried out for the magazine during the past 20 years. Exhibitions of Mr. Almasy's work have been held in many countries. Mr. Almasy produced the above reportage on special assignment for the "Unesco Courier".

The legend of the Tower of the Giants

The pottery objects found at Ghar Dalam (or Dalam cave), long thought to be the most ancient in Malta, are very similar to those of the same period discovered at Stentinello, near Syracuse, which suggests that the first inhabitants of Malta came from Sicily, the largest of the neighbouring islands. But the decorative motifs of the Ghar Dalam pottery are also found on pottery from further east, in Dalmatia, in Cilicia and other countries bordering on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean.

Some historians believe that the Maltese of the neolithic era came from Libya. The bay in which the Dalam

cave lies, known as Marsaxlokk, is situated in the south-eastern part of the island. Marsaxlokk and Valetta, which is situated on the north coast, are the island's best natural ports, and if it is accepted that the first men to come to Malta landed in the bay of Marsaxlokk, then it seems more likely that they crossed the sea from Libya and not from Sicily.

The Ghar Dalam period, placed by archaeologists between 2500 and 2100 B.C., was followed by the Mgarr period, which takes its name from a small site in the north-west of the island where the ruins of a temple, known as the Ta'Hagrat temple, were discovered.

Small in size, this temple was both a shrine and a burial place. The dry stone-building technique appears to be already fairly advanced, but the construction of the roof must have posed considerable problems. It is thought that this was also constructed of carved stone, in large thin slabs, but it is not known how these were assembled.

Zebbug, another site in the western part of the island, has given its name to the next period. In 1947, archaeologists discovered several tombs and a considerable quantity of pottery there. Among the decorative motifs were representations of a small human head.

The various artefacts found in the temples and tombs of the Mgarr and Zebbug periods provide valuable evidence of the evolution of ways and customs over the centuries that separate these two periods. In addition to pottery, the principal finds at Ghar Dalam and Mgarr were tools fashioned from bone and flint. The tombs at Zebbug, however, contained ornaments, the most numerous of all being necklaces made from shells. However, the chronological order of the Mgarr and Zebbug periods has not been definitely established, and some experts place Zebbug before Mgarr on the basis of carbon 14 dating.

From Zebbug, one crosses the narrows separating Malta from the island of Gozo to reach Xaghra and the Ggantija temples (the "Tower of the Giants" as they have come to be known) which have given their name to the next period.

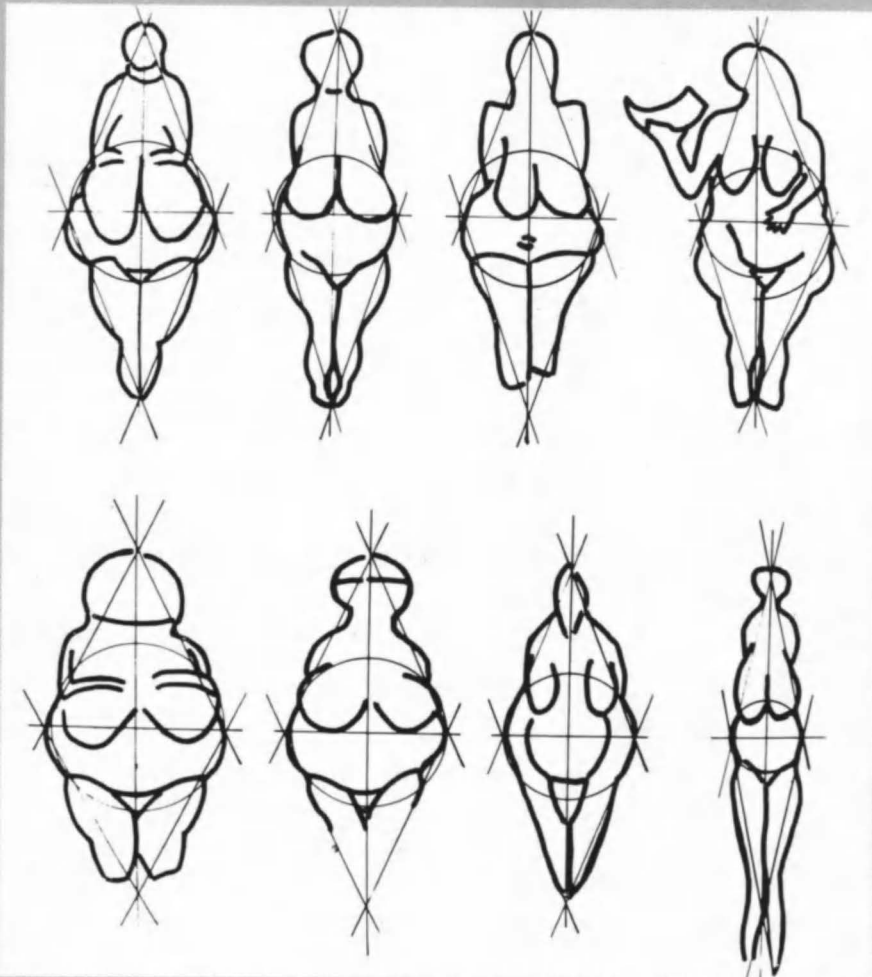
Situated on a hillside with a panoramic view stretching out to the northern coast of the tiny island, the remarkable temples of Ggantija rightly deserve their fame. The southern temple, the largest of the two temple buildings, was built to a plan which bears certain resemblances to those of churches of the Christian era.

On each side of the 108ft long central corridor, which might be described as the "nave", are two small rooms. At the end of the central corridor is the apse which is marked off by a low partition wall about two feet in height. Part of the left hand side of the central corridor was probably used as a sacrificial altar.

The Phoenician inscriptions found here give no indication as to when these bold sailors from Asia Minor came to the island of Gozo. It is thought that they used Malta and Gozo as staging ports and worshipped in the temples.

The northern temple is in the form

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FEMININE BEAUTY 20,000 YEARS AGO. — Numerous statuettes of corpulent women have been found at Palaeolithic sites in Europe, in places as far apart as western France and the Don Valley in the U.S.S.R. These "Venus figurines", as they are known, were made about 18,000 B.C. Drawings above show eight of the Palaeolithic Venus figurines, modelled according to a common pattern. The bulk of the trunk—breasts, belly and pelvis—fits within the circumference of a circle and the sharply tapered legs and narrow shoulders lie close to the limits of isosceles triangles. Drawn in outline by the French prehistorian André Leroi-Gourhan, the figurines (left to right and top to bottom) are from: Lespugue (France); Kostenki (U.S.S.R.); Dolni-Vestonice (Czechoslovakia); Laussel (France); Willendorf (Austria); two centre figures, Gagarino (U.S.S.R.) and Balzi Rossi (Italy). Stone-Age sculptors in Malta, 16,000 years later, gave the same ample forms to their statues of women, as did the artists of the Iron Age, two thousand years ago, to amulets representing the fertility goddess, discovered in Danish peat-bogs (see page 27).

Drawings © from "Préhistoire de l'Art Occidental" by André Leroi-Gourhan, Editions Mazenod, Paris, 1965



Photo © Paul Almasy, Paris

This headless limestone statue, 48 cm. high, was discovered in the ruins of Hagar Qim, a temple complex first excavated in 1839, in the south-west of Malta. The holes at the top are sockets where

the head was fitted. Though no sexual characteristics are indicated, the shape of the body, recalling those of Palaeolithic Venus figurines (see opposite page) suggests a female divinity.

VENUS FIGURES (Continued)

of a square with sides measuring 82 feet. The rooms into which it is divided feature several niches which are differently placed from those of the southern temple. Careful examination of the interior walls suggests that they were covered with bright red paint. In view of the size of these rooms, it is unlikely that they had stone roofs and the builders probably made them of wood, though the possibility that they were left without roofs cannot be entirely ruled out.

It is surprising that the Ggantija temples, gigantic for their time, were built on this particular site. In this part of the island there is no trace of the limestone rock of which they are built. It must have been brought from Ta'Cenc, on the south coast of the island some considerable distance from Xaghra.

Transporting this material from Ta'Cenc to Xaghra represented a remarkable feat at that time. It must certainly have made an impression on popular imagination since a legend relates that a giantess carried the stones on her head, at the same time holding a baby in her arms and feeding it along the way.

Tarxien, on the island of Malta, is the most famous archaeological site in the archipelago. It was during the Tarxien prehistoric period that the ancient Maltese civilization reached its apogee. To their technical mastery the builders added artistic taste and feeling. Not only were the stone blocks carefully hewn and dressed; they were also decorated with designs in relief. Most of these decorations are carved in spiral patterns and other geometrical figures, though some motifs represent animals.

The Tarxien group consists of three interlinked temples. Their existence

was unknown to archaeologists until 1915 and they were eventually discovered by accident. The fact that they remained buried for centuries explains their perfect state of preservation.

One discovery that immediately attracts attention is the statue of an enormously fat woman placed in the middle of the central temple. The statue is impressive, even though the upper part of the body is missing, and is probably a colossal representation of the goddess of fertility.

The majority of the stones of the Tarxien temples are blackened with smoke, which suggests that the Bronze Age inhabitants of the island cremated their dead there. The ashes of innumerable funeral pyres erected in the temples throughout the Bronze Age and the broken remains of burnt urns recovered there, have been submitted to scientific, carbon 14 testing. The results of these tests have enabled a precise chronological table of the various stages of this period in the prehistory of Malta to be established.

The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum (or Pawla Hypogeum), an ancient catacomb discovered not far from the Tarxien temples, also ranks among the most important archaeological remains of Malta. Like the Tarxien temples, the catacomb was discovered by chance during the construction of two blocks of houses in 1902. Entirely carved from the rock, which here forms a limestone plateau, the Hypogeum is several centuries older than the Tarxien temples.

The Hypogeum is an architectural complex of halls, passages, chambers, stairways and high-walled galleries, into which are carved niches of varying shapes and sizes, spread out on three levels.

The largest and most carefully constructed room, the inner sanctum or "Holy of Holies," is situated in the upper part of the catacombs, and it is here, in all probability, that animal sacrifices were made. Access to the third storey is difficult and the stairway leading to it ends with an impassable step some six feet high.

The purpose of the room below this stairway is still a matter of conjecture. Some specialists believe that it was a treasury and that it was to protect its contents from robbers that access was made so difficult. Others maintain that it was merely a water tank.

During the Bronze Age the period of invasions began and Maltese civilization gradually lost its originality. The isolation that Malta, as an island, had experienced up to the Stone Age was disturbed by the arrival of sailors from the eastern Mediterranean, from Greece, from neighbouring islands such as Sicily and Lipari, and even from the Gulf of Lions. Improvement in boat-building techniques and in navigation brought Malta within reach of the bold seafarers who had set out to seek their fortunes in distant lands.

The newcomers brought with them new customs and beliefs which they imposed upon the peoples of the islands who, small in number, were unable to defend themselves. The objects discovered in the tombs of succeeding periods are so different that they cannot be explained in terms of the evolution in customs of a single people. Such radical transformations can be due solely to the cultural contributions of invading peoples.

No doubt this tiny country with such a turbulent history conceals beneath its soil other precious traces of the past. ■

Temple complexes discovered in Malta, and in particular that of Tarxien, show that a well-established religion existed in the Island 3,500 years ago. Excavations at Tarxien between 1915 and 1919, laid bare major structures raised by neolithic builders. Photo right, of part of the Middle temple at Tarxien, shows the passage leading to the inner rooms. Access, however, is blocked by a small slab gracefully carved with two spirals, a decorative motif also found on ancient monuments in Crete. Many stones in the Tarxien temples are blackened with smoke suggesting that the dead were cremated there in ancient times. The huge stone slabs used to build these and other Maltese temples have inspired a legend that a giantess transported the stones on her head, while feeding the baby she carried in her arms.

