

The ‘Rainy Sun’ – The Significance of a Natural Phenomenon to the First Maltese

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As a symbolic anthropologist I have been studying the symbolism of Malta’s prehistoric cultures for the past thirty five years. Much of this symbolism has been laid down in the many signs, motifs and motif complexes applied on the surface of earthenware. Though this is still generally underestimated as ‘just decoration’, these ceramics are actually loaded with symbolism.

The ‘rainy sun’, which I experienced only recently in nature itself, is a motif complex typical of the Għar Dalam culture, the first phase in Maltese prehistory, 5,800-4,500BC, with Gozo as the island of their first arrival and main activity.

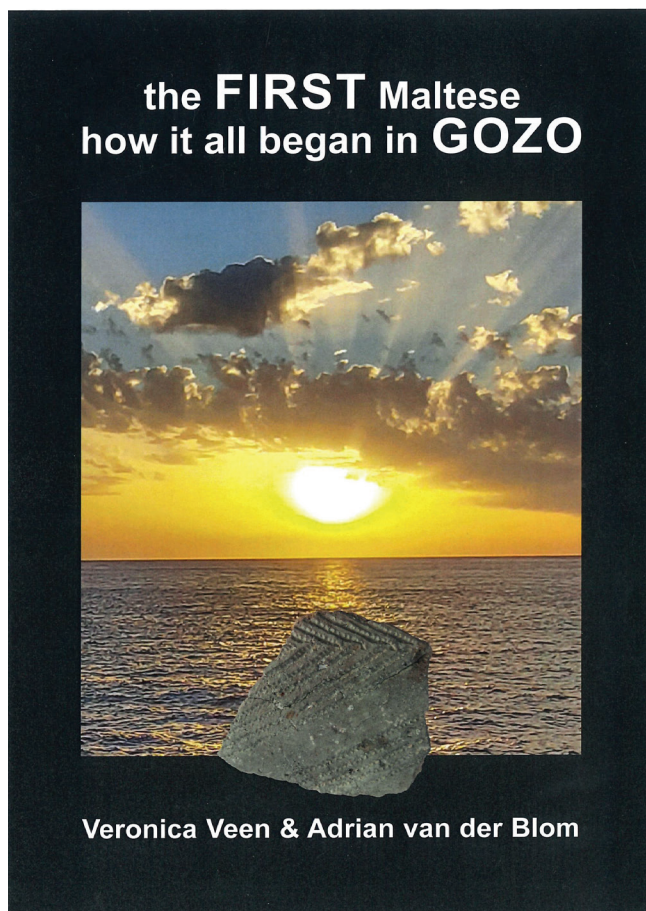
In 1992 I described the phenomenon in *The First Maltese*, a book published by my husband and

me. It was only in October 2022, that I recognised the ‘rainy sun’ again in a photograph taken by Mr Joseph Calleja and used as a cover for this magazine. During our conversation we discussed the ‘rainy sun’ phenomenon and its relation to the first settlers, who must also have witnessed it and understood its significance to their agricultural existence. This was apparently the reason why they included it in their imagery, built up from dozens of, often tiny, motifs impressed or incised in their pottery.

From Raindrop to Cosmic Image

These motifs included something seemingly insignificant as a raindrop as well as something grand and cosmic as the ‘rainy sun’.

In Gozo, the tiny raindrop appeared in the earliest coarse ware, found amongst others at taċ-Ċawla, dating about 5,800BC and perhaps a little earlier. These raindrop forms must have been impressed with obliquely held, more or less, pointed sticks. The motif is sometimes freely spread across the pot surface, sometimes in a loose configuration. Soon a clustering of the motif, with something like a sprouting seed, occurs. The raindrops mostly were put obliquely on the surface, and later they would be abbreviated to dashes, and from there to oblique lines that can fill a band (furrow?) or (fertile) triangles.



Cover of forthcoming book, featuring a ‘rainy sun’ photograph by Mr Joseph Calleja.

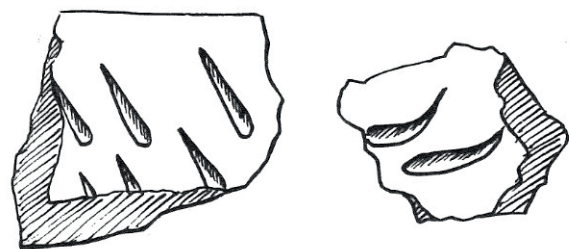


Fig. 1: Potsherd with raindrop motif from taċ-Ċawla and a related sprout form a site north of Għarb, both about 5,800BC.

In *The First Maltese* (Veen, 1992: 39-54) and *The Goddess of Malta* (Veen 1992 and 2019: 30-39), I constructed, through an in-depth symbolic-anthropological analysis and with the help of Sicilian Stentinello material, something like the Weeping Goddess, an endeavour too wide-ranging to be repeated here. She can be regarded as the final stage of the concept of the rainy sun, even approaching figurative art, and as such a personification. Her eyes, from which her veils of tears flow down, form a typical neolithic cluster with sources of water in the land. In Maltese, the word for eye and source is the same: *ghajn*.

Here the term goddess appears, which meanwhile has become a somewhat problematic concept. In one of the essays added to *The Goddess* (Veen, 2019: 61-69), I explain that I had chosen, with due reserve, to retain the concept of goddess, despite all misuse

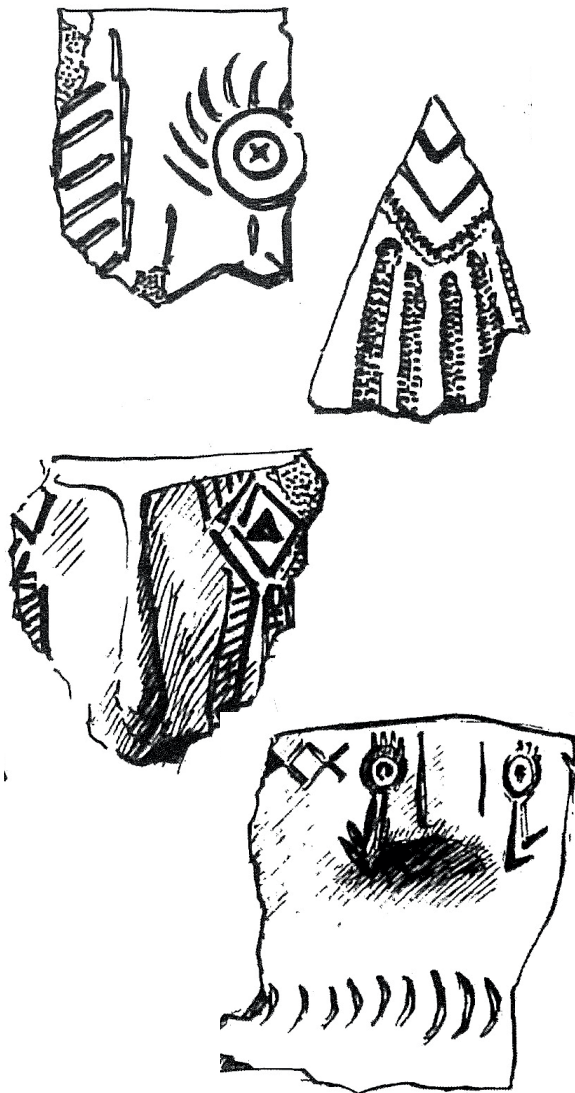


Fig. 2: Images of the 'rainy sun' can approach figurative art and as such a personification of the Weeping Goddess. Stentinello style from the Paterno region in Sicily, 5,500BC.

and amateurish interpretations, since we ultimately have to find a sensible word to approach their way of thinking and spirituality, with the goddess as a metaphor for the life-giving powers of nature, in all their manifestations.

From Figure 3a I could come to the quite abstract image of Figure 3b. The triangle with oblique lines has been discovered, by myself and my husband, three times in Gozo. It is striking that the intricate compositions of these Weeping Goddesses or 'rainy suns' often occur between two vertical bands filled with raindrops, oblique dashes or lines which emphasise their rainy content.

Such a sherd with an almost literal 'rainy sun' between bands with raindrops comes from Skorba. Even the rays of the sun itself are drops. Only a small fragment with a probable sun motif was found by Magri in Xewkija in 1904 (Magri, 1906). Between the deeply incised circular grooves, we see horizontal dashes, less deeply done. A 'rainy sun' again?

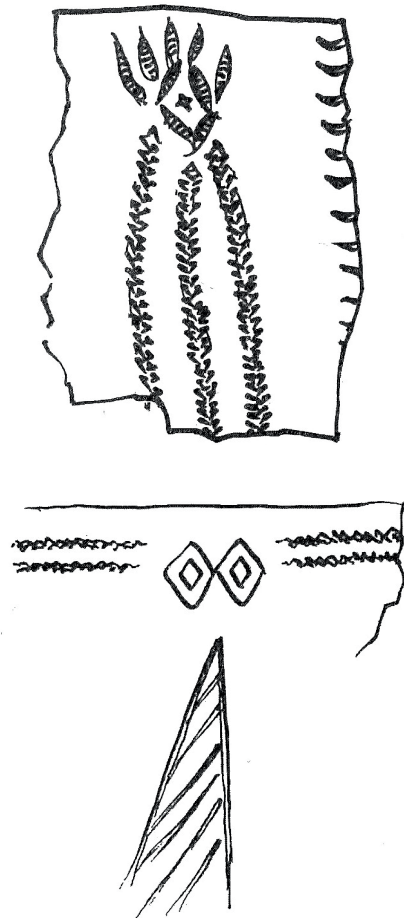


Fig. 3: Two appearances of the Weeping Goddess. The more abstract second one with her veil of tears, making the fields fertile, is akin to pottery fragments found in Gozo. Both Stentinello style, Sicily, 5,500BC.

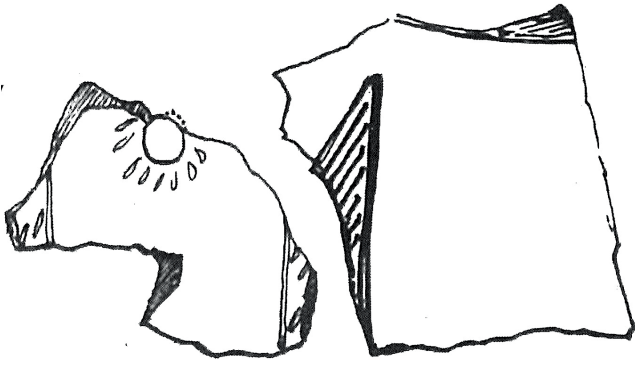


Fig. 4: Maltese variations on the Weeping Goddess: a quite literal 'rainy sun' from Skorba, and a triangular rain stream from taċ-Ċawla, Victoria, 5,500-5,000 BC.

Most amazing perhaps is the unique, elaborate and very refined sun stamp found at tas-Silġ, Malta (Figure 5). Since the sherd shows pyrites inclusions, it must have been imported, probably from the same Paterno region that created the Weeping Goddesses. This could be seen in the style and complexity of the motif. The sherd, a fragment from a miniature pot, shows two sunny eyes below the rim, probably the only ones. The concentric eye motif is a stamp impressed with a very sophisticated tool, of which the subtle relief leaves the central part elevated. The 'rays' are actually mini-triangles, adding to the neolithic cluster.

From a band of five horizontal grooves going around the pot, one hanging triangle under both eyes comes down of which the sides consist of five(?) grooves as well. Could we see here the fertile triangle of rain pouring down from the horizontal band of the sky, the clouds, or perhaps even the rainbow? Anyway, a full-fledged Weeping Goddess heralding herself again, in this tiny sherd.

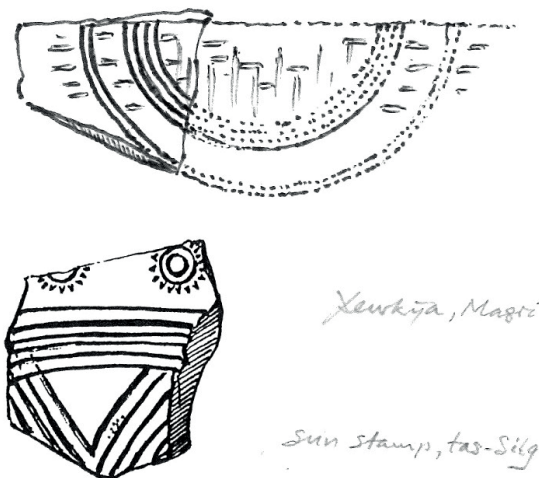


Fig. 5: Fr Manwel Magri found this unique 'rainy sun' motif below the former Xewkija temple in 1904. From tas-Silġ, Malta, comes an important sherd showing a very sophisticated 'rainy sun' stamp. Both 5,500BC.

As said, I experienced the phenomenon of the 'rainy sun' with all its ramifications, really consciously, only last October, a month in which I had never been in Malta before during all the 35 years of my work. I immediately connected it with the first Maltese, who obviously also had observed this phenomenon and caught it in their imagery. The photograph by Mr Calleja and the inspiring conversation with him could only enrich this experience, with important consequences for my work.

We have to realise that in the Mediterranean, the time of sowing is in Autumn. After all the tedious work, one will await the much desired rain, which will touch the seeds that would have been carefully put into mother earth helping them sprout, so that the circle of life will continue.

And then, at that magical moment, after the first shower when the sun breaks through the clouds with her veils of tears, the rainy sun manifests itself, though only for a short time: the miracle of fertility has come, and the cycle of life has started again.

References

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This article is a fragment from the forthcoming book by Dra. Veronica Veen and Dr Adrian van der Blom: *The First Maltese, How it all began in Gozo*, Malta, Inanna Publications, 2022 (ISBN 978-9918-0-0439-3). An exhibition will be organised in Gozo under the same title.

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