

Europe's Oldest Civilization: Malta's Temple-Builders

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Seven thousand years ago, a mystical people appeared in Malta. Within 1400 years, this society started producing there, using Stone Age tools, the earliest and most wondrously constructed, free-standing megalithic architecture in the world. What is astonishing is that their surviving World Heritage sites predate the better known Giza Pyramids and Stonehenge by 1000 and 1500 years respectively!

Who were the first Inhabitants of Malta?

Malta is a small archipelago of 121 square miles located at the center of the Mediterranean Sea - 60 miles south of Sicily; 180 miles north of Africa - and lies midway between the Strait of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal. Early pottery remains suggest that Malta was first inhabited from Sicily during the Early Neolithic Period (5000 BCE). Malta can be seen from Sicily on a clear day. These immigrants at first lived in caves, but later domesticated animals, developed agriculture, and lived in huts and villages. They buried their dead in kidney-shaped shaft graves and created, without a potter's wheel, gracefully shaped and tastefully decorated pottery.



Malta's Position in the Mediterranean



Map of Malta with the Neolithic Temple sites

How did the Temple-Building Society evolve?

Carbon-dating indicates that, between the years 3600 – 2500 BCE - 1400 years after their arrival in Malta, these skilled people raised over 30 free-standing, megalithic (large stoned) temples throughout the Maltese archipelago. Although each site has its own idiosyncrasies, the structures share a number of common features:

- They all consist of a number of semicircular chambers (apses) with three lobes (trefoils), which are organized symmetrically around a central axis;
- The entrances of each of these structures are erected monumentally within a concave façade which looks out onto an open space or plaza; and
- In general, the temples' finely finished trilithon doorways (two upright megaliths supporting a lintel slab) are mostly orientated towards the south-east and south-west. One exception, the Mnajdra Lower Temple faces exactly towards the East.



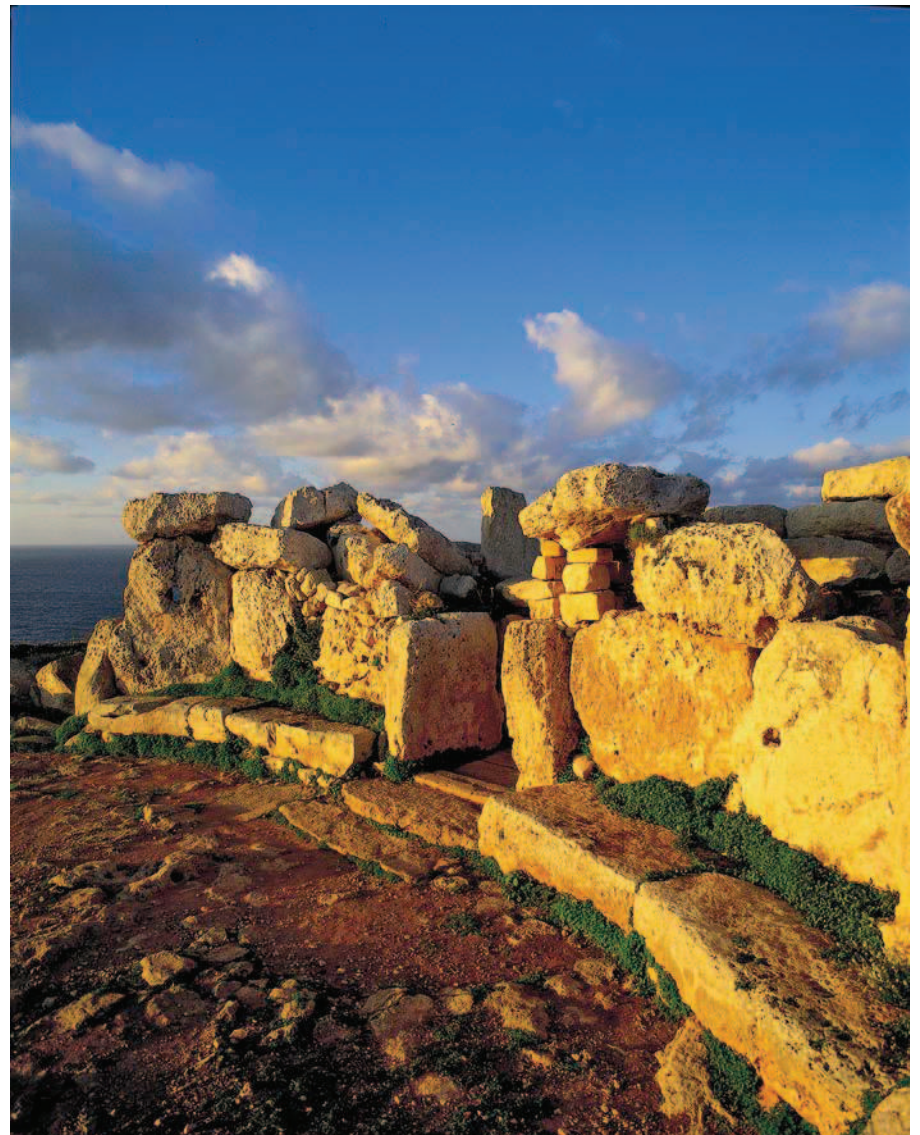
Aerial photo of the Mnajdra Temples



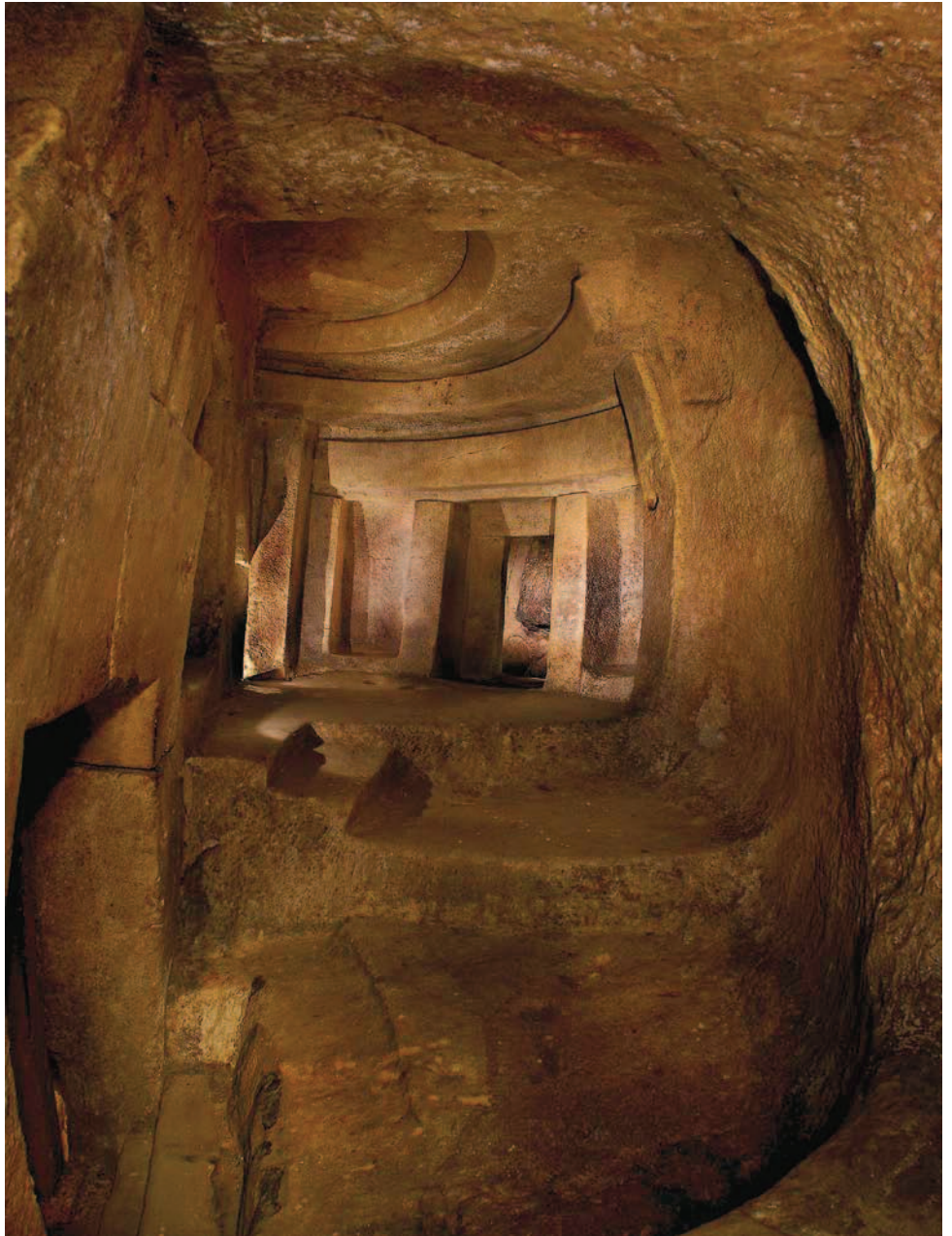
Hagar Qim façade



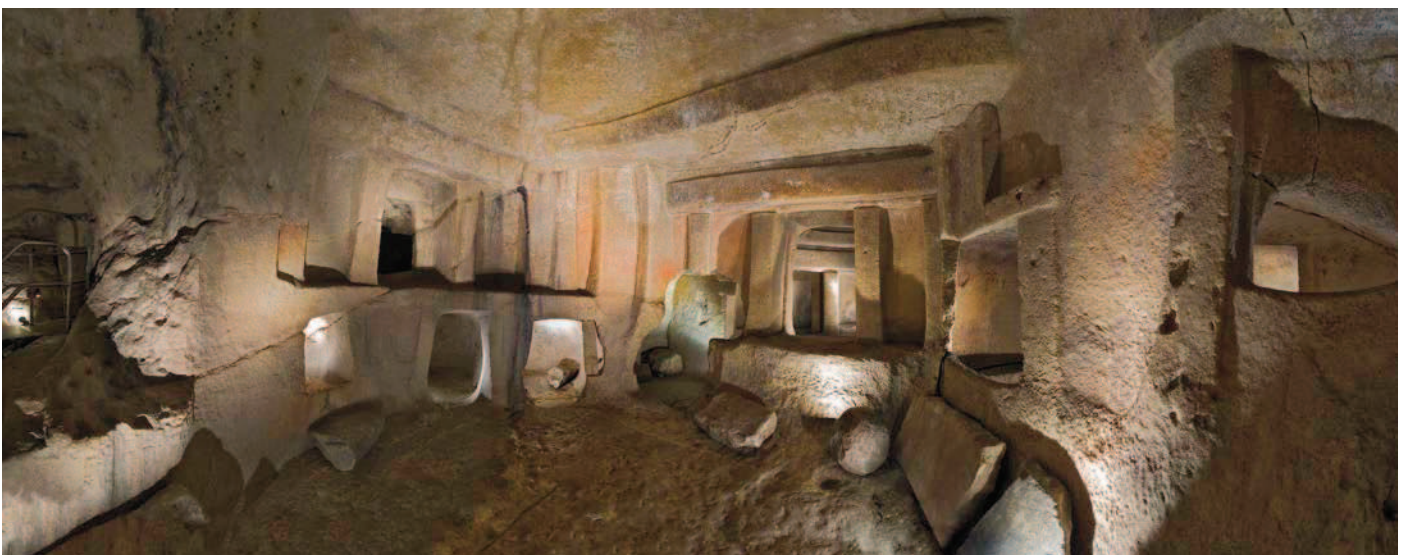
Ggantija Temples façade



Mnajdra Temples façade



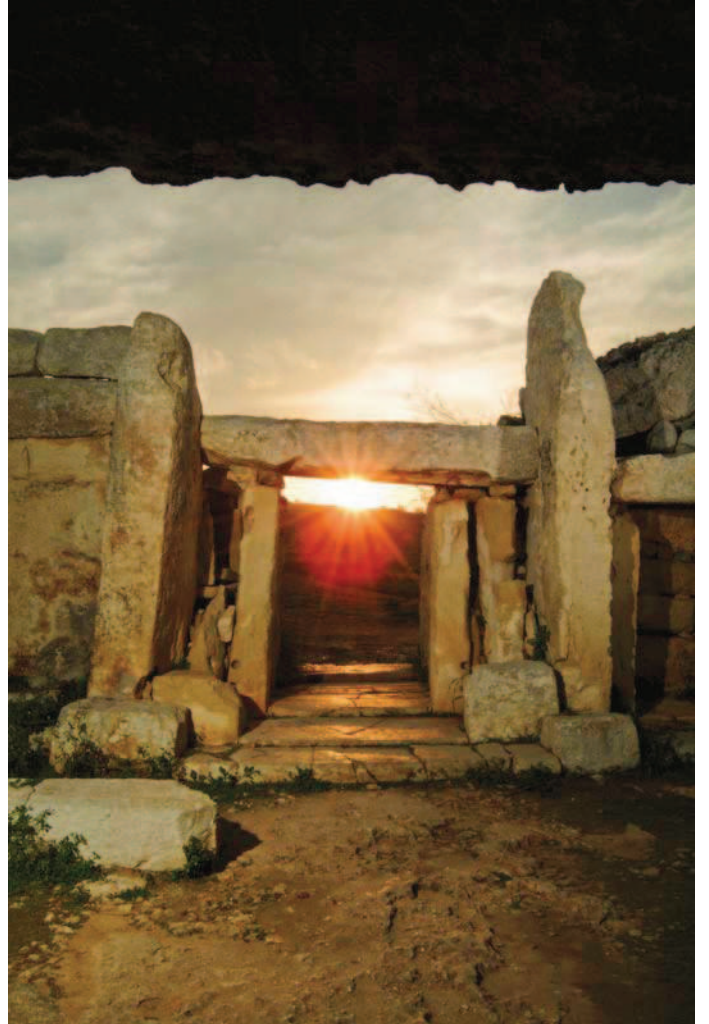
Hal Saflieni Hypogeum - 'Holy of Holies'



Hal Saflieni Hypogeum - 'Main Chamber'



Mnajdra Lower Temple - Equinox sunrise



Mnajdra Lower Temple - Equinox sunrise

How were these Megaliths quarried?

Malta's geological structure permitted the use of two types of limestone for construction purposes: (1) the hard, grey, upper-coralline limestone; and (2) the soft, pale, globigerina limestone. By exploiting natural fissures and crevices in the rock, the early Maltese builders managed to break off megaliths using primitive tools. These included hand-axes fashioned from imported flint, knives chiselled from imported obsidian, wooden wedges and levers, stone wedges and hammers. The soft globigerina limestone was adopted for the more refined, masonry work.

How were the Megaliths transported?

After the megaliths were quarried, they were transported over rollers, using levers, to nearby building sites. At the building site, the rollers were possibly exchanged for stone balls (still found *in situ*) so that the megaliths could be moved in all directions on the plane. This made it easier to place the large stones in their designated place since rollers only permit loads to be moved backwards or forwards.

How were these Megaliths erected?

The height of Maltese temple ruins may reach 20 feet. How did Stone Age people lift slabs weighing up to 20 tonnes to such heights? The early Maltese Temple-Builders would have known that dragging a burden up a ramp was much easier than lifting it. High external walls required long ramps. These ramps would be removed once the structure had been completed.



Reconstruction stone model (scale c.1:35) of a construction of a hypothetical Maltese temple



Reconstruction of Tarxien's façade, based on temple façade model found also at Tarxien (inset)

How were these Structures decorated?

Stonework within the temples is finely decorated with low-relief sculptures of animals or fish, spiral or volute motifs, and many anthropomorphic (human-like) statues. At Tarxien Temples, one stone statue would have reached 9 feet in height when whole. One can best appreciate the sophistication of these builders at the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, a complex underground temple, hewn 3-storeys deep into the rock over three different periods: 3600 - 3300 BCE; 3300 - 3000 BCE; and 3150 - 2500 BCE. The walls of some of the Hypogeum's chambers have been painted with elaborate, red ochre designs: spirals, blobs (filled circles) or chequer-boards. Other chambers were carefully sculpted to recreate life-size imitations of built interiors of above-ground megalithic buildings. Roofs are therefore carved to simulate corbelled masonry with a series of stone-rings overhanging each other until they span the entire chamber.



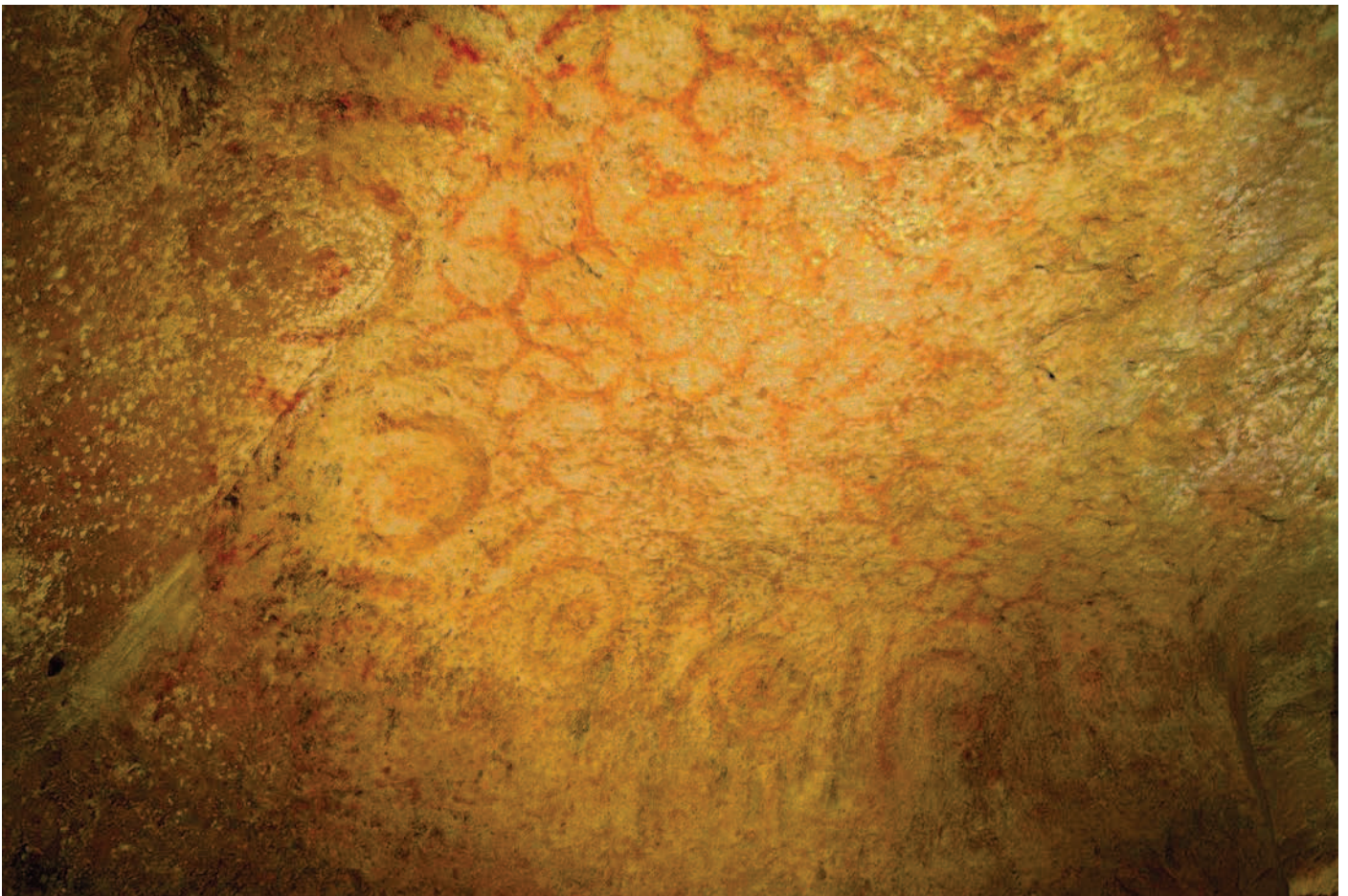
Decorated spiral sculpture from Tarxien



Small stone model of a roofed temple from Ta' Hagraat



Decorated spiral sculpture from Tarxien



Roof of 'Decorated Room' at the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum



Animal motifs sculpture from Tarxien



Corbelled wall Manjdra Temples



Corbelled wall Hagar Qim Temples



'Shaman's Group' - stone - Xaghra Circle



Statuette head - clay - Tarxien



Obese sitting statue - stone - Hagar Qim



'Venus of Malta' - clay - Hagar Qim



Sitting statuettes - clay - Xaghra Circle



Huge stone statue - reconstruction - Tarxien



'Sleeping Lady' - clay - Hal Saflieni Hypogeum

What was the Purpose of these Structures?

The sheer investment of effort required to cut, transport and construct these 'Temples' suggests that they were of central importance to Malta's prehistoric inhabitants. The objects and furnishings found within them indicate that the temples may have served for one or a combination of three purposes:

1. The above-ground temples most probably served as sanctuaries: rituals were probably performed to worship ancestors and to venerate a corpulent fertility deity which may have represented 'mother earth';
2. The unique, easterly orientation of Mnajdra above-ground temple suggests another purpose: this temple may have served as one of the world's oldest solar calendars. Sunrise lights up the interior of Mnajdra's southern temple on the first day of each of the four seasons. On the Equinox days, a ray of sun enters the temple and lights up its main axis. On the Solstices, sunlight illuminates the entrance chamber's megaliths – focusing on the left-hand vertical in Summer and on the right-hand upright in Winter; and...
3. The underground hypogea – Hal Saflieni and the recently excavated Xaghra Circle – also served as burial grounds.

What happened to the Enigmatic Temple-Builders?

We cannot as yet explain the reason for the sudden decline of this magnificent Temple-Building Society around 2500 BCE. We can only guess that these master-masons may have been obliged to emigrate due to climatic factors or were decimated by epidemic disease. Although their monuments have survived, the more refined structures carved out of the softer globigerina limestone have, over the years, suffered serious degradation. Their conservation has since been entrusted to Heritage Malta, the government agency responsible for the protection and promotion of Malta's cultural heritage.

The Legacy of the Temple-Builders

These Temple Builders not only left their buildings as a legacy to mankind, they also bequeathed their innate masonry skills to succeeding generations of Maltese. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes 8 Maltese properties deserving of World Heritage preservation due to their outstanding value to humanity. These 8 World Heritage sites include 6 above-ground Temples (Ggantija, Hagar Qim, Mnajdra, Skorba, Ta' Hagra, & Tarxien), the underground Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, and the majestic Baroque walled-city of Valletta. Not surprisingly, it is claimed that the stoneworking skills reflected in 16-17th century Maltese Baroque architecture are themselves a legacy of Malta's Temple-Builders of the 3rd millennium BCE.

Book references:

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Vella Gregory I., *The Human Form in Neolithic Malta*, 2005, Midsea Books Ltd

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More information about Malta's Temple-Builders may be obtained from:

www.heritagemalta.org

www.neolithiafoundation.org

http://web.infinito.it/utenti/m/malta_mega_temples