Cremation burials in early Bronze Age Malta: evidence from Tarxien and Ġgantija

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A common way of disposing of the dead across the entire Mediterranean (and even beyond) from prehistoric down to late Roman times was to bury the corpse – or the burnt remains, if cremated – in a built chamber or in a floor cavity and then cover it up under a mound of stones and/or earth, usually encircled by a kerb or retaining stone wall. Sizes varied and larger ones might even have a passage providing access to the burial chamber. In many cases, these burial mounds or tumuli used to be circular, having an overall appearance of a cone, hut, or hill.

It is worth investigating whether the resemblance of burial mounds to huts was intentional or merely accidental (something which I do not intend to do in this contribution). If it was intentional, was it meant to convey an idea of the tomb as a house of the dead? For instance, Richard Bradley supposes that cairns were regarded as houses of the dead.[1] Cited by Robert Layton and Peter J. Ucko,[2] Colin Richards argues that as the living resided in houses where the central hearth contained the life-maintaining fire, the dead resided in tombs whose perpetual darkness signified their role as residences of the dead. Richards continues to elaborate on the late Neolithic passage grave of Maeshowe in west Mainland, Orkney, in northern Britain by describing it as a place being conceptually below but physically above ground, thus placing the dead in an ambiguous position located between two worlds. He sustains his argument first by highlighting the resemblance of the mound to the surrounding topography where a number of similar-looking natural knolls are to be found. Leading on from this point, he further argues that the physical constitution of the Maeshowe mound mirrors that of the earth itself. As it is constructed of stone but is then covered by a mound of natural clay, the chamber resembles the geological formation of the earth whose bed-rock is covered by natural till. According to Richards, this structure to house the dead might have been intended to be visible as a monument, yet, at the same time, it positioned the dead below the surface of the world inhabited by humans.[3] Richards' argument in respect of Maeshowe's burial mound may, perhaps, also be applied to other similar burials. Quite plausibly too, Chris Scarre suggests that the low rounded form of the artificial burial mounds may replicate the shape of the natural hills in which previous burials took place, thus manifesting a shift from a tradition of burial in natural hills to a tradition of artificial burial mounds.[4] This theory may also complement Leif Sahlqvist's suggestion that a barrow can be viewed as a sacred mountain in miniature and/or a metaphor for a sacred mountain.[5] Nonetheless, other forms of burial different from the above were also encountered.[6]

In this contribution, I shall be dealing with cremation burials on the Maltese islands in the early Bronze Age (Tarxien Cemetery phase: 2400-1500 B.C.), focusing, towards the end, on a type of clay figurine associated – as yet, exclusively – with this early Bronze Age practice. Some new interpretations are attempted in respect of both the burials

themselves as well as the mentioned figurines. To this end, I shall be resorting to evidence from two temple sites: those at Tarxien and Ġgantija, with the richer corpus of evidence coming from the former.[7] To begin with, I derive insights for my interpretations by initially resorting to the earliest literary evidence we have and which concerns the Aegean region where it comes from. But I also draw on comparisons with some other sites and/or materials outside the Maltese islands. It is mainly this comparative approach that, for the greater part, provides the backbone of my arguments.

Literary evidence

The earliest literary description we seem to have of cremation followed by burial under mounds or barrows is provided by Homer. Though he probably lived and wrote in the 9th or 8th century BC, Homer displays good knowledge of the funerary practices of Bronze Age Greece with which he vividly colours his narrative.

The narratives which give us the relative descriptions are to be found in his *Iliad*. The first concerns the death and burial of Patroklos. We are first given a brief account of the funeral preparations in Book XVIII: after having been washed and treated with olive oil, Patroklos' corpse was laid on a bier and covered with a thin light cloth from head to feet, over which a white linen shroud was finally laid.[8] Book XXIII gives us a fuller and more detailed description of what went on in the funeral: wood was heaped up and a pyre was built, on top of which the corpse was laid. Fat sheep and oxen were skinned, dressed, and made ready for the pyre. The corpse was covered from head to feet with fat extracted from the dead animals, while their flayed carcasses were heaped around the corpse. Twelve slain Trojans and more animals were cast upon the pyre, along with jars of honey, oil, and unguents which were leaned against the bier, and all was set on fire.[9]

The next day, upon instructions of Achilles, the fire was quenched with gleaming wine, the bones of Patroklos were singled out (as he lay in the middle of the pyre) from the rest of the bones and gathered in double-layered fat inside a golden urn covered with a linen shroud. Then, the circle of the barrow was marked off, the stone revetments set around the pyre, and a mound of earth was immediately heaped up.[10]

Finally, towards the end of the *Iliad*, we are given another account: that of Hector's burial following his death in retaliation for the death of Patroklos. Book XXIV gives us a similar, albeit shorter, description of Hector's funeral: great heaps of wood were gathered, Hector's corpse was laid on top of the high pyre and set on fire. On the following day, the fire was quenched with wine and his bones were gathered, wrapped in soft purple cloths, and placed in a golden urn. The urn with his bones was then laid in a hollow grave, covered over with large stones closely set together, and immediately after by a barrow.[11]

The cremation cemetery at Tarxien

Like much of the rest of the Mediterranean, the Maltese islands may not have been alien to this type of funerary scenario, nor are they expected to have been. Furthermore, the possible existence of this kind of burial in Malta and Gozo has never, to my knowledge, been seriously explored or possibly even thought of.

The first season of Temi Zammit's excavations at Tarxien in 1915 was to provide us with the first and, as yet, the most substantial evidence of Bronze Age cremation burials.[12] Just about 1.20 m below the field surface, Temi Zammit came across a deposit c. 30 cm thick consisting of dark soil and ashes. It contained cremated bones, burnt fabrics, pottery, and figurine fragments amongst other material. A large number of *in situ* crushed jars were also found. On the basis of their relation to the cremated bones and other material, they appeared to have been urns holding the cremated remains and accompanying grave goods. In fact, in addition to bones and pottery, they contained carbonised seeds and plant remains, bronze implements/weapons, personal ornaments, and lumps of both fine and coarse tissues from burnt dyed fabrics with which the cremated bodies were evidently dressed or wrapped.

This 'cemetery'/cremation deposit, which covered a relatively small part of the area occupied by the whole Neolithic temple complex (in fact, it was only found within the Tarxien South temple), rested on a fine sandy soil deposit devoid of stones. This last deposit itself lay over the temple floor and over any stone blocks and other debris from the temple ruins. According to Evans, it may have been an artificial fill intended to produce a level floor for the 'cemetery'. Moreover, the area covered by the 'cemetery'/cremation deposit seems to have been roughly circular, with a diameter of about 12.2 m.

From the outset, it appears that the stone enclosures of the already ruined Tarxien temples quite conveniently accommodated the cremation burials of the early Bronze Age people. It is quite difficult to ascertain whether the cremation of the corpses was undertaken on the site of the 'cemetery' itself. The amount of ash in the 'cemetery'/cremation deposit and the evidence of burning on the stones in and around the area convinced Zammit that it was. But the burning does not seem to have been restricted to the 'cemetery' area. It was evident also in other areas which must have had nothing to do with the 'cemetery'. Therefore, it is likewise possible that, while the cremation took place elsewhere, the cremated bones along with the other grave goods were placed in urns and buried in the 'cemetery' area. It is also unclear whether any mounds (or, perhaps, a communal mound?) were raised above the burials. The roughly circular form of the 'cemetery' area may be indicative, but any remaining traces might have been cleared away as a result of agricultural activity, to the extent that Zammit found no such traces at all. On the other hand, the stone enclosures of the earlier temple structure might have been found to accommodate the burials so well that no mound or mounds were needed. This may explain, in this case, the choice of the site for the 'cemetery'.[13]

The ashy deposit at Ġgantija

Less obvious, but quite indicative, is an interesting piece of evidence from Ġgantija. In 1936, the Museums Department resumed investigative works at this site. The clearance of an amount of stones and earth in front of the north temple entrance exposed an undisturbed deposit of 'dark grey earth and ashes'. This deposit contained many sherds described as 'neolithic', flint and obsidian flakes, stone objects, bone points and, very interestingly, small fragments of carbonised matter. The deposit extended along the entire length of both temple facades, apparently reaching the western wall too.[14]

More recently, in 1999, a discoid figurine fragment was discovered by Mr John Bajada while on duty as a Museum Officer at Ġgantija (Fig. 2). This important fragment was found embedded yet exposed in the same grey ashy layer in front of the North Temple facade and to the right. On close inspection and documentation of the fragment's find-spot and associated context, the layer was found to contain not only pottery sherds but also pieces of bone (Fig. 1).[15]

To a lesser extent and not quite clearly, this situation at Ġgantija somewhat mirrors that at Tarxien, the main difference being that, at Ġgantija, what appears to be a cremation deposit is situated outside and not within the Neolithic temple compound as at Tarxien. However, the picture at Ġgantija is enhanced and enlightened by a further piece of evidence provided by the 18th century French traveller Jean Houel. In his published plan of the Ġgantija temples, Houel depicts a circular yet smaller structure next to the north temple facade and to the right (Plate 1).[16] Coupled with the presence of the grey ashy deposit – even if this is reported to have extended further to the South Temple facade and west wall too – and its contents, this evidence leads me to seriously consider the one-time presence there of a cremation burial under a mound. In this respect, what Jean Houel saw and documented pictorially when visiting Ġgantija might have been the remains of the mound, which is pretty well outlined (even if schematically) in the plan he produced. A slight heap is still visible on this spot to this day and to my knowledge it has never been investigated. On the other hand, the grey ashy deposit with its contents might be spilt material from the mound itself as a result of its decay.
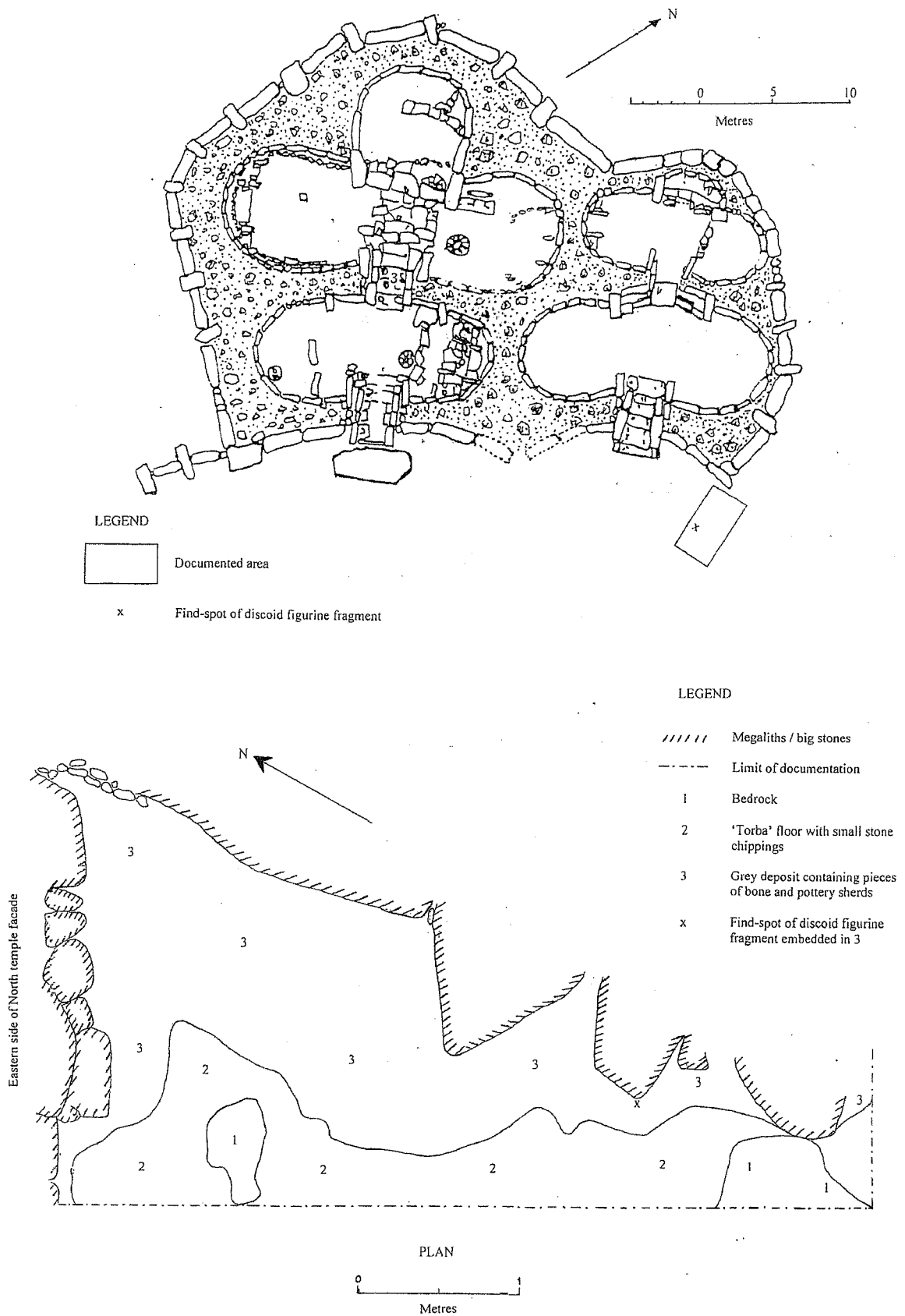
LEGEND

☐ Documented area

x   Find-spot of discoid figurine fragment

LEGEND

/ / / / /   Megaliths / big stones

— · — · —   Limit of documentation

1   Bedrock

2   'Torba' floor with small stone
      chippings

3   Grey deposit containing pieces
      of bone and pottery sherds

x   Find-spot of discoid figurine
      fragment embedded in 3

PLAN

Metres

Fig. 1. Plan of Ġgantija temple complex with documented area on the right (top) and detailed plan of the documented area showing the discoid figurine fragment's find-spot (marked 'x') and associated context (bottom). (Drawing: John Bajada and George Azzopardi)
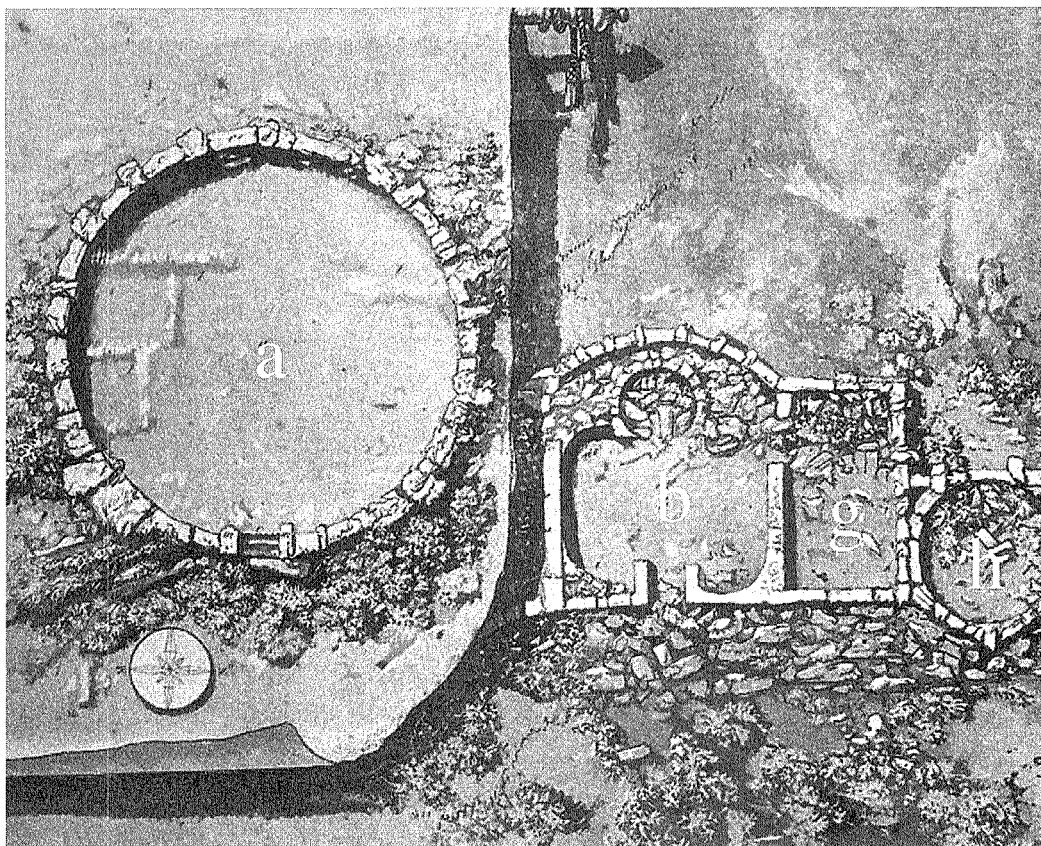
Plate 1. Plate CCLI (bottom) in Jean Houel's 'Voyage Pittoresque des isles de Sicile, de Lipari et de Malte', IV, (Paris. 1787). The circular structure (a) on the left is the Xagħra Stone Circle while the complex structure (b and g) on the right is Ġgantija. Another circular, yet smaller, structure (h) – possibly, the remains of an early Bronze Age cremation burial mound – on the extreme right stands next to the facade of the smaller northern temple.

Discussion

But one may ask: why build mounds or barrows next to or within an earlier temple structure (as might have been the case at Tarxien)? Monuments could be adapted or altered to suit new demands or changing circumstances. Thus, while the physical monuments themselves tend to endure, the ideas and symbolism associated with them may change as the monuments get appropriated by successive generations who might see them from different perspectives.[17] Monuments (or monumental enclosures) originally used for public ceremonies could, therefore, be appropriated by new people for the burial of their dead.[18] During the early Bronze Age (end of 3rd–beginning of 2nd millennium BC) in Britain, for example, many burials were located near (not within) the large communal monuments (as seems to be the case at Ġgantija) and finally covered by earthwork mounds.[19] In fact, a major feature of the 2nd millennium BC in Western and Northern Europe was the location of burial mounds on sites with a long tradition of ritual activity extending back into the Neolithic period (as seems evident at Ġgantija and, perhaps, at

Tarxien?). This indicates a tendency whereby newer monuments cluster around much older ones.[20]

Referring to developments of earlier Neolithic enclosures in Britain, Mark Edmonds plausibly suggests that building barrows next to or on the perimeter of an enclosure (or, in my view, any other monument, for the sake of this argument) meant inserting 'new people into the stories and associations of the place'. From a phenomenological perspective, he adds that the burial of individuals under such mounds (next to or on the perimeter of an enclosure) asserted a claim to the enclosure/ monument and all that it stood for by the people responsible for the burial.[21]

In a similar perspective, Richard Bradley suggests that the appropriation of certain monuments by particular people marks their close identification with these places.[22] If so, this may suggest that by burying their dead – presumably, their ancestors – next to a temple (as in the case of Ġgantija), the Tarxien Cemetery people were likewise appropriating, identifying themselves with, and laying claim to the earlier temple and to all that the same temple stood for. And as with the monument

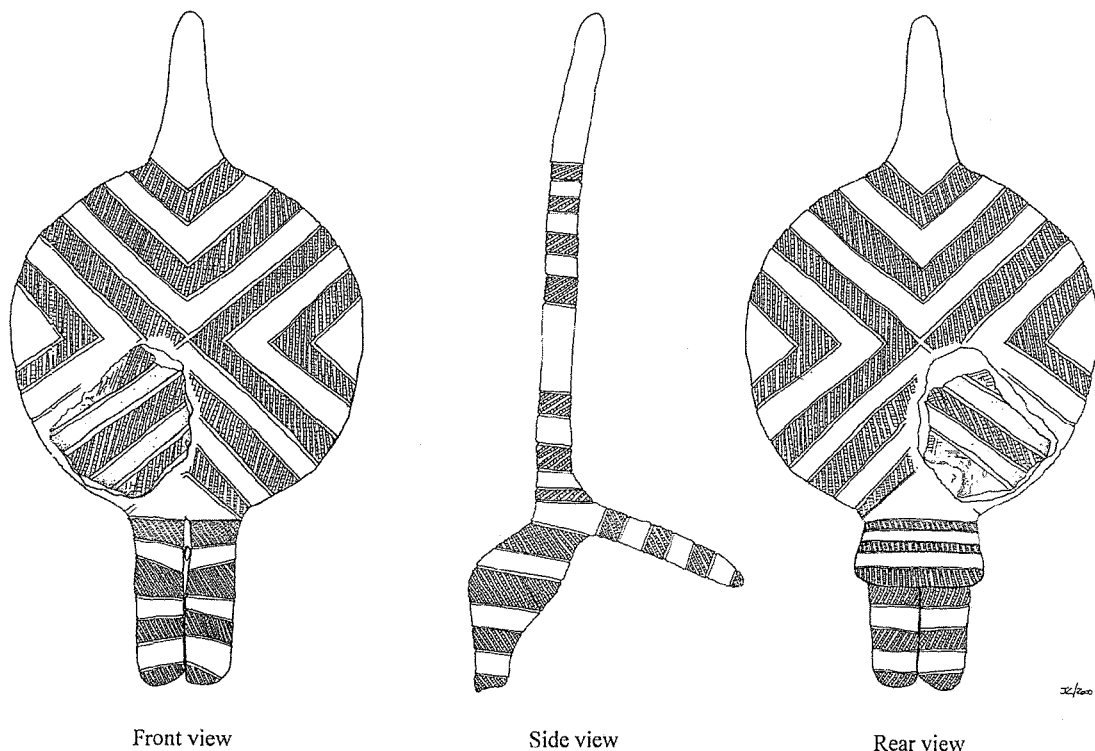Front view   Side view   Rear view

Fig. 2. Drawing of a discoid figurine found in the 'cemetery'/cremation deposit at Tarxien. The drawing also shows the Ġgantija discoid figurine fragment superimposed on the Tarxien figurine. (Drawing: Joseph Calleja)

at Flagstones in Dorset (Britain) where, with time, it also became a focus for burial grounds,[23] the proximity of the dead to the earlier temples at both Tarxien and Ġgantija might have suggested a 'genealogical depth' to the ties binding the Tarxien Cemetery people to these temples and all that they represented. Sustaining such a link, the Tarxien Cemetery people could perhaps better manage the ties between earth (themselves) and sky (their gods/ancestors) to their own advantage.

Therefore, the re-use of the previously existing monuments of Tarxien and Ġgantija has probably involved a change in their meaning while maintaining their sacred character. This re-use might have reflected a new socio-ideological order based on the appropriation of the past. Therefore, the re-use of the temples involved discontinuity but, to a certain degree, permanence too.

The Tarxien cemetery figurines

A number of clay discoid figurine fragments – some of which could be reconstructed into complete figurines – were also found among the

contents of the cinerary urns in the 'cemetery'/ cremation deposit at Tarxien. When complete, the figurines consisted of a relatively large flat disk, incised on both sides with an elaborate linear 'design'. The disk stood on a pair of legs balanced by an elongated projection on the rear. The figurines lacked arms. They were also faceless while their tapering heads were plain and undecorated (Fig. 2).[24]

Ceramic figurines specific to the prehistoric Cucuteni-Tripolye culture (Romania) but with a similar 'decorative' pattern were recently studied by Dragos Gheorghiu (Plate 2). Like the ones at the Tarxien 'cemetery', these figurines were, in the main, fragmented and related to incomplete or fragmented skeletal material. At the Tarxien 'cemetery', the skeletal remains were cremated. At Ġgantija too, the figurine fragment was found in association with skeletal fragments within the grey ashy deposit. In all instances, fragmentation of both figurines and skeletal material might have been deliberate and there might have been a correspondence in meaning between the fragmented figurines and the fragmented or incomplete skeletal material.[25] As the fragments of the broken figurines at the Tarxien 'cemetery' were
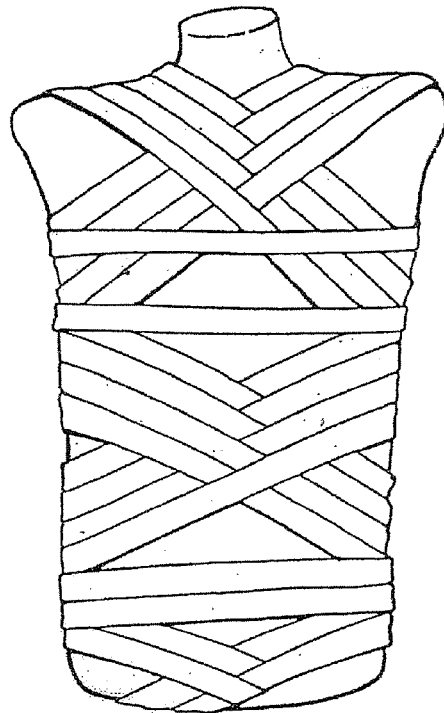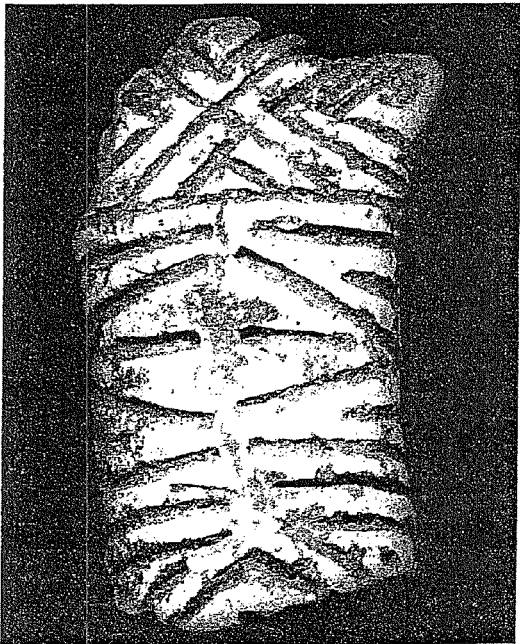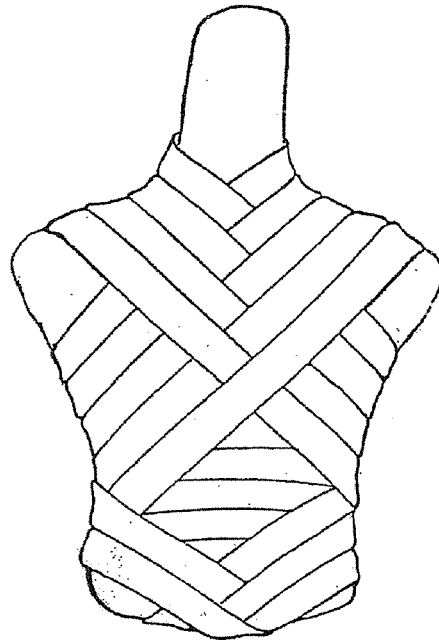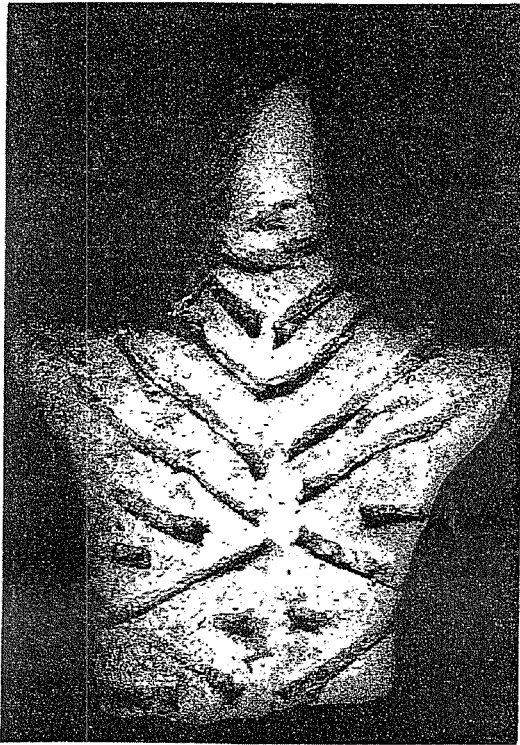
Plate 2. Ceramic figurines of the prehistoric Cucuteni-Tripolye culture (Romania) with their chevron-like 'decoration' (left) and the experimental modelling carried out by Dragos Gheorghiu suggesting representation of a funerary wrapping (right). (After Gheorghiu 2001, 77, Figs 2 and 3; 78, Figs 4 and 5). Note the striking similarity of the 'decorative' pattern on both these figurines and our discoid ones from Tarxien and Ggantija on Fig. 2.

found together (a characteristic attributed to the 'killing' of artefacts), could it be that these figurines were deliberately broken or ritually 'killed' prior to their deposition in the urns as part of a mortuary ritual practice, as shown by examples from Minoan Crete?[26] Could this have taken place so that the ritually fragmented figurines would correspond to the bodies fragmented through cremation?

Through experimental modelling, Gheorghiu sought to demonstrate that the chevron-like 'decoration' incised on some of his figurines could possibly be a representation of an interwoven funerary wrapping of the corpse and, thus, these figurines could represent deceased individuals or ancestors. The complete wrapping of the body is further highlighted by the figurines' absence of arms and by their cone-shaped legs. On the other hand, the absence of any decoration on their heads – typical of the ancestor figurines in Cucuteni-Tripolye culture – might suggest that the heads of the deceased were not wrapped like the rest of the body. Taken together with the absence of any decoration on their heads, the facelessness of the figurines would seem to point towards the possibility of the head of the deceased having been covered instead with a veil. The wrapping of the corpse (and the covering of the head with a veil) is corroborated by osteological data. The total wrapping of the deceased would symbolise the 'ancestors' on the one hand, and 'protection' on the other.[27]

In terms of 'decorative' pattern, of the absence of any arms and face, the modelling of the head and, consequently, representation, the above figurines seem to provide fairly good parallels to the ones from the Tarxien 'cemetery' and the one from Ġgantija represented by the recently discovered fragment. Thus, like the 'chevron-decoration' on the Cucuteni-Tripolye ceramic figurines, the similar 'decorative' pattern on the Tarxien and Ġgantija figurines might have likewise represented interwoven

funerary wrapping of the body.[28] Therefore, our figurines from Tarxien and Ġgantija might have been representations of completely wrapped deceased persons or ancestors. The burnt fabrics found at Tarxien and, possibly, the carbonised matter from Ġgantija (though the true nature of the latter is not made known) seem to lend further support to this hypothesis. And as the Tarxien and Ġgantija figurines are likewise faceless and their tapering heads lack any decoration, the heads of the deceased individuals or ancestors they presumably represented may also have been covered with a veil.

The breaking of the presumed ancestors' figurines might have been seen as a 'consumption' of the figurines similar to the 'consumption' of the bodies through cremation (in the case of Tarxien and, apparently, also of Ġgantija) or through skeletal dismemberment (in the case of Cucuteni-Tripolye). This would denote a sense of recycling the past or the powers associated with the past. This presumed practice might, therefore, infer a belief in some sort of 'power' residing in the ancestors' substance which might then explain the special protection afforded to the bodies of the deceased by wrapping them. Even any decoration reproducing the interweaving of bands (like that seen on the above-mentioned figurines) or of plants or mats could have been a symbol of protection not least for the ancestors.[29]

The dead individuals or ancestors which the figurines from the cinerary urns (at Tarxien) would seem to represent might have been those whose cremated bones and ashes were held inside the same urns. This hypothesis is lent weight by the fact that both figurines and cremated remains shared the same urns. Assuming that, like those of Cucuteni-Tripolye, our figurines represented deceased individuals or ancestors, they might have been simultaneously an image of 'the world of the living' and of 'the world of the dead', the binary symbolic structure found in every traditional society.[30]

Notes

1 R. Bradley, 'The land, the sky and the Scottish stone circle', in C. Scarre, (ed.), *Monuments and Landscape in Atlantic Europe: Perception and Society during the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age*, (London. Routledge, 2002), 130.

2 R. Layton and P.J. Ucko, 'Introduction: gazing on the landscape and encountering the environment', in P.J. Ucko and R. Layton, (eds.), *The Archaeology and Anthropology of Landscape: Shaping your landscape*, (London. Routledge, 1999), 14.

3 Richards C., 'Monuments as Landscape: Creating the Centre of the World in Late Neolithic Orkney', *World Archaeology*, vol. 28 no. 2, (1996), 202.

4 C. Scarre, 'Introduction: situating monuments. The dialogue between built form and landform in Atlantic Europe' in Scarre, 9.

5 Sahlqvist L., 'Territorial Behaviour and Communication in a Ritual Landscape', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, vol. 83 no. 2, (2001), 87.

6 For other forms (even in evident resemblance to houses), see: R. Bradley, *The Significance of Monuments: On the shaping of human experience in Neolithic and Bronze Age Europe*, (London. Routledge, 1998), 15-19, 56-65. See also: C. Tilley, 'Art, Architecture, Landscape', in B. Bender, (ed.), *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*, (Oxford. Berg Publishers, 1993), 57 (Fig. 2.2).

7 What appears to have been a cremation burial of the Tarxien Cemetery phase was found at Kappara Hill, Msieraħ in 1964 while clearing a new building site. But the site was disturbed to such an extent, that any remaining evidence is deemed inadequate (see: *Museum Annual Report* 1964, 3, pl. 1).

8 Homer, *Iliad* XVIII, 408-412.

9 Ibid., XXIII, 187-208.

10 Ibid., 270-295.

11 Ibid., XXIV, 921-938.

12 Making reference to Zammit's field-notebook, J.D. Evans mentions the presence of early Bronze Age (Tarxien Cemetery phase) material in grey, ashy soil at Tal-Qadi temple ruins on the way to Salina Bay, suggesting a later use of the building in the Bronze Age, possibly to house a cremation burial like those at Tarxien, even if no mention of any cremated bone is made by Zammit (see: J.D. Evans, *The Prehistoric*

Antiquities of the Maltese Islands: A Survey, (London. The Athlone Press, 1971), 41-43). But in the absence of any further details, the picture is less clear and reliable than that at Tarxien. No mention of the grey, ashy deposit is made in the Tal-Qadi excavation report carried in *Museum Annual Report* 1927-28, II-III.

13 T. Zammit, *Annual Report of the Valletta Museum: 1916*, (Malta. Government Printing Office, 1917), 1, 3-7 and Evans, 149-151.

14 *Museum Annual Report* 1936-37, VI-IX, and Evans, 173.

15 Author's personal fieldnotes.

16 J. Houel, *Voyage Pittoresque des Isles de Sicile, de Lipari et de Malte*, IV, (Paris. 1787), 79, pl. CCLI b,g,h (bottom).

17 W. O'Brien, 'Megaliths in a mythologised landscape. South-west Ireland in the Iron Age' in Scarre, 158

18 As happened, for example, in Britain (see: Bradley (2002), 131.

19 J.C. Barrett, 'The Mythical Landscapes of the British Iron Age', in W. Ashmore and A. Bernard Knapp, (eds.), *Archaeologies of Landscape: Contemporary Perspectives*, (Oxford. Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1999), 253-254.

20 R. Bradley, *The Passage of Arms*, 2nd edn., (Oxford and Oakville. Oxbow Books, 1998), 130.

21 M. Edmonds, *Ancestral Geographies of the Neolithic: Landscape, monuments and memory*, (London. Routledge, 1999), 141.

22 Bradley, *The Significance of Monuments*,18.

23 Edmonds, 148.

24 Zammit, 5, and Evans, 160-162, pls. 56-58.

25 D. Gheorghiu, 'The Cult of Ancestors in the East European Chalcolithic. A Holographic Approach', in P.F. Biehl and F. Bertemes with H. Meller, (eds.), *The Archaeology of Cult and Religion*, (Budapest. Archaeolingua, 2001), 76-79 (including Figs.1-6).

26 J. Chapman, 'Object Fragmentation in the Neolithic and Copper Age of Southeast Europe' in Biehl and Bertemes with Meller, 90.

27 Gheorghiu, 76-79 (including Figs.1-6).

28 The 'decorative' pattern on our examples generally runs diagonally and, in fewer instances, perpendicularly. However, the wrapping bands could be 'interwoven' both diagonally and perpendicularly.

29 Gheorghiu, 83.

30 Ibid., 76.