

Tradition, time and narrative: Rethinking the Late Neolithic of the Maltese Islands

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This paper reconsiders the Late Neolithic of the Maltese Islands from a broader perspective. It argues that the prevailing narrative centred on passively inherited cultural baggage obscures the dynamic narrative created by the ancient inhabitants. It is argued that a fuller understanding of the period requires an engagement with concepts of time and tradition, which are seen here on multiple scales. This enables a fuller reading of the period, particularly in terms of how people created and redefined time.

Introduction

At a glance, the Late Neolithic of the Maltese Islands can be perceived in terms of large megalithic structures that dominate the physical and conceptual landscape. These structures, frequently termed temples, are highly visible and can give the impression of a linear tradition centred on stone. However, the Late Neolithic is a period constituted of many materials and intersecting elements that in turn are related to a changing society concerned with the creation and maintenance of memory. As a discipline, archaeology makes use of narrative to communicate the past, but it also uncovers past narratives, more specifically their material forms. This paper explores time, tradition and narrative with reference to the period 4100-2500 BC in the Maltese Islands, showing how an established archaeological narrative has sometimes overlooked the Late Neolithic tradition and proposes a re-assessment of these issues.

Tradition

Tradition is not merely the handing down of customs, beliefs etc. It also carries the implication of a long-established, inherited way of thinking or acting.

Tradition implies ancient origins and time and repetition give it legitimacy. The concept of tradition is manifested in archaeology in two main ways. First, as Robb (2008) points out, 'tradition' in archaeology is often used to denote historical continuities in material. Furthermore, he points out that beyond the formal classification the language usage also denotes a group's passively inherited cultural baggage (Robb 2008, 333). Second, tradition in archaeology also denotes how particular problems are approached. In this sense, tradition creates an established narrative based on passively inherited cultural baggage. Consider the broader Neolithic narrative of the Maltese Islands. People arrived from Sicily, carrying with them the established 'Neolithic' package. They settled down c. 5000 BC and reproduced their Sicilian baggage until c. 3600 BC when the narrative shifts to a narrative (and tradition) of uniqueness, centred around large stones (Table 1).

This line of thinking has many implications, but this discussion will focus on the so-called Temple Period. In narrative terms, the entire period is seen as a single tradition, based on perceived continuity of material culture, which in turn is interpreted as evidence for a single Temple Period subjectivity. The archaeological record of this period has been interpreted in two principal stages: a pre-temple stage

Period	Phase	Dates, BC	Main Events	Traditional Narrative	Revised Narrative
Early Neolithic	Ghar Dalam	5000-4500	Initial settlement from Sicily, farming communities.	Received culture Neolithic package, reproduced	Under further investigation.
	Grey Skorba	4500-4400	Village life.		
	Red Skorba	4400-4100	Continuation of village life, communal shrines, clay figurines		
Middle Neolithic	Żebbuġ	4100-3800	Considered start of Temple Period. No temples. Beginning of collective burials.	New (received) culture Focus on ceramics, received technology	First known material expression of extension of life cycle and creation of new narrative.
	Mġarr	3800-3600	Poorly known phase.	'Transitional' phase, people defined solely by ceramics	
Late Neolithic	Ġgantija	3600-3000	Beginning of temple building.	Culture of uniqueness People largely defined by stone	Extension of life cycle becomes increasingly elaborate. Redefinition of time and space. Focus on community and memory.
	Saflieni	3300-3000	Transitional phase, overlapping.		
	Tarxien	3000-2500	Apex and eventual decline of temples. Restriction of areas within temples.		

Table 1: An alternative visualisation of chronology

of the Temple Period and a temple stage. For ease of clarity, this paper will refer to Temple Culture when referring to both stages and the Temple Period when referring to the temple-building stage. The pre-temple stage, divided into the Żebbuġ and Mġarr phases, is considered to mark the arrival of a new population with new traditions, seen via the ceramic repertoire. This paradox is more representative of how time and tradition have been conceptualized, rather than the actual Late Neolithic narrative. The issue is further complicated by the seemingly sudden appearance of the Żebbuġ phase, which is seen as both marking a new tradition and drawing on a Sicilian tradition. This is symptomatic of the problem of how archaeologists explain change and this example illustrates the dilemma posed by the archaeological record. This interpretation of tradition is problematic on another level: it effectively argues that the Żebbuġ people passively inherited a Sicilian tradition and kept passively leaving it as a legacy until the appearance of stone monuments in the Ġgantija phase. Following Robb (2008), this type of argument poses an inherited tradition, in which tradition itself is the structuring principle and people are passive.

The Żebbuġ repertoire indeed marks a departure in terms of form, technique, colour and decoration. Like pottery from the previous phase, it shows distinct

parallels with Sicily, particularly San Cono-Piano Notaro ware from Agrigento. This change underpins debates on the start of the Temple Culture, which often posit a new population (Bonanno 1986; Trump 2004). Explaining this change in terms of a migrating foreign population raises many issues, including the unlikelihood that societies instantly disappear and are immediately and completely replaced by new ones. Explanations which invoke maladies in human and animal populations do not adequately address the issue or explain the ceramic links with Sicily. The paucity of archaeological evidence makes explaining change an even more complex undertaking, especially if one wants to avoid a circular argument that is more focused on a society defined by temples. Fundamentally, however, this approach to tradition views technology as a passive reflection of external factors, thereby reducing people to passive objects. It does not engage with the underlying nature of change or the role of technology vis-à-vis people.

One problem with explanations of change in Maltese prehistory is the focus on a Temple Culture defined by temples where the origins and 'decline' of temple culture are taken as a given (although there tends to be more discussion on the latter). However, it is necessary to understand what is happening between 4100 and 3600 BC. The Żebbuġ and Mġarr

phases are denoted as precursors to temple-building, but one must also consider that there are 500 years of no temple-building. These phases have been traditionally viewed in ceramic terms, overlooking the generations of people who created a world that has been assigned secondary importance in the academic narrative. Rather than focusing on the 'new' external characteristics of an assemblage, the focus should be on technological changes as a means of materializing knowledge and ideas (Lawson 2010).

These issues are currently under further study by the author. The new approach moves away from a traditional typology of ceramic material. At face value, the Żebbuġ repertoire looks different and does indeed have Sicilian parallels. However, an approach based purely on surface characteristics does not address the underlying social and technological processes at play. Rather than equating new pottery types with new people, it is important to understand the underlying issues and also investigate issues like the continued occupation of Skorba during the Żebbuġ phase (Trump 1966). Pottery typologies themselves are thus examined using different techniques, including an examination of the attributes of the repertoire. Broadly speaking, the Żebbuġ repertoire is characterised by incised decoration, closed globular jar forms and a dark and irregularly fired fabric. Technological changes are seen via a new temper (small white grits) and less well-fired clay. Decoration is mostly incised and there are some examples of painted decoration.

The majority of the known assemblages are from the funerary sites of Ta' Trapna ż-Żgħira, Żebbuġ in Malta and the Xagħra Circle in Gozo (Fig. 1). Pottery from both sites has many parallels and clearly belongs to the same tradition. More broadly, both sites show the same emerging focus on collective burial and a consolidated identity. However, there are notable variations. There is more painted pottery in Malta as opposed to Gozo. Conversely, anthropomorphic representation is more prevalent in Gozo. The techniques of pottery decoration, currently under further investigation, follow a series of combination of incised elements. Each element (horizontal, vertical or diagonal lines and arcs) is combined in multiple ways, creating complex patterns. These tend to follow the shape of the vessel. Painted decoration is achieved using red ochre, although the assemblage is small and fragmentary and it is very difficult to reconstruct the schema of decorative elements. The variation in decoration is perhaps not apparent at a glance and to

date it has simply been seen as 'incised lines', without further investigation. However, the new ceramic repertoire needs to be seen in its broader social context, namely the beginnings of an investment in a collective identity. As such, it is reflective of a change in habitus and this is materialized in new ceramic production techniques, new burial techniques and new ways of using materials like stone and bone. In short, the Żebbuġ phase is a time when new knowledge is created.

The appearance of temples in 3600 BC needs to be further investigated within this context. It is worth remembering that temples do not suddenly appear on this date, especially in the form with which the modern scholar and visitor is familiar. Rather, 3600 BC heralds the emergence of temple-building. The temple-building phases of this period demonstrate that the siting of temples and the attendant material culture point to the creation of a Late Neolithic tradition that is structuring but not passive. Gell (1998, 255) argues that the transmission of tradition involves the recapitulation of a collectively held model, prompting Robb (2008) to argue that if we take longevity into account, it follows that, as per Gell we must attribute agency to tradition itself. Late Neolithic Malta illustrates a structuring tradition that endures over a long time. I argue that by the Tarxien phase, that tradition acquires its own form of agency and this is demonstrated within a temple context. Megalithic complexes (temples) were built over a long period of time, with numerous additions and changes in layout. These changes were not merely architectural, they created new experiences of the spaces and wider belief systems. Significant resources, including time, were invested in this endeavour. This kept the community engaged with these spaces and ensured they remained part of the general consciousness. By the Tarxien phase, significantly more emphasis is placed on the tradition of building and maintaining these complexes. Furthermore, areas within these buildings were closed off with the addition of doorways and screens, restricting access to activities carried out within these spaces.

Time

A linear chronological view of the Neolithic has many purposes, but focusing on a linear narrative tradition obscures one of the central questions, namely how



a



b

Figure 1. Żebbuġ phase pottery Żebbuġ phase jars, unknown provenance but typical of the repertoire found at Ta' Trapna ẓ-Żgħira and the Xagħra Circle. Dimensions of (a) are 24 x 21cm and (b) 14.8 x 17cm (Photograph: Daniel Cilia and Heritage Malta).

people constructed time and their worlds. Time in the Late Neolithic was not conceived in linear terms, neither was it an abstract concept. The idea of time was very much rooted in materiality. However, the conventional timeline for the Maltese Neolithic is rooted in a tradition that conceptualizes time in a linear way. This is partly related to ways in which time is constructed in archaeology (see for example Gosden 1994; van der Leeuw & McGlade 1997; Lucas 2008) but it also has repercussions in terms of conceptualizing the timeline of Maltese prehistory. The linearity of time is rooted in a tradition of ceramic repertoires and a received culture from neighbouring Sicily. In this tradition, people and things are separated from each other and ideas of time and memory.

Monumentalized Neolithic landscapes appear across the Atlantic, Baltic, Europe and the Mediterranean. Monumentalization appears at different times, but it is often preceded by non-monumental Neolithic life. This is clearly the case in Malta, and is best seen in the Żebbuġ and Mġarr phases. In Britain, monumentalized landscapes have many associations with the dead (Malone 2001). Specific locales for the living and the dead (temples and hypogea), both associated with monumentality

and megalithism, have been identified on Malta and Gozo. Both British and Maltese megaliths have an element of time and transformation to them and sites, particularly causewayed enclosures, change in appearance over time. After 4000 BC, monumental burial becomes more widespread across Britain and structures are remodelled over time. Parallels are seen in the re-arrangement of space in temples, particularly in the Tarxien phase. Of interest is that the fragmentation of the body is also practised in Britain and 'old' bones are re-deposited in some British sites (Malone 2001), parallels for which are found both at the Saffieni Hypogea and the Xagħra Circle.

One of the paradoxes of the Maltese Neolithic is thus related to the construction of time; relative chronologies rely on objects and stratigraphies but at the same time they obscure the ways in which people constructed time. They also limit discourse on objects, particularly the relationship between people, things and ideas. While relative chronologies usefully illustrate stratigraphic change, they do not adequately address change itself, and how and why it happened. Time and space are created through action and they exist on many different levels (Gosden 1994). Alternatively, a practice-based approach focusing on how people

created and maintained their worlds would enable an understanding of time at multiple scales. Practice shapes and is shaped by habitus. For example, while there is emerging settlement evidence for this period, temples contain many objects created in the everyday domain, in particular ceramics and stone tools. While some ceramics appear to have been created for use in temples, for example the Tarxien phase offering bowls, they were created in the domain of the everyday. The acquisition of clay and its transformation occurred outside the 'ritual' context. Some objects were intended to have longer biographies, for example figuration (Vella Gregory 2016), while objects like stone tools had shorter lifespans.

While Maltese megaliths have been firmly embedded in a temporal dimension, the social dimension remains poorly understood. In particular, on a broader level, acts of practice also shape and define bigger things, in particular the community. In Late Neolithic Malta there is significant investment in actively shaping habitus. A concept put forward by Pierre Bourdieu (1977), it refers to a schema of uniquely internalized dispositions which determine how we perceive and act in the world. The concept is not unproblematic and my approach takes habitus as both structured and structuring in relation to external systems. In material terms, habitus is seen in many ways, including the creation of specific arenas of practice, like temples and tombs, but also in the investment to extend the life cycle and create a society focused on ancestry and memory. In particular, the latter required sustained practice to remain effective and embedded in people's habitus. Consider, for example, the death rituals seen at the Xagħra Circle in Gozo. After death, the body is buried but it is unlikely that burial marked the end point of life. Once the flesh decayed, the living returned to the site and broke up the body into constituent parts, placing them at specific points in the site (Malone & Stoddart 2009). This involved the physical handling of the now decayed body, dismantling the whole and creating a collective pile of body parts, marking the end of the life cycle. Furthermore, this practice emphasized the focus on collective identity, which also endured in death and beyond. These acts required time and direct engagement with the body, at the same time further shaping the habitus of the living. They also made use of specific objects which helped create and maintain the community narrative.



Figure 2. A cache of figurines from the Xagħra Circle, Gozo. The highest figurine stands at 18.5 cm (Photograph: Daniel Cilia and Heritage Malta).

A group of figurines from the Xagħra Circle (Fig. 2) known as the shaman's cache is particularly evocative. Often interpreted in terms of shamanism (an approach not wholly appropriate in this case), these have been connected to rituals of death (Stoddart et al. 1993) and transformation (Stoddart 2002). However, these figurines materialize a rather more complex scenario. Looking at the group, these represent the idea of a person in a very abstract form. Six of these show the head of a person on an angular body. Two have very well-finished faces and the suggestion of clothing on the lower end of the abstract body. A third has less well-defined facial features (but still somewhat detailed) and no suggestion of clothing. Another three also clearly reference the human form but the facial features are less distinct, with one in particular having an almost blurred face. The final three objects are even more curious: two human heads on stumpy non-human bodies and the head of a pig on a stick. These images need to be examined from different perspectives. First, the bodies do not reference an individual human body. Rather, they are an abstract materialization of the idea of a body. Second, these bodies can be moved and reconfigured in multiple ways, creating many performances and narratives. Third, this occurs in a broader context that goes beyond death rituals and ideas of transformation. This group materializes the wider social ethos, one focused on community. The communal aspect of megalithic sites has long been recognized (see for example Pace 1997), although it has often been decoupled from practice. This group of figurines is not merely tied to

death rituals, rather it is an evocative materialization of complex concepts that affected the practice of the living and how they deal with the dead.

By the Tarxien phase, the created tradition of memory and ancestry acquired its own agency and became self-sustaining. Taken together, the Late Neolithic of the Maltese Islands demonstrates a multi-layered view of space comprised of specific siting of temples and the broader landscape context (Grima 2008), the use and meaning of space within temples (Grima 2001) and cosmological space. As Thomas (1999, 2002) has noted, monuments transform space through objects and people create new kinds of relationships with places and material substances. In the case of the Maltese Islands, this also comprised the creation of cosmological space, which transcended time and physical boundaries. Recognition of the latter significantly changes the narrative of the Late Neolithic.

Narrative

To understand the Late Neolithic tradition, it is important to engage with the concept of temple. The Maltese 'temples' are labelled as such purely on the grounds they are not a domestic structure and must therefore be ritual. As a result, figurines found within are often considered deities and discussion is framed in narrow ritual terms. The focus remains on big stones, in the tradition of Renfrew's (1973: 556) view that monuments constitute 'the natural counterparts of other features of society'. This view has cast a dominant shadow on the other features of Neolithic society. Moreover, while Maltese monuments are singled out for their antiquity and poorly defined ritual associations, elsewhere monuments are linked to ancestry and ceremony.

A reconsideration of the narrative should take into account the following points. The first two stages of the Temple Culture, Żebbuġ and Mġarr, are characterized by collectivity on a smaller scale, expressed in smaller hypogea, for example Ta' Trapna ż-Żgħira, Żebbuġ (Baldacchino & Evans 1954). The body is disarticulated and sprinkled extensively with ochre, which also appears on the few surviving examples of imagery. Grave goods tend to be small (pottery, beads), but two small menhirs from Ta' Trapna ż-Żgħira, Żebbuġ, and Xagħra Circle, Gozo (length 18 cm and 16.5 cm respectively) point to complex burial rituals (Vella Gregory 2005). Żebbuġ

phase pottery (currently undergoing further study by the author) is defined by complex incised lines and patterns based on linearity and, to a lesser extent, curves. Red ochre is found on pottery in burials and, more rarely, incised human-like depictions on vessels. These are stick figurines defined by lines and a lack of facial features. While the stone heads have a notion of a face, these faces are also abstract.

The visual narrative before the appearance of temples is characterized by linear-based abstraction and two-dimensionality, but it is already linked to a narrative based on time. Burial rites involved interaction with the dead body long after the point of death, a practice that becomes increasingly elaborate in the subsequent Ġgantija phase. In narrative terms, the first two phases of Temple Culture are linked to the appearance of temples via a set of practices that establish a tradition based on memory and performance. This evolved slowly and it became much more complex and widespread around the same time monumental buildings appeared.

The development of large monuments in the Ġgantija phase (3600-3300 BC) raises questions about their development. The main temple at Ta' Ħaġrat, for example, dates to the Ġgantija phase while the smaller building may be slightly later (Pace 2004). Yet, Ta' Ħaġrat never reached the size of Ġgantija temples in terms of area and architectural complexity. However, the Ġgantija phase does not herald the sudden appearance of large structures. The Ġgantija phase has a 600-year time window, during which time temples evolve and expand. Some temples, such as Ta' Ħaġrat, remained small, others like Ħaġar Qim and Mnajdra reached large and complex proportions. The reasons require further thought (a tentative proposal can be found in Grima 2008).

The narrative should also consider space within temples, which played a crucial role in the performance of social relations. It is not sufficient to view temples as arenas for social relations if these arenas are not examined further, particularly since these performances required space in its various dimensions to be effective. While megaliths (and standard archaeological plans) may make temples appear visually similar, there is in fact no canonical temple layout. There are, however, some important points of commonality, such as larger open spaces that could accommodate a sizeable number of people and smaller apses for smaller gatherings. Doorways and thresholds are important in all temples and demarcate



Figure 3. A group of figurines from Hagar Qim. The height of each figurine is as follows: (a) 21.2 cm (b) 19.4 cm, (c) 23.5 cm, (d) 48.6 cm (Photograph: Daniel Cilia and Heritage Malta).

specific zones (Grima 2001). This suggests that on a broad level, there were commonalities in the types of experiences within temples. Thresholds do not simply demarcate zones. They most likely represent entering and exiting different domains, particularly since they tend to have steps. More broadly, megalithic sites are sited at specific locales in the landscape (Grima 2008), creating a world of multiple, intersecting dimensions that go beyond the physical domain (Helms 1988). Furthermore, the Late Neolithic visual narrative is strongly focused on broader ideas of community and memory (Vella Gregory 2005). Taken together, megalithic sites, the materialization of space and the visual narrative (Vella Gregory 2013) point to an experience (Skeates 2010) of the Late Neolithic defined by a collective identity sustained over many generations.

Conclusions

The crux of the Late Neolithic of the Maltese Islands does not inherently lie in architecturally complex buildings. That part of the narrative belongs in modernity and could be somewhat controversially viewed as an invented tradition (Hobsbawm 1992),

although this is by no means a negative. The central point is that starting in 4100 BC a small island community redefined time, creating complex traditions and narratives in the process. Temples and burial sites should be seen as aggregation sites, arenas for social relations and cohesion. For reasons that may never become clear, this community consciously extended the life cycle and materialized it in numerous ways. The human body was systematically broken down into smaller parts, which were in turn placed together in a mass, in the process removing traces of an individual and placing emphasis on the community. These acts occurred in a landscape designed to remind people of their wider obligations even in the acts of everyday practice. Megalithic architecture was one element of this visual and conceptual landscape, its visibility maintained over many generations.

The visual landscape created a narrative focused on collectivity and ideas of a community whose essence lived on after physical death. The mortuary rituals (Malone *et al.* 2009) required the participation of the broader community, whose engaged acts ensured the continuation of these ideas, ideas which were fundamental to the propagation of the community. The figurine repertoire also places emphasis on ideas of the bigger whole. In the Late Neolithic, people

invested time and resources to create various iterations of the human body. This involved redefining ideas of scale, creating bodies that ranged from the miniature to the monumental (for a full discussion see Vella Gregory 2016). In particular, large and deliberately sexless bodies are visually impactful and direct focus on the whole. Looking at figurines from Haġar Qim (Fig. 3), the viewer's attention is directed to a large body mass. Furthermore, interchangeable heads provided an added element for performance and were used to create multiple narratives, albeit rooted in a central and large body.

Megalithic aggregation sites were thus the locales for the performance of social relations. Temples were also places where space, knowledge and tradition intersected. As actions, performances are linked with agency and are actively involved in social practice. They also affect identity, time and the body (Schechner 2003, 2006). Moreover, performances are entangled with space, and indeed can create space. Extraordinary performances, involving the manipulation of symbols in complex rituals, dramatize the values of a society and facilitate the propagation of ideology over different social groups (DeMarrais *et al.* 1996; Inomata and Coben 2006). This discussion, and scholarship more broadly, has largely focused on these extraordinary performances. However, every day performance is equally important (Hodder 2006) and future contributions on Temple Culture should explore this in more detail.

These aggregation sites had a cosmological domain, a place where knowledge and a complex web of social relations intersected and time was redefined. After the Mgarr phase, the life cycle was extended beyond previously known realms of possibility and slowly the cosmological domain created a new narrative of time that brought together the past, present and future. Above ground, space was partly experienced on the earthly plane, within temples, and via the use of knowledge and material culture, but it existed beyond the physical temple. The domains above and below ground were linked not just spatially, but more specifically in terms of performative acts and material culture. The meaning and power of this knowledge was enhanced via the body. Barth (2002, 3) notes that knowledge contains a 'corpus of substantive assertions and ideas about aspects of the world'. To understand the Late Neolithic narrative, it is thus important to consider time and tradition in terms of knowledge. The creation of a narrative focused

on collective identity and community required the intersectionality of various forms of knowledge. The materialization of space was read in different ways by members of the community. The siting of megalithic sites in specific locales ensured their place in everyday consciousness for everybody. The construction and division of space within these sites, particularly in the Tarxien phase, showed that certain forms of knowledge were restricted to a small section of the community (Stoddart & Malone 2008).

Current research focusing on the everyday domain outside of megalithic sites should further elucidate the question of knowledge in the Late Neolithic. The archaeological record of the Maltese Islands is complex, particularly in prehistory. While a long tradition of study has offered various narratives and data sets, there is a need for further research into Neolithic life. This research needs to be framed in an inclusive narrative that brings together the various strands of evidence, which will ultimately set the agenda for future directions. The central point of the Late Neolithic narrative is therefore not stone, but the ways in which people extended space and time beyond the physical domain.

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