

## **Encounter with the 'Stones'**

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### **Abstract**

Eva-Gesine Wegner is a German sculptress who visits Malta frequently and works mostly in stone, wood and clay. She connects the architecture of the Maltese Neolithic temples with the body of the goddesses' statuettes. Wagner also relates her personal emotions and spirituality with that of the temples. Her sculptures reflect the sense of lineage the artist held as a female and her response to Mother Nature. Most of her works convey the spiritual aspects of fertility, life and death.

Key words: Maltese Prehistoric Temples, stones, Eva-Gesine Wegner, the goddess, sculpture, psychology.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Eva-Gesine Wegner's work is directly inspired by the Maltese Neolithic heritage. This artist first came in contact with the Neolithic temples and artefacts when she came to Malta on her first visit in October 1987. She travelled as a tourist with a group of women interested in the temple culture of the Mediterranean islands. On this first occasion Wegner was impressed by one of the replica statuettes which one finds for sale in souvenir shops around the island. She was so extremely attracted by this small figurine of a Neolithic Maltese goddess that it stimulated and motivated her to start to work in stone. Wegner relates: "The little goddess was a fresh reminder that the time was coming when I should begin to work in stone" (Wegner, 2000). The artist never worked in stone before, because her medium was mainly clay.

### **ENCOUNTER WITH MALTESE PREHISTORIC ART**

This first experience of Eva-Gesine Wegner on the island and her encounters with Maltese Prehistoric art left a great impact not only on her artistic endeavour but also on her emotional aspect. She was seeing great connections between the building and architecture of the temples and the shape of the body of female statues.<sup>1</sup> The artist recalls her first experience inside our temples:

For me it was really wonderful to enter such an ancient place. It touched my heart. It was really unique to build such architecture, like building up a body, a temple. It is like my body, something holy. It was very interesting to see this, because I was the only artist in the group. I came with a group and was the only one interested in this ancient temple, and particularly, in the time when these temples were built. I was the only person that noticed that these temples were used as a holy place, I felt like a priestess.

The words: "It touched my heart" express an emotional connection which could be compared with, for example, an intellectual connection (Rountree, 2001:15). Some Maltese people tend also to make an intellectual connection. The appeal of 'the ancient' could be traced in her statements. Many women relate to temples through the 'body'. The artist (as a woman) links 'her' body to the shape of the temple. Most of the Maltese tend to relate a temple through the 'mind' – a heritage related to the ancient history of

the islands rather than a spiritual heritage (Ibid). Rountree explains that “the great majority of the Maltese more generally rarely sense a *spiritual* link to the pre-Christian period.” But there is a growing number of Maltese artists “who have drawn on the symbolism of the Temple Culture in their work, and several expressed a deep sense of spiritual rootedness in the Maltese landscape of which the temples are an integral part” (16).

Wegner's words: “I felt like a priestess”, and “I was touched” indicate a personal, spiritual identification with the temple sites. During Neolithic times women had a very important role to fulfil. It is very likely that there existed a well-organised culture where women had a leading position, at least in religious matters.<sup>2</sup> Here also the artist is using an emotional language. Visiting the temples had a therapeutic function. It seems clear that the artist seeks a feminine identity with the temples. The feminine identity with the temples and the islands of Malta and Gozo were very important for her. She commented this about the temples and Malta:

Concerning Malta, I was touched coming the first time here; I found my roots as a woman. So at that time I was in difficulty with myself, my personality, I found it difficult to develop as a woman in this culture. Malta and its temples became good help for me to find my own strength, myself as a woman and above all self-confidence.

Wegner traces her roots as a woman. The artist cannot trace a historical, genealogical link, but feels she can trace a spiritual link, one, which is gendered. It is a kind of ‘spiritual’ heritage if not her ethnic heritage (Wegner and Rountree, 2000). Unlike most Maltese people who do not trace a spiritual heritage to temples, due to the fact that Malta was dominated by many countries for hundreds of years. I argue that today's artists are still influenced by the historical situations of the islands. Here, one should see the importance of ‘our’ original roots as a nation and try to identify our ancient, ancestral past, which was totally untouched by foreign interference for centuries.

Her gendered identity traces its heritage to temples, which is a self-consciously constructed heritage. Wegner had a very turbulent past in her life. May be she lacked self-fulfilment as a woman. The problem lies not because she was not able to cope with her career but because she was personally unstable as a character. One may say that she had lost touch with her inner world and therefore she was barely aware of its existence. The temples and their artefacts became symbols that take on a different meaning for the artist and invoked them in personal crisis. For the artist, visiting the temples, working in situ, and producing images and symbols in stone, connected her to the primal past and also became a healing process.

### **Individuation**

Carl Jung's archetypal patterns of the ego, the shadow, the anima and the animus, the persona and the Self, in a psychological process guarantees individual harmony and wholeness for those seriously seeking self-knowledge and well-being. This is what he coined as individuation.<sup>3</sup> The individuation process is aimed at bringing the individual to a state of spiritual maturity and peace with oneself. Wegner succeeded to achieve the Self. She reconciled the personal unconscious and collective contents of the Self with her relationship with the world. She found in Malta her self-realisation.

The most fascinating medium in Malta for the artist is the ‘stone’, which the temples were built with. Wegner believes that ‘stone’ possesses a kind of magical power and energy. She states:

I can say that it was the 'stone' in general that impressed me. I feel more and more that the stones still keep this old energy of a time when there was no war for many thousands of years. So I am looking for this energy how to bring it into my life, into my art, and that this perhaps can influence people to look for the same source.

Here, Wegner is going back in history when life was not dominated by men only. There is a probability, that Malta in prehistoric times was considered as the bulwark of matriarchal life (Gimbutas, 1991).<sup>4</sup> Society was made up of equality of the sexes. This predominance of women was not intended to suppress the male sex, but people dedicated most of their energy to build beautiful temples in honour of their gods. Men trusted in the authority of the women from birth, which was considered a natural thing. Unfortunately matriarchal civilisation vanished around the third millennium before Christ. Aggressive patriarchal tribes put an end to this ideal state of life (Gimbutas, 1999:121,124,129). Men dominated society and women were oppressed and lost their rights. Very few examples of this type of life survived. A good example is the Amazon civilisation. Even the Ancient Greeks witnessed the existence of a Matriarchal past.<sup>5</sup> Eva-Gesine Wegner seeks a personal inspiration from and connection with the temples. She mythologizes a peaceful and multifocal past.<sup>6</sup>

### **Wegner's sculptures**

Her first work in Maltese stone was *The Healing of Medusa* (Fig. EGW-1) executed during her second trip to Malta in July 1988. Wegner acquired a piece of Maltese stone to make her first sculpture. By coincidence this was a decorative piece of stone which was acquired from the original baroque architecture (Fig. EGW-2) of a church in Cottonera, Malta. The Germans bombarded this church during the last World War. This relic in stone was lying in the garden of Wegner's friend, Fortunato Schembri from Birzebbuga in Malta. He gave her the piece of stone to carve it into a sculpture. Wegner describes how she felt when the Maltese man gave her this piece of stone.

There I stood as a German in front of an (as yet) unknown Maltese man and in choosing this particular stone he had struck the blackness of our common past.

Fortunato dispelled my discomfort. He wanted to give me this stone for exactly this reason – as a sign of friendship and peace. What a gift! (Wegner, 1998).

The artist carved a stephanotis fruit on one side and a blossom on the other side of the stone (a stephanotis tree happened to be in the yard where the artist was working).

Wegner saw that the fruit of the stephanotis



Fig. EGW-02



Fig. EGW-03

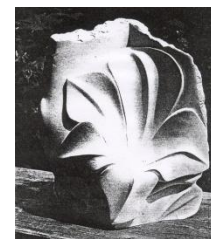


Fig. EGW-01

resembled the shape of the vagina, which symbolizes life. She metaphorically expressed that "I knew then that this stone should be a sign of birth and death and rebirth – the eternal cycle of life." On the other side of the sculpture she carved the flower of the Stephanotis (Fig. EGW-03) and in the middle of the flower, Wegner shaped a small female figure (Fig. EGW-04). While she was working on the details of the body, the

head broke off. She felt very emotional by this incident. She saw that there was a great connection with the Maltese headless goddesses and Camille Claudel's sculpture of the mythological Medusa, beheaded by Perseus<sup>7</sup> Wegner kept contemplating why the headless goddesses of Malta had heads placed on their bodies. Could it be because these goddesses had a different head placed on their bodies according to the season of the year, representing them in human form, that is, a young face, a mature face, and an elderly face?



Fig. EGW-04

These ancient statuettes of fat ladies or goddesses are in fact mostly without a head. In the place where the head is placed one could find two holes where the head normally was attached. Inspired by this thought, the artist worked on a head to be placed on the body of her statuette inside the blossom. For her this was a sacred symbolical ritual, giving back the head to all women who, symbolically speaking, were made headless throughout history. All this is related to the idea that for many years female power was shackled. Wegner also connected this work with the tragic life of Camille Claudel and her work. The Head of the Medusa, which Camille Claudel carved also symbolizes the idea of 'women' who lost their head whether metaphorically or not.

### **The tiny island of Filfla**

Another important work which Eva-Gesine Wegner executed and had a great relation to Malta and the Neolithic temples (Fig. EGW-4) was the work titled *Filfla*. Some years ago the artist had the opportunity to take home to Germany a piece of marble from Carrara in Italy. The shape of this marble was similar to that of the island



Fig. EGW-04

of *Filfla*, the small, uninhabited island which can be seen from the Neolithic temples of *Mnajdra* and *Hagar Qim*. (from the aerial view of the *Filfla* and the temples one could see the form of a perfect triangle). Did this had to do with the original plan of finding an appropriate site where to build the temples? We know that there is something mysterious about these temples and the island of *Filfla* on the southern coast of Malta. It is amazing that during a fine day, from inside the temple, one could see the sunrise and

sunset through the huge vertical slabs of stone. The equinoxes and solstices play a mystical regularity. The alignment with the movements of the sun and the moon was of great importance to the ancient Maltese inhabitants. Eva-Gesine Wegner relates how she came across the poetry by Maltese well-known architect Richard England <sup>8</sup> and was encouraged by him to work on the themes related to the island *Filfla* and the temples. She recalls:

I got some poems of the well-known Maltese architect, artist and poet, Richard England. It was through his help, that I discovered the island of *Filfla*.<sup>9</sup> This particular part of Malta for me was important because the island of *Fifla* and *Mnajdra* temples are close to each other.<sup>10</sup> It is one of the temples that I like most. I had the opportunity to see this small island from these temples many times during the day and at night when it was full moon, and sometimes I stayed there overnight.

Wegner continues:

One day when I was coming to Malta from my home, Frankfurt, I realised that I had a piece of marble in my garden which I brought from Carrara, which was exactly the shape of this island of *Filfla*. So I started to work on this piece of marble and thought to bring it to Malta and show this piece of work and its connections. This was the first piece of marble I worked on.



Fig. EGW-05



Fig. EGW-06

From this piece of marble the artist carved two recognizable shapes, that of a face of a woman with a long neck (Fig. EGW-05) and from her hair an image of a pharaoh emerges (Fig. EGW-06). On the other side of the piece of marble there is the shape of a lion resting on its chest. In her imagination, Eva-Gesine Wegner sees *Filfla* as if it were a lion guarding the temples. Here the artist mythologizes profoundly and sometimes she is lost completely in a primordial dream. This sculpture, *Filfla*, was exhibited at the *Mnajdra* Temple for three days.

## The cactus women

*The Cactus Woman* is another work, which was executed on site, in Malta by Wegner near the Neolithic temples at Borg in-Nadur, in Birzebbuga, Malta (Fig. EGW-07). The

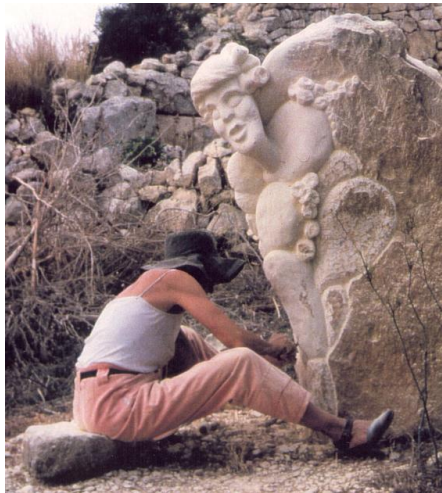


Fig.EGW-07 The artist is working on the figure of the *Cactus Woman*

artist acquired a huge piece of hard limestone and carved a female image mingled with cactus fruit and leaves. Large cactus trees (prickly pear trees) that produce edible fruit are very common around the islands especially in rural areas. The shape of the cactus leaf also has a rocky form and texture. Wegner managed to capture the structure of the monoliths in the nearby fields and transform her stone into an image of an ancient Maltese goddess, which complemented well with the surrounding fields and temple. Unfortunately this work, which was left on site for a permanent period suffered damages by vandalism.

## The head of the Medusa

The theme *Head of Medusa* was repeated many times in the work of Eva-Gesine Wegner. One could say that the artist was obsessed with the 'Medusa' theme. During this particular period Wegner was researching about the life of the French sculptress Camille Claudel. Here there was the possibility for the artist to absorb the thematic approaches of this almost unknown artist who ended up in an asylum because of her unfortunate life. In this particular work Wegner created the classical representation of 'Medusa' with the snakes coming out of a female head (Fig. EGW-8). She also included a female figure, in a sitting posture, embracing the *Head of Medusa* (Fig. EGW-09). Again, here the artist is symbolising the caressing aspect, a sense of protection to femme fatale ideals.



Fig.EGW-08



Fig.EGW-09



### The maternal theme

The maternal and matriarchal themes are also part of her series of works, which she executed not only in Malta but also in her native country Frankfurt, in Germany. After her first travels to Malta, Wegner was still working in clay. At first her work was small and slim but then it changed and became larger, more massive and robust. Bigger bodies of figures were modelled. This is seen in the work: *A Mother* (Fig. EGW-10) which is a bust of a woman carved in Maltese stone (taken to Germany from Malta) This ethereal looking face was also used as one of the illustrations of her published book in German and in French: *Bei den Steinen angekommen / Aux pierres de mon depart*, 1998.

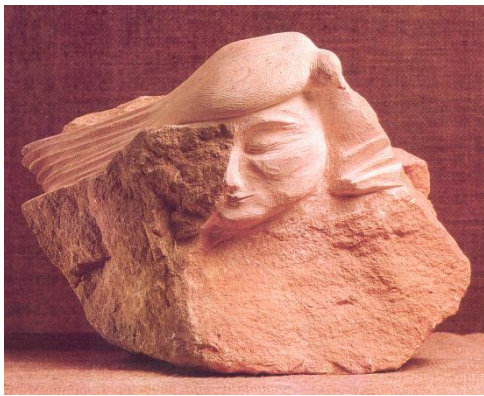


Fig.EGW-10



Fig.EGW-11

The maternal or motherly element in her work is related more to a universal conception rather than to the human or natural sense of maternity. Another work, *Male and female back to back* (Fig. EGW-11) is a rocky textured work in clay expressing the great craving for a type of life that accepts equality of the sexes. The artist believed that once upon a time in Malta there was equality of the sexes and that we lost that feeling after thousands of years. In this work Wegner wanted to show equality of the sexes and also how this type of life could be attained again. I consider also that these two figures represent symbolically the 'anima' and the 'animus', that is, not just equality of sexes but as well the male qualities in the female, and the female qualities in the male. Another female bust in clay modelled by Wegner, represents a primordial type of face with an expression of longing for a new life; a type of life which was lost. This is called *Mother Nature*. Today, many feminist groups and feminist historians concentrate on ancient and pre-historic societies but for certain people this matriarchal society never existed in the distant past.



Fig.EGW-12

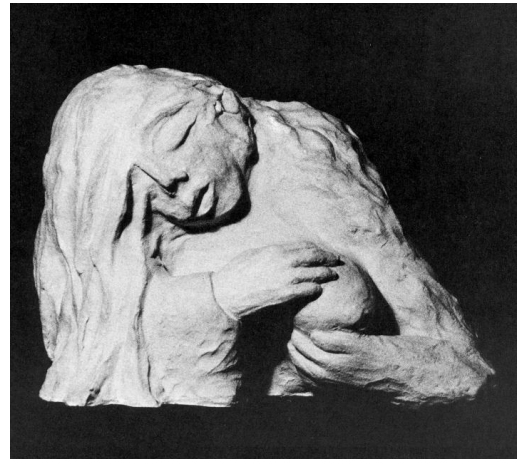


Fig.EGW-13

*The Cycle of Birth and Death* (Fig. EGW-12) is a strong work inspired by the rocks above the *Blue Grotto*<sup>11</sup> at Zurrieq, in Malta. This work symbolizes Mother Earth giving birth to nature<sup>12</sup>. The large breasts and corpulent body suggest the idea of life; the characteristics of the child being released into the world express birth. For the artist, undoubtedly the Neolithic goddesses and fat ladies, represented fertility. *Mother Earth*, is (Fig. EGW-13) represented holding her breasts. It is a very expressive female head. Lactation is evident and this symbolizes the nurturing qualities of the Earth. In very old times people observed that it was the female animals that gave birth and fed their young, so they identified their god as a female source of creation and nourishment. In the native, American Indian and other primitive cultures, people who took all their needs from the earth had a concept of *Mother Nature*.

## CONCLUSION

Eva-Gesine Wegner's sculptures do not just reflect a symbolic connection with the ancient past but they evoke emotion, and certainly the artist is trying to show the observers images that remind us of maternity, the female aspects of birth, life and death, and the cycles or the role of nature in life. For her art is religion. It symbolises the spiritual fulfilment of her inner-being.

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## ENDNOTES

1 Some archaeologists like Marija Gimbutas claim that the shape of our temples have the same shape of the statuettes of the Mother Goddess. *The Civilization of the Goddess*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, U.S.A., p. 262.

2 In various ancient cultures (Old Europe and Old Anatolia) the role of women was mostly ascribed to religious functions, that of priestesses. See Gimbutas, Marija, *The Living Goddesses*, 1999, p. 137,138. See also Veen, Veronica, *The Goddess Of Malta*, 1992, (priestess-hood), p. 51.

3 See Jung, C.G., *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Chapter VI, A study in the process of Individuation, or Franz, M. L., *The Process of Individuation* in Jung, C.G., *Man and His Symbols*, 1964, Chapter 3, pp. 158-229.

4 The meaning of 'Matriarchal' is not always defined, as it should. In simple terms it is a social system in which the dominant authority is held by women (Gimbutas 1991). Another well accepted definition is: A society in which the woman heads the clan or lineage; rules of matrilineal descent.



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5 The most widely known female Mystery is that of Eleusis of ancient Greece. It was instituted by the Goddess Demeter as She awaited the return of her daughter Persephone. The Eleusinian Mysteries lasted for centuries, although they were also taken over and changed by men. This spiritual path was experienced by some of the greatest thinkers of Greek history.

6 Marija Gimbutas author of the *Language of the Goddess*, 1989, has archaeologically documented about Matrifocal culture and the Great Goddess. Matrifocal is preferred to 'Matriarchy'. Such societies were opposite to Patriarchal, that is male dominated societies. Matrifocal societies were egalitarian, non-violent and revered men and women equally. In Matrifocal societies, the Mother of the family is assisted by other women of the household and is the most influential socialising agent and is central in terms of cultural values.

7 Camille Claudel was one of the students of the famous French sculptor, August Rodin. she later became his assistant and lover. Claudel was not only of great inspiration to Rodin but equalled him in her work. After her split from him she ended in an asylum at Montdevergues. Her tragic life story and great artistic talent is found in the famous book by Paris, Reine-Marie, *Lady of the Camille, Camille: The Life of Camille Claudel*, 1984, Arcade.

8 Prof. Richard England is a leading Maltese architect-artist. His works are found in Malta and in many foreign countries. He has an international reputation.

9 The island of *Filfla*: It is a very small island at the SW of Malta. An abandoned island, which was used for target practice by the British Forces after World War II.

10 *Mnajdra* is the second Neolithic temple close to *Hagar Qim* in the area of Zurrieq.

11 The famous Blue Grotto is one of the island's show places, and no visitor to Malta should fail to take a boat trip to this fascinating cavern in the cliffs, with its miraculously blue water. It is found on the side cliffs in the sea at *Wied iz-Zurrieq*, a fishing creek, in the vicinity of *Hagar Qim* and *Mnajdra* temples.

12 The Greek poet Hesiod writing around 700 BCE names the "deep-breasted Earth" Gaea, who emerges out of Chaos. Subsequently, classical authors such as Lucian made occasional references to a Mother Goddess who was equated with the Earth, and who Plato and Sophocles maintained was one of the oldest of the deities.

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