

MALTA - A TOURISM DESTINATION TO THE LAND OF THE GODDESS

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ABSTRACT: Malta, a small island in the middle of the Mediterranean is extremely rich in its Prehistoric archaeological heritage. Many tourists who visit Malta from all over the world are fascinated by the Prehistoric Temples and their artefacts. This paper shows the ways in which contemporary archaeologists, writers, and artists interpret Neolithic symbolism, particularly the images of Neolithic Goddesses found in various temples on the islands. The well preserved state of the Maltese Temples and their artefacts and their beauty, still attract pilgrims coming from all over the world to visit the Maltese Neolithic Temples – the places for ancient Goddess worship. The description and some interpretation of the temples and Goddess statues and statuettes shed light on the hypothesis that the Goddess representation was a strong symbol of a fertility cult which existed on the islands thousands of years ago. The Prehistoric Goddess remains an important figure of cultural tourism in Malta..

Key words: Cultural Tourism, the Maltese Prehistoric Goddess, Fertility Cult, Feminist Movement.

In recent years interest in Maltese Prehistoric temples and artefacts increased markedly. People in Malta are becoming more conscious about their origins and more awareness about the conservation of the temples is also noticeable. The importance of Prehistoric art lies in its power to reveal the social context of the life of the early inhabitants of the Maltese Islands. The growth of this interest involved not only archaeologists and historians, but also artists. Many tourists from all over the world come to Malta to visit the prehistoric temples and their extraordinary statues and statuettes.

One can say that during these last two decades, there has been an increase of pilgrims coming from all over the world to visit the Maltese Neolithic Temples – the places for ancient Goddess worship. This includes not just regular tourists but also a good number of artists and scholars. We know that there are also groups of American women involved in the ‘Goddess movement’ who make these pilgrimages to Malta. Here I want to make it clear that not just American women are interested in these visits to the land of the Mother Goddess but also men and women coming from other countries. As social anthropologist Kathryn Rountree puts it:

Malta’s reputation in the Goddess movement draws sizeable numbers, although not droves, of women pilgrims from many other countries each year. Some visit as independent tourists, while others join tours organised by a number of operators based mostly outside Malta.

Linda Eneix is another American writer-artist who frequently visits Malta to organize conferences, seminars

and Goddess-tours. She is greatly influenced by Maltese prehistoric culture, which is evident in her paintings and written work. For her the figures of “ancient goddesses” are so inspiring. They have a kind of “fullness and touchability” (Eneix, 2002). When asked about the way she sees the re-emergence of the Mother Goddess in our times she comments:

“Mother Earth”, “Mother Nature” -- these are terms that came from somewhere. They are remnants, which survived, because they were used with tongue in cheek, like “Father Time” or “Daddy Long Legs”. People these days get excited if you talk about a Goddess. It is pretty clear in the Bible that there were thousands of years and a lot of bloodshed involved in stamping out the Canaanite and Pagan concepts of any lusty female divinities. But we don’t have to attest to a belief system to acknowledge that it once existed. Not only in Malta but also all over the world in Neolithic times, it is well documented that women had a much larger role in the pantheons of power. It’s found to some extent in every society, which lives close to the earth, and where people are more relaxed about sexuality.

With these words by Linda Eneix, it is easily argued that feminists come out with strong statements like this to show the world that the reasons why there is an increased interest in ancient goddesses could be various. Primarily goddesses ‘call’ all those who are dissatisfied with mainstream religions, political institutions and all male-centred cultures because many feminists find that institutionalised religions are dissatisfying because of the missing female element.

The Goddess movement left a great influence on many artists, particularly on female artists who used the imagery of Goddesses to create a spiritual awareness especially amongst women. As we have already seen this spirituality is based on Earth based traditions. Willow La Monte described the Goddess religion not a religion based on faith but on experience. She claims "One doesn't say one believes in the goddess when one experiences the goddess or goddess energy." (Lagana, 2001). La Monte used the title of her newspaper '*Goddessing Regenerated*' as an "idea of deity or goddess as a verb not as a noun, as personality but also as energy, as motion, as movement." (ibid). Artists experience this energy and it is translated into art or Literature. La Monte pointed out

Just as poet Robert Graves has felt that the moon goddess was his muse, so many artists in many countries, both visual arts as well as literary arts, are heavily inspired by the imagery. There is just an enormous outpouring of creativity right now around the world based on these cycles and these goddess images (ibid).

La Monte mentions Robert Graves here because he was a leader in the promotion of the Prehistoric goddess in Old Europe. He is considered as one of the most prolific British writers, but he mainly considered himself more as a poet. Perhaps his most popular book is *The White Goddess*, first published in 1948. Graves explored the ancient European deities through the study of myth and psychology. *The White Goddess* was considered to be the goddess of Birth, Love and Death. Certain Feminists within the Goddess movement considered his work as an uncompromising, advocated and momentous way for Goddess-centred spirituality. Artists, writers, poets and musicians get not only inspired by ancient goddesses but they become so much involved in the reconstruction of ancient myths, religions and spirituality.

It is important now to give a general brief account and interpretation of the major temples in Malta and their artefacts which are of great interest to many tourists who purposely come to visit these ancient shrines.

One of the most spectacular Neolithic monuments on the island is undoubtedly the underground, labyrinthine sanctuary known as *Hypogeum* or also known as *Hal Saflieni* (part of the village known as Paola) temple. This extraordinary structure, both used as temple and burial place was cut into the soft rock. With the archaeological finds in this temple a remarkable statuette was found. This is the world famous '*Dreamer of Malta*' or better known as the '*Sleeping Lady*'. This prehistoric masterpiece, made in terracotta is a reclining figure no more than 12 cm. in length, ample-hipped and topless with the lower part of her hips covered with a pleated skirt, which is held around her waist with a belt. Her head rests on some sort of a pillow and the bed she is lying on is sustained by four long strips of wood held together by two others which transverse them. She is resting on her

side, with one arm under her head and which suggests that she is clearly asleep, visibly dreaming. This statuette is considered by many to represent the rite of incubation. Another similar statuette was found in the same place, this time the figure is lying face down on a four-legged couch with raised arms on either side of the head. Again this figure is wearing a pleated skirt and a belt. These figures suggest two popular hypotheses: The idea that some kinds of ceremonies of dream incubation or rituals of healing (Gimbutas, 1991) took place in the shrine. Other related explanations are that these were votive offerings to the deity of the temple or used as a symbol when the burial of the dead was taking place. Both statuettes had traces of red ochre colouring. Another two small alabaster standing figures, partly damaged, and were also excavated from this site. The postures of these standing figures are very similar to those on figures found on a larger scale at *Hagar Qim*. I will refer to other interesting figurine fragments found in the *Hypogeum* later on when I discuss the aesthetic aspect of these statuettes.

Hagar Qim temples, (situated in the limits of Zurrieq) are the best known for its stone statuary. The numerous so called 'cult statuettes', however, are something of a mystery. We see them both standing and in comfortably seated postures and also in other various positions. Although headless, many are equipped with a socket between the shoulders, with tiny holes for attaching cordage. Many were found with separate heads nearby, others are more likely to have had their heads made of other material such as wood (which explains their disappearance). They might have been created to be used in some sort of oracle rituals. The particular locations, in which they were found at *Hagar Qim* temples, probably point to ritual use. Cristina Biaggi explained this in her paper delivered at the Malta Conference in 1985.

The moveable heads could have been made to move in ritual to assent or dissent a particular request made by a worshipper. Their differences show that they represented different numinous aspects of the Goddess: the clothed figures are often seated on a stool decorated with sacred symbols, wear a bell shaped skirt, and are shown with much smaller figures crowding below; while the nude figures stand or squat and are always alone (Biaggi, 1986).

All statuettes have corpulent bodies. The most popular one is the standing one which is approximately 49 cm high and with a very stylised posture: the right hand arm is straight and attached to the right thigh and the left one bent with the palm of the hand placed in the middle of the stomach. The rounded shape of the figure with grossly plump flesh in the arms, thighs and egg-shaped buttocks may indicate that this figure could have been a woman, although there is no clear definition of female breasts and vulva (Biaggi, 1986). Surely it is not a male

because no trace of male genitalia is visible. This statuette is standing on a rectangular low pedestal. Two other seated, obese stone statuettes at *Hagar Qim* aroused more debates on the gender issue of these figures (Veen, 1992). Looking at a glance at these figures one quickly realises that the flow of the line of these corpulent bodies makes them look more female than male. Again, the breasts are small but the anatomical structure from the torso to the buttocks shows curves that evoke more the female rather than the male form. But certain archaeologists (Trump, 1983) hold that these figures are genderless, or androgynous. Later on I will continue to show both sides of the discussion on the gender of the many figurines found in Maltese temples. This is important because it will give some light on the hypothesis that a Mother Goddess existed in Malta, and that these discussions could reveal that the early inhabitants of these islands venerated such a deity. One of the most renowned small figurines found at *Hagar Qim* is the famous 'Venus of Malta', a nude female figure, which is made of terracotta with very precise anatomical details but headless. The probability is that its head was destroyed. This figurine is only a few centimetres high and the large breasts that dominate her body express the nurturing qualities of the female.

In *Tarxien* temples, one of the most beautifully decorated temples, one may come across a very popular, interesting, impressive colossal statue of the so-called 'Fat Lady', also referred to as the 'Fertility Goddess'. This idol is wearing a pleated skirt and has tiny feet compared to the rest of her body. Unfortunately, only the lowest part of this statue survived. In other various parts of the temple site other similar statuettes were found. The majority of these figures seem to show the image of the so-called 'fat ladies', their shape very identical with other statues found in other temple sites. Other statuettes seem to be sexless as no part of their genitals is clearly visible but others are without doubt females. A particular small clay statuette (6.6cm.) which looks slightly grotesque, is a female figure, showing the crucial moment of birth, and expressing a sense of gesture, with one hand touching the head, (with a broken raised leg), and suggesting that the person is in labour pain. The lines incised across the back might have represented the months of gestation. Another colossal fragment of a stone statue is the lowest part of a 'goddess' with a pleated skirt and robust legs. On the base of the pedestal one could see also images of other small figures. Some parts of a genderless figure, hypothetically regarded as a 'temple-priest', were also found at *Tarxien* temples (Trump, 1961). Archaeologist Michael Ridley considers this statuette as a priestess. (Ridley, 1986). A detail that survived of this small statuette is the face and fine rendering of the hair in the form of a wig (Zammit, 1986). The figure also is wearing a long pleated skirt covering both feet. Unfortunately there is nothing to

suggest the gender of this representation of the figure. A good number of stone and clay heads were also found in this temple.

Another similar sculpture in stone, like the one found at *Tarxien* was discovered in 1964 by a group of Italian archaeologists at *Tas-Silg* temples near Marsaxlokk. The figure is wearing a skirt and stands on small hefty feet. It stands on a low plinth with decorated spirals on the front part. Unfortunately this 1.14-meter statue is heavily damaged on the upper part, so it is impossible to identify its gender.

When we come to analyse other statuettes from other temple sites in Malta one must not leave out one of the earliest human representations so far recorded in the Maltese islands a much stylised figurine found at *Skorba*. This Palaeolithic form of statuette (which resembles the Cycladic and Danubian figurines) is wearing a triangular mask with a nose indicated and a dot for a mouth. Although anatomically peculiar, the figure is surely a female because the breasts and the deeply incised vulva are evident. This statuette is one of the oldest found in Malta, from the 5th Millennium B.C. (Gimbutas, 1989). Characteristics show a certain type of concern for fertility. Marija Gimbutas suggested that this statuette represented the "Bird Goddess." 'Statue men-hirs' were also found at *Zebbug*. These tend to be more of an abstract reflection of the human figure.

Finally we come to discuss the most recent and remarkable finds of various figurines and statuettes found during this last decade. These were found at the *Xaghra Stone Circle*, also known as the *Gozo Stone Circle* or the *Xaghra Brochtorff Circle* (Fig. 08), which was used as a burial site, and is about 500 metres away from the *Ggantija* temples. The re-excavation of this site (first excavated in 1820 by James Somerville and Otto Bayer) was started by an Anglo-Maltese team of archaeologists in June 1987 and concluded around the summer of 1994. A great amount of pottery and figurines were found on this site and this enriched the artistic Neolithic heritage of the Maltese islands. According to Malone:

Earlier excavations discovered about one hundred figurine fragments from temples and the Hypogeum. The *Xaghra Brochtorff Circle* work has increased the sample by a third, with seventeen near-complete terracotta figurines, eighteen fragments and heads; a snail seated stone figure, a larger seated pair on a bed, six stick figures and three other stone images (Malone, 1998).

These anthropomorphic figures brought new debates on the gender, use, and meaning of the images. I wish to analyse first the extraordinary 'Double Goddess' or 'Twin Fat Ladies'. It was found in the summer of 1991. It is a rather small statue about 9 cm by 14 cm. Both figures are seated on a couch with one of the figures holding a tiny figure on the lap and the other one a pot. Again, like temple statuettes from other sites, the figures are

dressed up with pleated skirts and their small feet are resting on some sort of a pedestal decorated with spiral motifs. Unfortunately one of the figures' head is missing and the other has a very interesting elaborate hairstyle. Traces of red ochre are also evident on the lower part of the twin figures. This statue was located in one of the apses of the burial complex. Here again archaeologists call these figures asexual (Malone, 1998) but others maintain that they are females. Another group of statuettes, considered as very peculiar works of art for that period, were found at the *Xaghra Stone Circle*, a cache of nine figures (Fig. 24) associated with the burial cave. These are called the '*Shaman's Bundle*'. Six of the figures are approximately of the same size, without arms and legs; they are flat with no indication of anatomy, very stylised as well as idealised. Their heads are finely carved. Two of the figures have ornate hairstyles, while the others show less detail in their general appearance. Again two of the figures wear the recurring pleated skirt. The smaller figures look as if they represent children. A head of an animal, probably a domesticated animal, a dog also makes part of the group. These figurines give the impression that they were used to be handheld or supported on sticks for ritual purposes, suggesting the use of a shamanic ceremonial performance during the burial (Malone, 1996). Contrasted with this group of nine statuettes, other rotund figurines were excavated in the same area of the *Xaghra Stone Circle*. One of them is a fine small-seated figure about 7 cm high with a very mysterious expression. In my opinion this is one of the best examples of a Neolithic statuette expressing abundance, and the nurturing qualities of the human being. Unfortunately no clear indication of sex is present in this artefact, as well as in three other examples of seated figurines with large buttocks found in this burial shrine. The remains of the largest sculpture, part of this burial site and were probably a one meter in height statue were found scattered in this area. When the image is reconstructed a corpulent anthropomorphic figure with closed arms and pleated skirt appears.

When analysing all these figurines and statuettes together, coming from various temple and burial sites in Malta and Gozo, one recognises an analogy amongst many: the corpulent bodies with pleated skirts, headless, egg-shaped buttocks and fleshy legs. These common characteristics are observed on many statuettes. Another thing I want to point out is that there must have been a relation between the statuettes and the temples. One cannot look at these artefacts independently of the sites at which they were found. There is an interrelationship between the megalithic buildings and the figurative representations, as well as the ritual practices of the Neolithic inhabitants of the islands. It seems reasonable to assume that these figurines or statuettes had a ritual function (Evans, 1959) and many are of the opinion that 'fertility cults' appeared to be an

important aspect of Neolithic culture in Malta. The apparent strong development of this cult in the later Temple Period has been interpreted as an increased effort at appeasing the Fertility deity (Savona Ventura, 1999). So we see that some kind of symbolism associated with fertility was present in these temples and this was undoubtedly expressed in figurative form. Fertility ritual practices were in fact part of the religious custom of the Temple people. Veteran, British archaeologist John Evans, in a short paper published in 1996, suggested that a relationship exists between the function of the temples and human representation. He also accepted the hypothesis that the early Maltese inhabitants venerated some kind of divinity and referred to the colossal statue and the subordinate figures found at *Tarxien* temples (Evans, 1996).

The prehistoric peoples in Malta were preoccupied with the propagation of life. They were very much concerned with survival and very conscious of the cyclical process of reproduction of their crops and stock, and of their own species. It appears that they possibly developed this fertility cult in an effort to promote and encourage the reproductive cycle. Worshipping such figurative representations may have been part of their daily observance. One can say that most megalithic temples have been associated with a progressive Fertility Cult, on the basis that the clay statuettes and symbols were associated with the fertility deity, which have been found in the various temples and tombs. Fertility appeared to have been the centre of the culture of the Neolithic.

As we can see from the description and interpretation of the various statues and statuettes found in temples, Malta is a unique place as a destination for tourists because of its prehistoric heritage. These World heritage megalithic temples attract thousands of tourists each year. The development of heritage tourism in Malta allows for further regeneration and continues to maintain "the principles of sustainable cultural tourism, while at the same time urging the introduction of necessary controls to protect individual cultural heritage sites." (The Malta Declaration on Cultural Tourism, 2006)

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