

# THE SUBTERRANEAN SANCTUARY AT HAL SAFLIENI

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*Place is space with meaning ... To understand a place one must know its memories*

(Richard England 1987)

## **Introduction**

The Hypogeum at Hal Saflieni is a unique structure on planet Earth; it is the only known megalithic monument which has been carved underground, and no parallels can be drawn with similar structures elsewhere. It not merely testifies to the precocious civilization of the Neolithic Maltese, but is a surviving model of the several Maltese megalithic structures above ground. Unlike the open stone circles outside the Maltese islands, such as Stonehenge, the Maltese megalithic repertoire is characterized by a massive enclosure housing a sanctuary; unlike the megalithic tombs enclosed and buried in supporting soil, the Maltese structures are entirely self-supporting and stand freely, without the surrounding matrix required elsewhere. They are therefore rightly classed as the earliest temples on the planet.

The Hypogeum comprises a labyrinth of caves and corridors with niches distributed over three different levels. The upper level is the most ancient; its walls are rough, and it is not possible to determine which portions of it are natural and which are cultural. It is located in an area known as Tal-Gherien, literally 'of the caves' (Zammit 1926: 5); crude caves lie near the entrance to the Hypogeum. The monument is hewn out of the soft globigerina, the ideal limestone medium which is both dissolved naturally through water action and is also readily worked by human hand. Like all other natural caves and fissures, it had been initialised through the agencies of nature, but was subsequently adapted by Stone Age man on an extensive scale over several centuries (Zammit 1926: 59). The technique of chamber formation becomes more refined as one descends down the storeys.

According to Zammit, "it is most probable that this underground monument was originally dug out by a religious community to serve the purpose of a Sanctuary in honour of a divine power they worshipped and in which devotees were able to consult an oracle under the direction of a numerous priesthood, who among other things practiced oneiromancy, that is they interpreted dreams provoked in the faithful that slept in cubicles still to be seen in the Hypogeum ... The hypogeum served also very probably for the training of the priests and for the initiation of the neophytes in the complicated magical rites. When the sanctuary, in the course of time, proved to be less attractive or unsuitable, the mysterious caves, that had acquired fame as a holy temple, were considered by the devout population to be a fitting ground for the burial of their dead" (Zammit 1935: 57-8).

An architectural assessment today reveals that "these were a people who searched with a sense of purpose and dedication, with a knowledge and awareness in tune with the totality of darkness and light. Theirs was a language of the amalgamation of science and art ... The cyclic time factor of the life-death-rebirth pattern is reflected in these peoples' obsession with the mystic spiral pattern ... To think of the orbicular womb-like spaces of the Hypogeum and the mystery that lies hidden within them is sufficient to entice the curiosity of all who have the ecstasy of human transcendental knowledge close to their hearts" (England 1980: 43).

"Symbolically the Hypogeum at Hal Saflieni represents a labyrinthine womb, and it is most unlikely that the early Maltese were not conscious of this symbolism" (Ferguson 1985: 156, 158).

## **Discovery**

The Hal Saflieni Hypogeum was first reported to the Museum authorities in 1903; according to Bartolo, it had been

discovered four years earlier, in 1899 (Bartolo 1915: 17). A number of buildings were constructed above the site at the time, and have since caused leakage problems and damage to the monument.

Although the Hypogeum was officially discovered in 1903 by workmen digging at the site, it must have been known to the Knights, for a coin of the period (1741-1773) was found on the upper part of the surface material. A French cannon ball was also picked up from this same material matrix (Zammit 1926: 6).

The *Malta Mail* of 11 October 1844 refers to the “discovery of some ancient catacombs recently made at Tarshien. It was not, however, pursued but the aperture was immediately closed until H.E. the Governor [Sir Patrick Stuart] had been informed of it, and it is supposed he will himself pay a visit to the spot before any excavation be persevered in” (Zammit 1925: 5).

The discovery of the Hypogeum coincided with that of Knossos in Crete by Arthur Evans. The latter had subsequently extrapolated on his own discovery by identifying Crete as the cradle of civilization in Europe and the Mediterranean. But Knossos was a Bronze Age civilization, whilst that of Hal Saflieni was a Neolithic one (Mayr 1908), and was therefore clearly an earlier civilization than Knossos.

### ***Megalithic entrance and ancient deposit***

The Hypogeum was originally entered through a megalithic assembly, today facing Hal-Saflieni Street. Underneath the floor of one of the houses erected just above the Hypogeum, and extending for a distance towards the north-west, several megalithic blocks which constituted this structure just in front of the entrance have been preserved *in situ*; some of these blocks were still standing when discovered (Zammit 1910: 6). Around these megalithic stones next to the Hypogeum entrance lay an ancient *undisturbed* deposit, of the same context and nature as that present throughout the Hypogeum labyrinth itself. This deposit comprised a homogeneous admixture of human bones,

beads, pendants, and prehistoric pottery. In contrast to the alluvial nature of this ancient deposit, rock-cut tombs still containing human skeletons were recorded by Zammit, lying at a distance of a few metres away from the Hypogeum entrance (M.A.R 1909-10: E2-3; Zammit 1910: 32) [Figure 1].

*“The top of the hill, in which the Hypogeum is cut, was, to a great extent, covered with megalithic buildings not unlike those now standing on Cordin Hill. ... Remains of large slabs of stone were found in situ, so arranged as to form chambers and enclosures. ... Human bones were found in considerable quantities among the material which filled the space between the standing pillars and slabs at the entrance to the Hypogeum. In this material ... old pottery, beads, stone pendants like those met with in the caves”* (Annual Report 1909-10: ii).



*The Jesuit father Emanuel Magri*

### ***The excavation***

In November of 1903 the Committee of Management of the Valletta Museum appointed one of its members, the Jesuit Father Emanuel Magri, to supervise the exploration and excavation of the monument (Zammit 1910: 4-5). Fr. Magri was involved for five years (1903-7) in the laborious process, but his notes disappeared with his sudden death in Sfax; efforts to retrieve them have been consistently unsuccessful (Zammit 1910: 5; 1926: 7).

The Hypogeum was initially cleared of all the material and deposit which had

accumulated inside it, and four sets of caves and galleries were identified. No metal implements were discovered; the tools used included stone, horn and antler. The finds comprised flint and other stone tools, alabaster, clay and stone statuettes, personal ornaments, animal bones and seashells. There were no signs of actual human habitation inside the Hypogeum (Zammit 1926: 59-63).

Some chambers were smoothed off nicely, whilst others were not. The latter were those which bore the decorations; the Holy of Holies manifested the best workmanship in carving (Zammit 1910: 15). Art forms prevailed in the two lowermost storeys. In Room 17, painted discs averaging 0.25 m. appear on the walls in groups of three, whilst Room 18 bears three discs in red paint and an elaborately painted ceiling in red; these comprise large red discs intermingled with loose spirals joined by lines. Close to Room 17 lies a large hall, chamber 20, which contains painted patterns and carvings; it is painted red all over and an elaborate pattern of red, branched and angular spirals and volutes adorns the ceiling. Room 24 is a large hall which is also elaborately carved and painted. It too is painted in red, and bears a scroll of patterns which are more evident in subdued light conditions (Zammit 1910: 20).

Some form of illumination must have assisted the craftsmen as they carved out the Hypogeum and designed the various art forms on its walls. The majority of the sherds and vases retrieved from the Hypogeum deposit suggests evidence of lamps; these were neither domestic nor funerary, but were best adapted to have served the function of lamps (Zammit 1910: 33-4).

### **Zammit 1907**

After Magri's demise, the Director of Museums, T. Zammit, was entrusted with the continuation of the excavations. These included the lowermost storey and the area north of the platform leading to the original entrance. After two individual reports by Zammit and Tagliaferro in 1910, excavations continued for another year, with the area around the original

entrance being excavated last. These last phases of the excavation were reported in the Reports of the Museum of Archaeology (M.A.R.) for 1909-10.

In this report Zammit clearly laid out the nature of the ancient deposit inside the Hypogeum labyrinth. This ancient deposit was comprised essentially of red earth, the same matrix surrounding the megaliths at the entrance, and which had been washed down into the chambers of the Hypogeum. In this red earth deposit, which averaged one metre in height, a homogeneous motley of human remains, implements and Neolithic pottery were to be found.

In certain parts of the Hypogeum recent material covered the red earth deposit, and this material was mainly the work of the builders who were developing the area at the turn of the century.

The early Hypogeum photograph below clearly shows the large amount of ancient deposit which filled the Hypogeum cavities. Several sieves and a skull are visible on the surface of red earth.



*A chamber with the ancient deposit*

Zammit differentiated quite clearly between the *material* and the ancient *deposit*, and it is necessary to quote at length in order to contrast the content with its subsequent misinterpretation by Evans (1971: 57-9). "In the upper stories, modern material was found, mostly thrown in quite recent times; some of the material, however, was undoubtedly over a century old as not far from the original entrance a coin of Grand Master Pinto (1741-1773) was found very near the surface. The modern material was easily recognized and of no interest whatever. Under this, a dark compact deposit was

found which showed nowhere signs of having been disturbed. In this old deposit no stratification was observed and in caves which were cleared inch by inch, the deposit was always of the same type and contained objects of the same quality. The deposit of the large caves, about a metre in depth, was made of red earth one finds in our fields and in this, bones and potsherds were intimately mixed. This deposit was wanting in the series of caves which were elaborately cut and finished, and in the small caves in the lower storey" (Zammit 1910: 34).

hands were in anatomical position ... this work involved a great deal of attention and could not be left in the hands of hired workmen." The assistance in the excavation by the Rev. A.W. Dawes C.F, and medical students E. Vella, P. Xuereb and F. Borg is acknowledged (Annual Report 1909-10: iii). In the alluvial deposit of the Hypogeum itself, "human bones were found in great numbers, but not one skeleton could be made out to have been whole and regularly laid out for burial. In the new caves as well as in those cleared the years before, the impression one gets

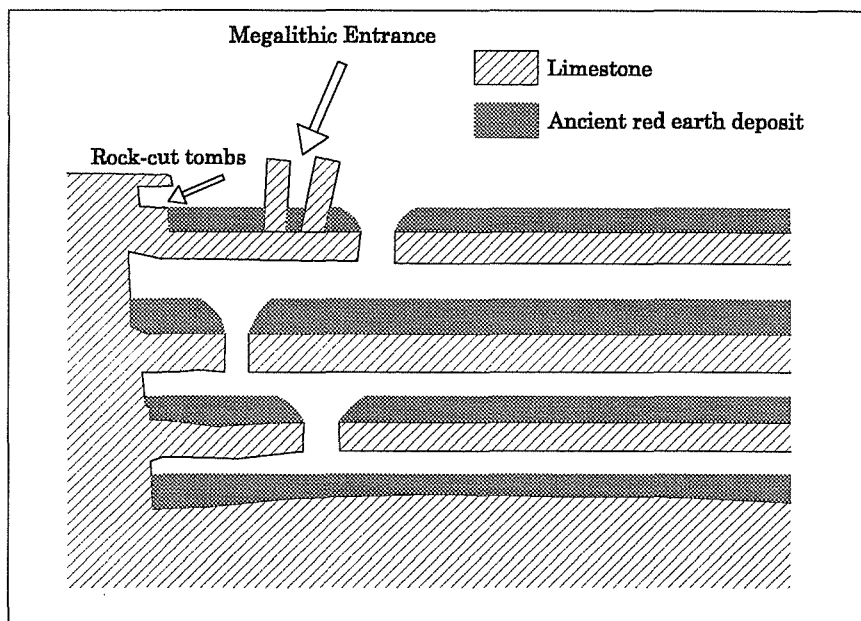


Figure 1: Schematic diagram of the distribution of the ancient red earth deposit throughout the Hypogeum

Bones and skulls were thoroughly mixed up in the deposit; and the one complete skeleton which was reported by Zammit in the red soil was neither buried in a trench, nor was it associated with flints or sherds; no mention of a ritual burial is made by Zammit. It lay on its *right* side, whereas ritual burials in the late Neolithic, such as those represented at Burmeghez, lay on their *left* (Zammit 1910: 37, 42; Tagliaferro 1911).

"Further investigations proved also that the burial of whole bodies was an exception, and not the common form of disposing of the dead ... limbs were not as a rule disjointed and the bones of feet and

from the distribution of the bones is that they were thrown in a haphazard way" (Annual Report 1908-9: iv).

Zammit therefore considered the Hypogeum as primarily a Neolithic sanctuary which was later converted into an ossuary (Zammit 1926: 62).

"The innermost part of the Hypogeum was destined for some kind of worship, another part of it was surely used to bury the dead ... the human bones found disjointed and confusedly massed might also point to the custom, prevalent in Neolithic ages, of scraping the dead bodies off their soft parts, before their final burial ... the

contents of the deposit point rather to a burial place in which the bodies were laid or heaped mostly as skeletons. Very few bodies were found lying in a natural position and no special arrangements such as trenches, sepulchres, stone enclosures etc. were met with, anywhere, intended to receive a body ... not a single one [skeleton] was found lying with bones in position." One significant calculation by Zammit on the contents of the ancient deposit was that "at least 120 skeletons were buried in a space of 3.17 by 1.2 by 1m. This is enough to show that a regular interment was out of the question as not more than 12 bodies could be laid in such a limited space." (Zammit 1910: 33, 34, 35, 36, 37).

Other evidence for the alluvial nature of the deposit can be adduced from other observations made by Zammit, that "fragments of sherds in parts of the Hypogeum fitted other fragments deposited in other caves far away" (Zammit 1910: 37). "Nearly all the caves, passages and chambers contained old deposit varying from a few centimetres to over one metre deep" (Zammit 1910: 34). "No difference whatever could be observed between the different strata of the deposit, and the same quality of sherds were found at the surface, at the bottom and in the space between" (Zammit 1910: 37). Slingstones were found neatly arranged at the Hypogeum entrance, and also in the deposit inside the labyrinth (Zammit 1910: 39).

"When all the red soil with its contents were removed from the caves and the passages, it was observed that the hypogeum ... had more the appearance of a sanctuary than of anything else. A large hall, where people must have assembled, an elaborate chapel in which holy rites were celebrated, an oracular room, tiny cubicles in which devotees could have slept in expectation of inspired dreams, are all features specially adapted for a place of worship and for the initiation of the young priests who had to learn the magical ceremonies and the sorceries of a primitive religion ... It is obvious that the people who made it excelled in the craft of stone-cutting and building; and as the art of a people is an index of its culture, it is safe to surmise that, in the Stone Age, the

inhabitants of these islands had reached a degree of civilization not met with at that time in any of the islands of the Mediterranean Sea" (Zammit 1925: 9-10; 38).

Although Zammit concluded that "the Hypogeum was in part used as a sanctuary in which religious ceremonies were conducted, and in part as a burial place in which the bones of the dead were deposited after being deprived of the flesh" (Zammit 1910: 43), he made it clear that the original and primary function of the Hypogeum was not a burial one. The sanctuary to tomb sequence is evident from Zammit's remark that "it is clear that, during the last phase, the Hypogeum was used as a burial place or, more correctly, as a deposit of human bones taken from graves somewhere outside the place ... the human bones were everywhere thrown in disorder ... more bones were met with than it was consistent with normal burials in a restricted place ... bones from 120 different individuals were identified in a space...which could not hold more than six bodies if interred in the usual manner" (Zammit 1935:11).

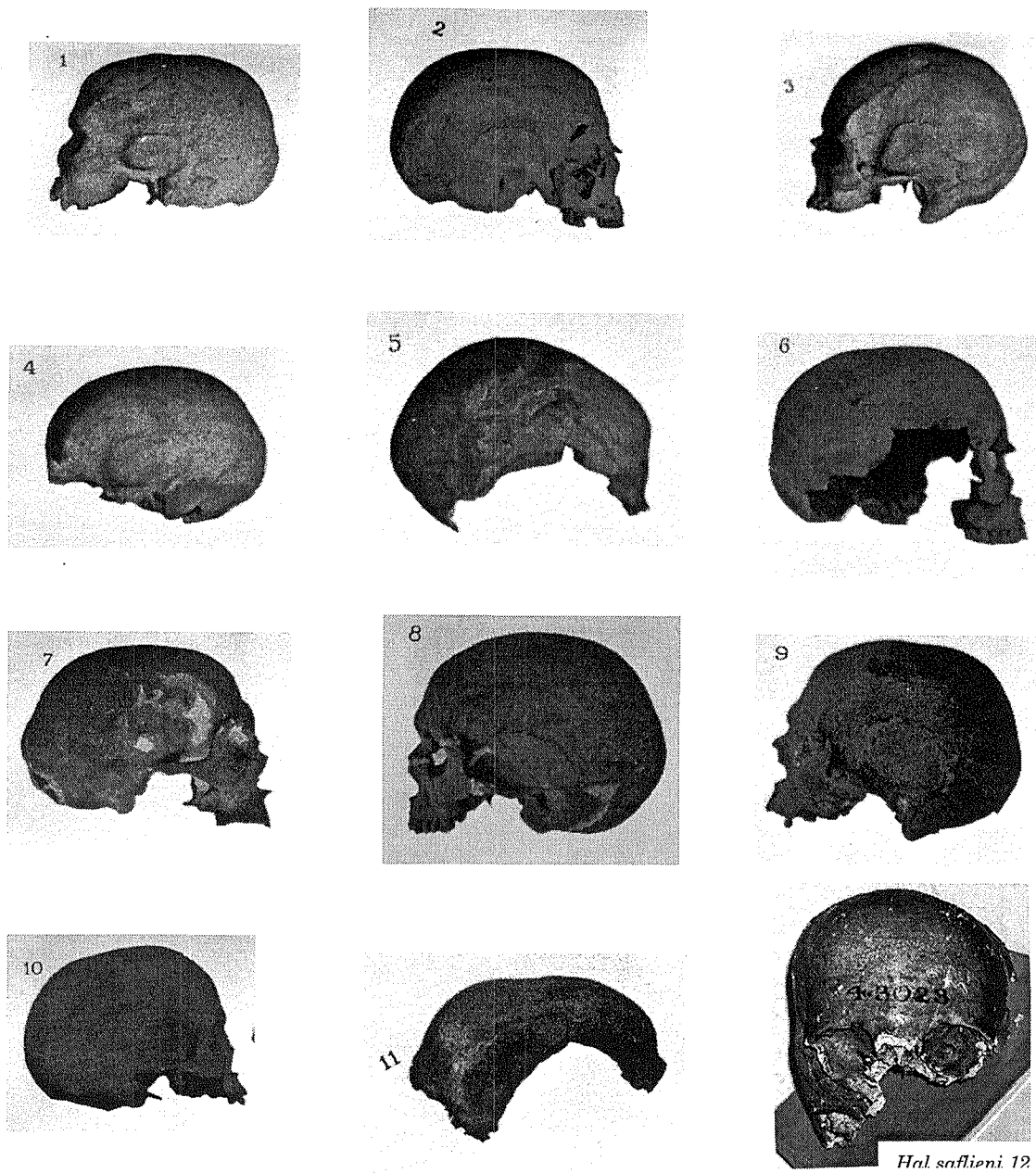
### **The Hypogeum skulls**

In 1912, Zammit, Peet and Bradley published a report on the small finds at the Hypogeum, and Zammit carried out a detailed anthropometric survey of ten Hal Saflieni human skulls, in accordance with the European standards prevailing at the time (Zammit *et al.* 1912). In the same year, Bradley surveyed the Maltese skulls in an anthropological study of the Mediterranean races.

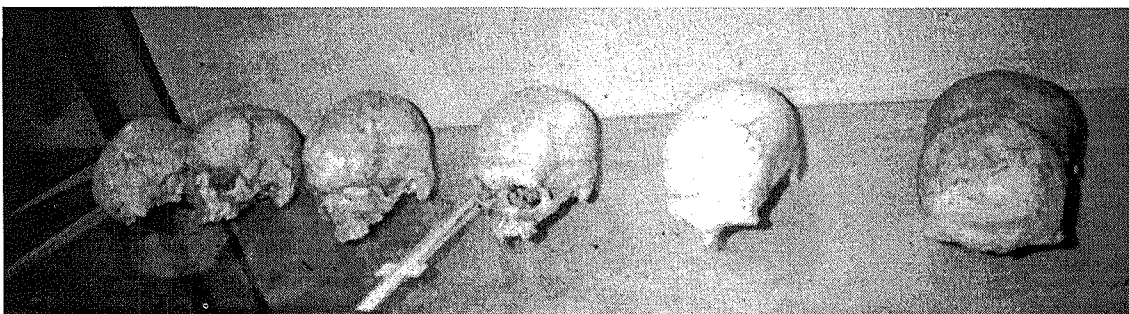
The number of Maltese prehistoric skulls presently exhibited at the Museum of Archaeology at Valletta is nil.<sup>1</sup> They numbered six in 1985, whereas a total of eleven had been displayed in 1907 [Plate 3]. Another three Hal Saflieni skulls were taken to the British Museum in 1948 and 1955, together with another from Ta' Hagra, one from Hagar Qim<sup>2</sup> and several cranial fragments from Burmeghez.

<sup>1</sup> The one displayed in the facsimile tomb is a Classical skull, and not a Neolithic one.

<sup>2</sup> The Hagar Qim and Ta' Hagra skulls are not featured in Evans 1971.



*The twelve Hypogeum skulls in 1912*



*The six remaining skulls in 1985*

**Plate 3: The Hypogeum Skulls**

In 1985, Emmanuel Anati and his archaeological team reviewed the six Hypogeum skulls. Two of these were considered to be so identical that they might well represent the typical skull morphology of the Hypogeum people. Another skull bore a scar probably related to a bone tumour, whilst another suggested anaemia caused possibly by malaria.<sup>3</sup> One of the other skulls bore the stigmata of a secondary burial, in that it had been exposed to sun and air before being deposited in the Hypogeum (Anati & Anati 1988: 230).

One of the skulls was probably trepanned, and thus provides the single possible example of such a procedure in the Maltese islands (Savona Ventura & Mifsud 1999: 59).

#### **W.A. Griffiths**

One of the students who excavated under the supervision of Zammit was W.A. Griffiths (Griffiths 1920: 466). *"Most of the rooms were found to be half-filled with earth, human bones and broken pottery. It has been estimated that the ruins contained the bones of 33,000 persons,<sup>4</sup> mostly adults. Practically all were found in the greatest disorder, and there had evidently been no regular burial of a complete body ... with regard to the original use of the Hypogeum, opinions vary. It may be that it was a temple carved underground for the use of spirits who had left this world, providing them with the same type of temple as that which they had been accustomed to worship above ground; or it may have been a sacred college, wherein the priesthood were initiated into the mysterious beliefs of those days ... whatever may have been the original use, there is no doubt that it was used in part as a burial place for the bones of the dead after a previous burial above ground"* (Griffiths 1920: 466-7).

Regarding the two figurines which were found in the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, one lying asleep on her side, and the other facing downward, both lying lengthwise

on a couch, the interpretation rendered at the time was quite feasible and acceptable. The former represented *"a priestess dreaming near the sacred places in the hope of obtaining inspiration to declare the words of the holy oracle, while the second figure represents her in the act of worship."* (Griffiths 1920: 467) The original interpretation of the fish on a plate is clearly more feasible than that of a fish on a couch, as suggested by Evans (1971: 59).

*"Perhaps the most interesting piece of pottery found was a black polished plate, on which was drawn with flint the figures of several horned bulls of mottled colour, all instinct with life. The species of animal was identical with that carved in high relief in the "bull sanctuary" of the latest and most wonderful discovery of all, the Stone Age Temple of Tarxien"* (Griffiths 1920: 468-9).

#### **R.N. Bradley**

Another student excavating under Zammit's supervision during 1910-1911 was R.N. Bradley, a young B.A. graduate. His particular interest lay in human skulls, and he submitted a report on this particular theme; Bradley had excavated the area immediately adjoining the original entrance of the Hypogeum. His impressions at the time were that the human remains at Hal Saflieni were not primary burials. *"Under the guidance of Professor Zammit I excavated at Hal Saflieni, between the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 1910 and the 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1911, working at room C29 and its entrance towards C28. No complete skeletons came to light, and the bones lay in confusion through the soil as in the rest of the Hypogeum, except that occasionally an arm with fingers, and complete foot, and several vertebrae would be found lying with the parts in situ. From the upright position of an isolated radius it might be judged that the filling up of the cave was of a wholesale nature, rather than that individual burials took place in it... unrelated bones and also implements were found in the interior of skulls. The finding of six vertebrae in position, five of them without spinous processes, suggests a case of re-burial, and it is an open question how far most of the interments may not have been of this character. Animal bones were found*

<sup>3</sup> The anaemia might also have been caused by a Mediterranean Thalassaemia with an intermediate form of severity, still common to this day.

<sup>4</sup> This figure differs significantly from the oft quoted 7000; both figures are mere guesses, and were based on different criteria for calculation.

mingled with human" (Zammit, Peet & Bradley 1912: 21).

### **Similarities with the temples above ground**

*"The Hypogeum near Hal Saflieni is a remarkable megalithic temple, where prehistoric man worshipped his deities and buried his dead. Long shafts descend 30 feet below the earth's surface, where, carved from solid sandstone, lie dozens of odd rooms, including an altar, a long hallway, and a treasure vault"* (Walter 1940: 272).

Both the Hypogeum and the Maltese prehistoric temple repertoire above ground level are megalithic in nature, and they share several similarities (Trump 1972: 63-4; 1990: 66; Ferguson 1991: 289). The main feature of the blocks found at the hypogeum entrance was a number of window-like openings cut in the stone slabs, such as were found at Mnajdra and Hagar Qim (Zammit 1910: 32). The doorways in the Hypogeum were similar in architecture to those at Hagar Qim (Zammit 1910: 32); the stone cornices were bevelled, smoothed and pitted in places, similarly to Hagar Qim, Mnajdra and Ggantija (Zammit 1910: 33).

The black plate discovered in the Hypogeum deposit showed designs of long-horned bulls (Zammit 1910: 38) similar to the specimens at Tarxien. The bovid theme prevails. Horns of sheep and young bulls were found in the Hypogeum deposit (Zammit 1910: 41). Other portable art forms include the naked and steatopygous figurines, and the stone disks found at the Hypogeum; all these closely resemble those found at Hagar Qim (Zammit 1910: 39-40).

### **The British archaeologists and the Maltese megaliths**

Because of these similarities in architecture and art, the incorrect attribution of a primary burial function to the Hypogeum has, since the fifties, also been extended to the megalithic temples above the ground. However, *"at this point it is useful to distinguish between [the European] tombs and the other monuments which are of 'megalithic' construction, like the temples of Malta, ...*

*Brittany ... Stonehenge ... the size of the stones used does make these monuments similar in some ways to the tombs, but their function and indeed their appearance are quite different, so that the two groups should be discussed quite separately"* (Renfrew 1978: 134). *"One enters the discussion encumbered by traditions of interpretation that are no longer entirely acceptable"* (Renfrew 1979: 44).

The origin of the megalithic collective chamber tombs has been a major issue in European prehistory. Whereas it was initially hypothesized, by Fergusson (1872: 508) and Worsaae (1886: 25-6), that tribes had actually migrated across Europe and introduced their culture into the lands they entered, it was Gordon Childe, Professor of Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology in Edinburgh, and later in London, who introduced the concept of *"modified diffusionism"*, where a *"cultural sweep"* was possible without an actual movement of tribes across borders (Childe 1925; 1939; 1957: 70); thus, it was a religious influence, and not a tribal invasion, which occasioned the spread of monumental burial in Neolithic Europe (Renfrew 1979: 7-8). At the turn of the century, Arthur Evans identified Crete as the cradle of civilization in the East.

Glyn Daniel concurred with both Arthur Evans and Gordon Childe, and he outlined his own hypothesis for the spread of megalithic tombs from East to West (Daniel 1941: fig. 2).

In the mid-fifties, Gordon Childe started to retreat from his previous position, and tended to agree with the opinions expressed earlier by Christopher Hawkes in Oxford, basically in that the European Bronze Age had diverged from the Oriental one (Childe 1958: 8). In the matter of the megalithic tombs, Childe contradicted Daniel directly. *"There is no evidence for Early Aegean practices tending in that direction. Still less Aegean was the erection of temples that were not tombs. This was done demonstrably only on Malta and Gozo. The celebrated Maltese temples ... remain an isolated phenomenon in prehistoric Europe ... the islands became neither trading posts nor centres of a Bronze Age economy. They remained Neolithic till occupied between*



1600 and 1500 BC by parties of more warlike settlers who cremated their dead and interred their ashes among the ruins of the temples" (Gordon Childe 1958: 119, 122). As early as 1950, Gordon Childe had already indicated the absence of megalithic collective tombs in the Maltese islands (Gordon Childe 1950: 111, fig. 86).

In his last edition of *The Dawn of European Civilization* (1957), Gordon Childe considered the architecture of the temples of the "megalithic civilization of Malta" as nearer to the western Mediterranean than the eastern one (Gordon Childe 1957: 255). This change of stance on the part of Childe may have led to his premature replacement as Professor at the Institute of Archaeology in London.

At around the same time, Zammit's prehistory of Malta, as outlined in his *Malta* (Zammit 1925), was temporarily crippled by a new prehistoric sequence for the Maltese islands. In the fifties, J.D. Evans, technical assistant to the Maltese Archaeological Survey, proposed such a sequence based on the Sicilian one, but this failed to measure up to his own radiocarbon dates when challenged by the veteran Sicilian archaeologist, L. Bernabò Brea. Moreover, Evans' excavation technique was eventually proved faulty by Trump, when the sampling of a specimen for radiocarbon dating (B.M. 100) was incorrect. Two early prehistoric phases, the Red and Grey Skorba, had been missed altogether, and another two, Mgarr and Zebbug had been reversed in order of chronology by J.D. Evans. The latter's prehistoric sequence has since been superseded by that of Trump (1966).

Glyn Daniel and J.D. Evans had further proposed a Maltese sequence of ritual burial practices originating from Ghar Dalam and the Zebbug rock-cut tombs, and evolving into the surface megalithic structures such as Ggantija, Tarxien, and the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum. The dating of the latter two megalithic structures they fixed at 1600BC, through spiral analogies with the shaft graves of Mycenae. Through this hypothesis Evans and Daniel were equating the Maltese megalithic monuments with the megalithic tombs of Europe, and clearing them out of the system as "minor

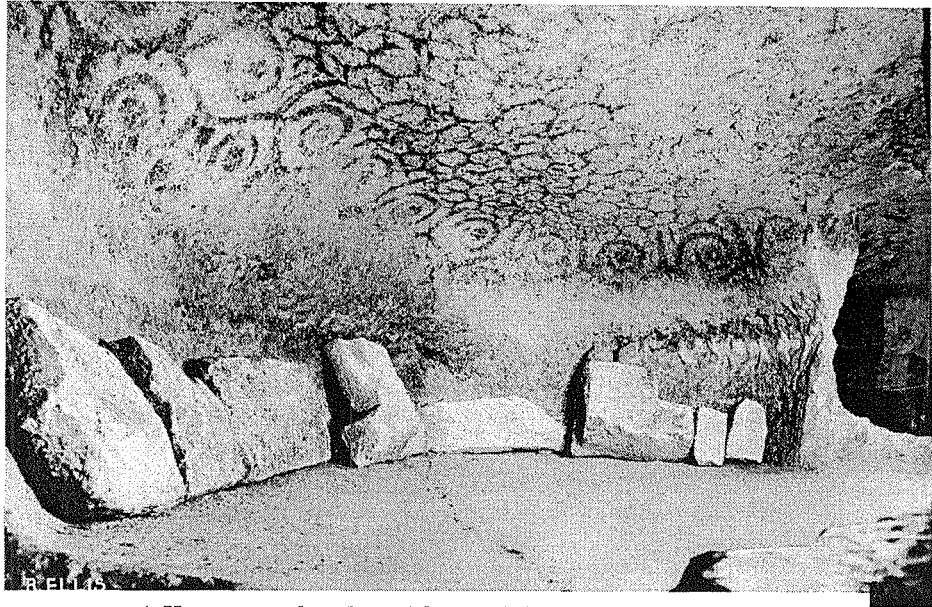
mysteries" (Daniel 1958: 17, 79-83; 1963: 80; Evans 1959: 84-134).

Daniel quoted Evans in hypothesising that the Maltese rock-cut tombs evolved into the megalithic monuments overground, "but it was not an isolated development; the Maltese megalithic builders had contacts with the outside world, and the running spirals of Hal Tarxien must surely, as Evans and others have argued, be inspired by the spirals on the shaft graves at Mycenae... We have in Malta small circular rock-cut tombs developing into surface megalithic tombs, becoming elaborated as monuments of the Hal Tarxien-Ggantija type... the dolmens of Malta are late in his [Evans] established sequence of pottery... The great structures like Hal Tarxien and Mnajdra are always referred to as 'temples', and there is no evidence of their sepulchral use. Yet they developed out of rock-cut and megalithic tombs" (Daniel 1963: 81-2). "The very evolution of tomb into temple in Malta reminds us forcibly that all along these early tombs had a ritual and religious purpose... let us turn from these minor mysteries to the major problems..." (Daniel 1963: 83).

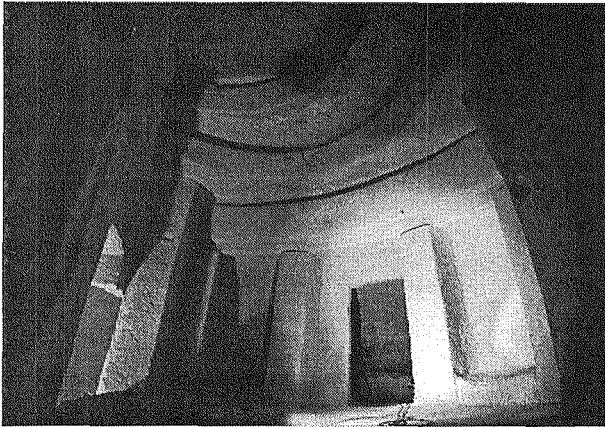
This hypothesis was endorsed in 1961 by Blance, and re-iterated by Glyn Daniel and J.D. Evans six years later (1967: 50). Colin Renfrew eventually rejected the entire hypothesis principally on the evidence of the calibrated radiocarbon chronology (Renfrew 1979: 8-9).

Although Daniel himself accepted the radiocarbon dates (Daniel 1963: 134), and eventually retreated from his position (Daniel 1972: 7; 1978: 81), Evans maintained a *status quo* (Evans 1971: 223-4; Renfrew 1978: 166). To complicate matters further, allegations had appeared in print of "distortion of evidence" by both Daniel and Evans (Blouet 1964: 9).

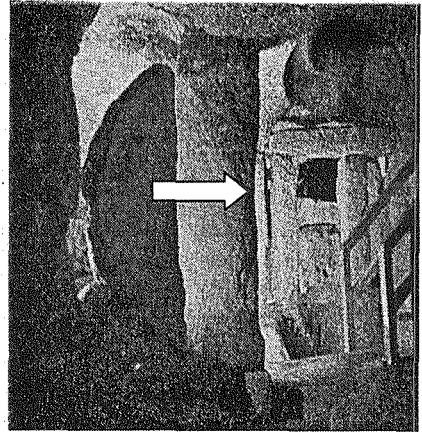
On the other hand, David Trump clearly defined the Hypogeum's primary role as that of a temple— "The Hypogeum, the rock-cut temple at the heart of the site" (Trump 1981: 131, caption to plate 3, 133-4). According to Trump, the Hypogeum had been constructed in a manner identical to the temples. The burials there were not ritual burials, and the decorated



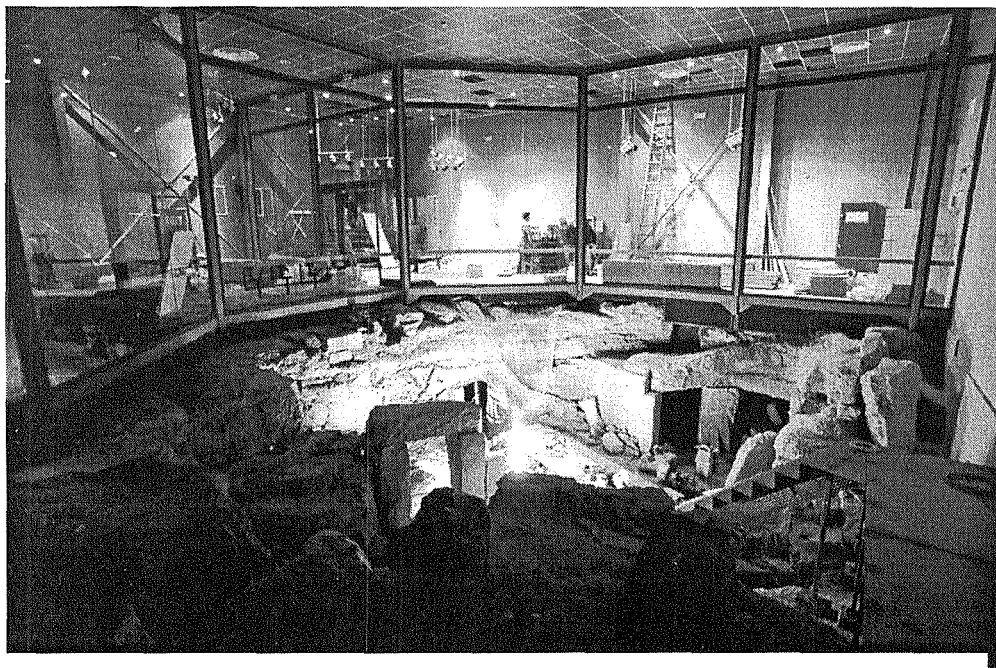
*A Hypogeum chamber with spiral decorations - 1910*



*The roof in a Hypogeum chamber*



*Trilithon doorway 1960*



*The new entrance to the Hypogeum - 1999*

chambers certainly represented a temple theme (Trump 1972: 63-4, 1990: 66).

### ***The Maltese architects and the megaliths***

The views expressed by the Maltese architectural profession strongly support Trump. Mahoney equated the Hypogeum with the prehistoric temples above the ground, and he rightly questioned the theory that the form of the temples derived from that of rock-cut chambers. *"The temples did not serve as graves. Then why should they be modelled on these burial chambers?"* (Mahoney 1996: 1). Mahoney also adduced evidence that, like the Hypogeum, the temples were roofed, even with heavy slabs, thus confirming the Italian architect Ceschi. Moreover, recently concluded studies on Ceschi's temple roof designs have confirmed the viability of his plan, where the supporting beams were horizontally disposed; a span of several metres can be thus roofed with globigerina without cracking (Trump 1983: 67; Piovanelli 1988: 130; Mahoney 1996: 6, 10; Chalmers 1999).

Other well-established Maltese architects have maintained the same professional opinion. In their structural assessment of the Hypogeum in April 1995, the three architectural consultants involved in the project, TBA Structural Engineers, identified the Hypogeum at Hal Saflieni as a megalithic temple, and not as a tomb (Bonello 1995). Richard England linked the subterranean Hypogeum with the temples above the ground through the *"earth focussed, sky orientated"* temple concept. *"The Maltese temple structures are essentially concerned with the establishment of spatial modulations expressed in carefully articulated womb-like contained areas ... the orbicular womb-like spaces of the Hypogeum ... It is in this aspect that the vital differences between megalithic circles such as those at Stonehenge and the Maltese temple buildings emerge: the former designed as a series of standing stones defined in space; the latter concerned and involved essentially with the definition of internal space ... it seems obvious that these people would have looked to the skies if only to establish some basic points of reference to the cyclic continuum upon which their whole agrarian life system depended ...*

*the moon and star graffiti found at Tal-Qadi is certainly a pointer towards a contemporary interest in celestial bodies and their movements"* (England 1980: 43, 44-5).

### ***The last decade of the millennium***

In 1992, the assistant curator of the Malta Museum of Archaeology attempted to resuscitate Glyn Daniel's megalithic diffusion hypothesis, which had been abandoned by Daniel himself more than twenty years earlier (Daniel 1978: 81). Pace was suggesting that in the Hypogeum a process of decoration was accompanied by the abandonment of the smaller burial sites and the *"emergence and development of surface megalithic structures,"* thus attributing, without evidence, a sepulchral function to the megalithic structures above ground (Pace 1997: 15). His reference to Zammit as indicating that the *"the Hypogeum served primarily as a cemetery"* (Pace 1997a: 27) is totally unfounded.<sup>5</sup>

Over the following years, the theme was further developed and elaborated, with the Hypogeum being made to assume a primary and original role of rock-cut tomb, whilst the megalithic structures above ground were identified as intermediate stages between the rock-cut tombs and the Hypogeum, the rock-cut tomb *par excellence* (Pace 1994: 41, 42; 1995: 27, 28). The Hypogeum is thereafter transformed into a *"mausoleum"* and *"burial monument"*, developing from *"formal collective burials in rock-cut chamber tombs"* (Pace 1995: 81; 1996: 7; 1997a: 26), as it merges from a *"unique structural masterpiece"* to a *"monument"*, an *"underground funerary monument for collective burial"* to a *"prehistoric underground cemetery"* and a *"mausoleum"* representing the *"underworld of the living"* (Pace 1997a: *passim*). According to Pace, the

<sup>5</sup> *"The hypogeum ... had more the appearance of a sanctuary than of anything else. A large hall, where people must have assembled, an elaborate chapel in which holy rites were celebrated, an oracular room, tiny cubicles in which devotees could have slept in expectation of inspired dreams, are all features specially adapted for a place of worship and for the initiation of the young priests who had to learn the magical ceremonies and the sorceries of a primitive religion"* (Zammit 1925: 9-10; see also Zammit 1910: 35; 1926: 62).

development of funerary sites was related to “*site location patterning of megalithic temple structures*,” as the Hypogeum becomes a “*centralized*” and “*central cemetery*” (Pace 1997b: 14, 15). A three-stage development was proposed, with the first stage represented by the Zebbug rock-cut tombs (4100-3800BC); the Mgarr phase is uncatered for, since the second phase is the Ggantija phase (3600-3000 BC), characterised by “*the emergence of megalithic building complexes*”, whilst Tarxien is suggested as the third stage (Pace 1997b: 17). Thus the echoes of the obsolete Daniel-Evans hypothesis still reverberate at the end of the millennium.

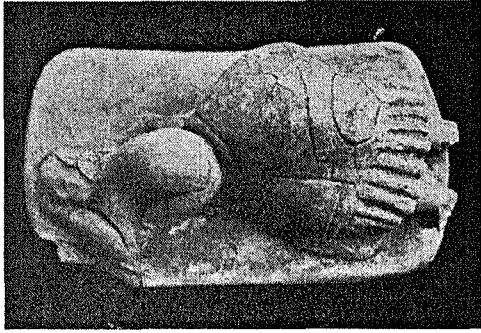
Unfortunately this point of view has had its repercussions upon the labeling at the Malta Museum of Archaeology, where a sequence of rock-cut tomb to megalithic temple to Hypogeum is still being suggested. The Hypogeum is referred to as “*a prehistoric rock-cut chamber tomb*.” The relevant placard reads “*ROCK-CUT TOMBS OF THE CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN*”, whilst another placard entitled “*THE DEVELOPMENT OF PREHISTORIC BURIAL MONUMENTS AND CEMETERIES*” reads “*Once established in Malta and Gozo, the practice of collective burial in rock-cut chamber tombs persisted for hundreds of years (circa 4100 – 2500 BC)*” i.e. including the temple period. “*From simple underground burial chambers, burial tombs and cemeteries steadily led to the development of more complex monuments that gained more significance as central social focal points.*” Despite the strong evidence to the contrary, this theme is bound to have its repercussions also upon the interpretative labeling in the Hypogeum itself, once this is once again open to the public.

### **The Oracle**

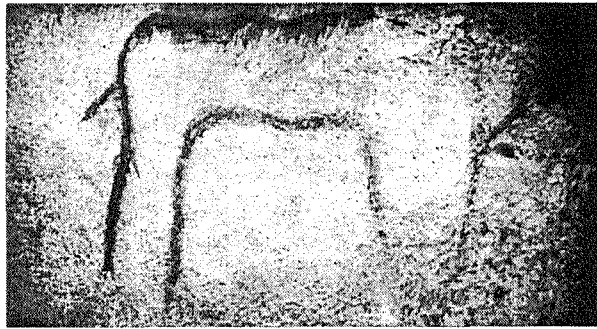
One important piece of evidence pointing to the initial function of the Hypogeum is to be found in what has been appropriately named the Oracular room by Zammit. The acoustics of this chamber in relation to the remainder of the Hypogeum prove beyond any doubt that this subterranean megalithic structure had been designed for a *mystical* function, whether this was religion, initiation,

magic, medicine or mythology. The Oracular room lies in the middle level; it has a “*highly arched ceiling richly decorated with a red scroll interspersed with painted discs of different sizes. This mysterious pattern undoubtedly had a symbolic meaning, for the decoration adopted by primitive people was never casual but always had reference to their religion, magic or totemism*” (Zammit 1925: 19). Present research in prehistoric cave art includes the study of wall configuration and their adaptation to the drawings, and to the significance of human voice resonance (Renfrew & Bahn 1996: 377), a feature which immediately brings to mind this Oracle room in the Hypogeum. Both Stoddart (1999) and Chalmers (1999) have carried out practical fieldwork in Malta’s history, and they have enhanced, besides the visual, not merely the acoustic elements in prehistoric sites such as the Hypogeum, but also the effects on the other senses, such as those of smell and taste.

It was realised in 1920 that a two-feet wide hemispherical opening in the Oracle cave, at the height of a man’s mouth, magnified sounds by about a hundredfold, and these were then audible throughout the entire underground structure. “*A curved projection is specially carved out of the back of the cave near this hole and acts as a sounding board, showing that the designers had a good practical knowledge of sound-wave motion. The impression upon the credulous can be imagined when the oracle spoke and the words came thundering forth through the dark and mysterious places with terrifying impressiveness*” (Griffiths 1920: 465). “*The Oracular chamber is remarkable for its acoustic properties. A deep, low note uttered or hummed in or near the small cave, or the oval niche, resounds and vibrates in the chamber in a most remarkable manner, and the human voice is so much magnified as to become audible throughout the entire underground place*” (Zammit 1925: 18-19; 1935: 28). “*I could hear his words in any room in the temple. The whole structure seemed to vibrate with the sounds. Most uncanny of all was the fact that whereas low tones could be heard everywhere distinctly, high-pitched notes did not carry further than the chamber itself*” (Walter 1940: 272). “*It reverberates*



*Figurines on couches – dreams and worship (Griffiths 1920)*



*Bull fresco pre-dating the red ochre wall paint (Agius 1959: 5-7; Rossiter 1968: 90; Ridley 1971: plate 14; Trump 1990: 61, fig. 11, 65; McGregor Eadie 1995: 104)*



*Engraved hand with polydactyly (See text, p. 162)*



*The Oracular Room (Inset – the human cochlea, the central organ of hearing; see p. 162)*

**SOME OF THE NON-SEPULCHRAL FEATURES IN THE HYPOGEUM**

from all parts of the spatial system and not only energizes the space but returns to energize, to regenerate, the maker of the sound" (Foster 1991: 6).

As in the megalithic temples above ground, the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum is exquisitely proportioned, an architectural refinement of the architects of prehistory (Joussaume 1985: 222). There is a spatial sequence in the entire structure, and as these "seemingly unrelated chambers meander through the living rock, so does reverberating sound as an organizing datum" (Foster 1991: 6).

At this point an analogy requires to be made between the configuration of the human cochlea, the central organ of hearing, with the spirals which decorated the Hypogeum chambers so diffusely. This organ measures 9 by 5 mm, and is located in the petrous bone of the human skull. Its spiral shape which is repeated *ad nauseam* in bright red colours all over the Hypogeum interior cannot be considered as coincidental with the fact that acoustics played such a central role in the spatial system of the Hal Saflieni temple.

#### **Other non-sepulchral features**

The large water cistern at one end of the site is more in keeping with a religious function than one of ritual burial (Trump 1983: 70).

The art forms in the Hypogeum have recently been re-evaluated (Mifsud & Mifsud 1997: 139-145). Once again, whether representing the bull, the tree of life, ethnic markers or engraved hands, the theme of these forms mitigate against a sepulchral function. Besides the multitude of designs in red ochre at the Hypogeum, there are also drawings in black manganese dioxide pigment, and one of these measures 1.15 by 0.95 metres. It represents a bovid, "with a hunch on its back, with short horns and tail" and is situated on the left wall at the entrance of the Holy of Holies. Agius compared it to the bas relief bulls beside the Tarxien temple complex (Agius 1959: 5-7; 1968: 7; Rossiter 1968: 90; McGregor Eadie 1995: 104).

Another design at the Hypogeum is in the form of an ideogram and comprises a

black and white chequered pattern (Zammit 1928: 18); this simple geometric design is interpreted by several authors as a female symbol (Forbes *et al.* 1979: 362). The other significant ideograms include the "tree of life" itself and the polygonal designs in red ochre which are considered by some authorities as representing *ethnic markers* in prehistoric art (Mifsud & Mifsud 1997: 144).

An engraved hand at the entrance of the Decorating room in the Hypogeum (Agius 1959: 5-7; 1978: 7) is a strong indicator of ritual initiation at the spot. The hand measures 20.5 by 10 cm (at the metacarpus), which is significantly larger than a modern hand; it bears six digits instead of the normal five (Mifsud & Mifsud 1997: 144). The ancient representation of polydactyly is typically associated with cult ceremonies and the worship of "*divinized ancestors*" (Barnett 1986-87: 5-12, 1990: 46-52; Driver 1956: 66-71).

#### **Closure**

A study of the microclimate in the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum during the late eighties produced evidence of deterioration of artefacts occasioned by adverse environmental conditions (Bonnici 1989), and the site has been closed to visitors since 1991. An enclosing wall was constructed in 1994, and a unit made of stainless steel and glass has recently been set up in this new hall.<sup>1</sup> The final product will be far cry from the original monument discovered at the beginning of this century. The red ochre designs of spirals and the geometric figures are but a fragment of their original glory; the hand engraving and the bull fresco have been obliterated. The remarkable acoustic properties of the oracle chamber have been preserved; here Jennifer Berezan has recently recorded her soundtrack *Returning* in "one of the world's oldest temples in a chamber created for sound". The acoustics of the soundtrack reflect a truly remarkable achievement in Neolithic sound engineering (*pers. comm.* Tonio Falzon). It

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<sup>1</sup> Timely intervention prevented a major disaster in 1994, when tons of steel and glass threatened a collapse of the entire labyrinth (Mifsud & Mifsud 1997: 161, fn 191).

was launched at the exhibition of "Temples - Malta" in the National Museum of Archaeology (28<sup>th</sup> October 1999). It was gratifying to hear Ugo Mifsud Bonnici refer to the Hypogeum as a temple and not as a tomb in his inaugural address, and to hear the seven exhibiting artists unanimously registering their experiences of the Hypogeum as a place of comfort and protection, of peace and security, a sanctuary, a womb, but definitely not a tomb (*pers. comm.* Julie Apap, Ebba von Fersen Balzan, Jeni Caruana, Sina Farrugia, Anna Grima, Caroline Hills and Olaug Vethal).<sup>2</sup>

### ***Radiocarbon dates and Neolithic burial sites***

There are three major Maltese sites of prehistoric human remains, namely Burmeghez, Hal Saflieni and Xaghra.

In 1911, a considerable quantity of bones including 39 skulls and 2250 teeth were found in close association with *Cervus* remains at Burmeghez, limits of Mqabba. The skulls were all reported to be dolichocephalic. About 70 individuals were probably buried at this site. The bodies were generally positioned on their left side, and aligned roughly along the main axis of the cave. In several cases the bodies were placed in a crouched position and facing east. The upper part of each body was propped up with moderately sized pebbles, and was overlain with flat stones measuring 30-80 cm in length. These flat stones were apparently placed at a certain height in order to cover the corpse, particularly the head, in order to protect it from the pressure of the overlying material. This burial arrangement contrasts with the descriptions from other Late Neolithic tombs, where no attempt had apparently been made to cover the corpse. (Tagliaferro 1911: 147-150; Zammit: 1925: O2-O3).

The ceramic repertoire at Burmeghez indicates that it was utilized by humans throughout the period lasting from the Ggantija to the Tarxien Cemetery phases (3600 - 1500 BC), whereas that at the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum also included the

earlier phases of Zebbug and Mgarr (4000 - 1500 BC).

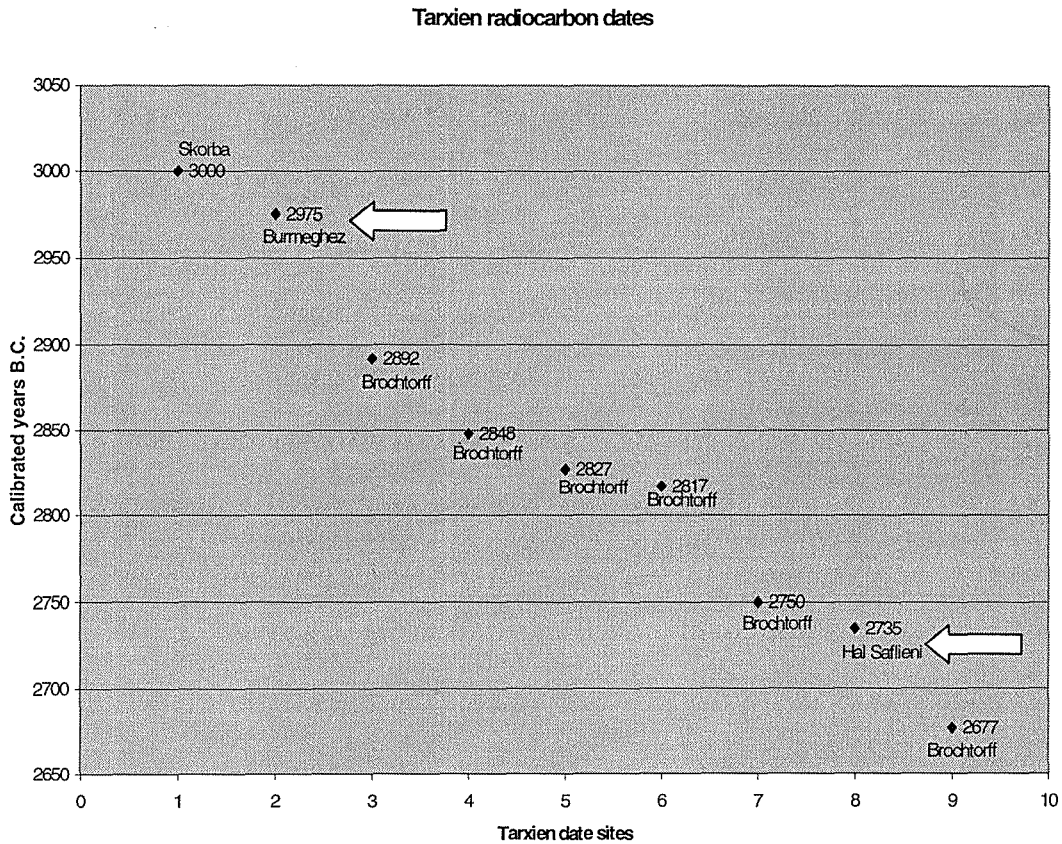
It has been shown above that the accumulation of human remains at the Hypogeum in Hal Saflieni were not related to primary ritual burial, but were brought down into the Hypogeum labyrinth through the action of floodwater in a matrix of red earth field soil.

The first radiocarbon dates for human remains at Burmeghez and the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum clearly show that during the early and middle phases of the Hypogeum, ritual burials were still being performed in caves. The Hypogeum might only have served as an ossuary during its terminal phases.

At the Brochtorff Circle, burial practices were of a different nature. Here, the prehistoric periods represented are the Zebbug, in rock-cut cave tombs, and the Tarxien, at a short distance away, close to the megalithic assembly. The finds included the stick figurines, which have been associated with shaman activity, and the double-fat lady and child. There are no figures *lying flat* on couches.

Thus at the three excavated sites of major prehistoric human remains, namely, the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, Burmeghez and the Brochtorff Circle, the distribution of the human remains is different in each case. At Burmeghez, there is a predominance of anatomical relationship between body parts, a left-sided flexed position of the body, an orientation along the main axis of the cave, and, by way of a lithic assembly, a stony arrangement protecting the upper body parts. At the Hypogeum, the nature of the human remains is that of an alluvial deposit containing bones, flints and pottery in one homogeneous mix-up. The one, possibly ritual, burial lay in the deposit itself and was unaccompanied by grave goods. At the Brochtorff Circle, ritual burial was evident in two phases, the Zebbug rock-cut tomb and the Tarxien close to the megalithic assembly; the intervening Mgarr and Ggantija were not significantly represented here. In both Zebbug and Tarxien phases at the Brochtorff Circle, burial was collective but predominantly dissociated.

<sup>2</sup> The artists spent on average a total of twenty hours in the Hypogeum chambers to create their art forms.



The first dates for Burmeghez and the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum insert themselves respectively at the start and end of the available repertoire of Maltese radiocarbon dates for the Tarxien phase (3100 – 2500 BC). The Burmeghez date precedes the *first* Brochtorff date, whilst the Hal Saflieni date precedes the *last* Brochtorff date.

Until further radiocarbon dates are available, it appears that the *Burmeghez* burial ritual was still being performed in the early phases of the Tarxien phase. This was substituted by the *Brochtorff* ritual in the middle Tarxien phase, and eventually, in the final phase of the Tarxien phase, the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum was involved in a secondary burial process.

(Trump 1995-96: 173-7; Mifsud 1999: 422-3)

**Figure 2: Maltese Radiocarbon Dates of the Tarxien phase**



With the aid of these radiocarbon dates, a sequence can be laid out, where the earliest burials were in Zebbug-phase rock-cut tombs. Constant re-utilization of these sites, as at the Brochtorff, was responsible for the dissociated nature of the human remains. At Burmeghez, burial was ritually performed in the manner indicated above, and the one radiocarbon date available places this ritual at  $4305 \pm 65$  uncalibrated radiocarbon years (Mifsud 1999: 422). Finally, at the Hypogeum, the Zebbug sherds around the original entrance, where rock-cut tombs were also present, indicate a similar set-up to the Brochtorff Zebbug-phase tombs. These human remains, in the rock-cut tombs at ground level at Hal Saflieni, eventually found their way into the Hypogeum through water action, together with the various artefacts which were also drawn into the ancient deposit, throughout the Hypogeum labyrinth itself and at the megalithic entrance. The same red soil matrix was present at the entrance and inside the Hypogeum itself (MAR 1909-10). The one date for human remains at the latter site lies at the end of the Tarxien phase, at  $4130 \pm 45$  uncalibrated radiocarbon years (Mifsud 1999: 422-3) [Figure 2].

The site of Burmeghez represents a ritual cave-burial site at the beginning of the Tarxien phase (OxA-8165). After the Ggantija phase, therefore, ritual burials were still being performed in caves, so that the rock tomb to temple sequence is not manifest. On the other hand, the radiocarbon date available for human remains at the Hypogeum (OxA-8197) clearly places them towards the end of the Tarxien phase. Both dates confirm that during the Tarxien phase, ritual burial was carried out in caves, and it was only towards the end of the Tarxien phase that the Hypogeum was utilized as an ossuary. Whereas the Hypogeum was being utilized approximately four centuries before Burmeghez, the burials at the latter preceded those at the former by approximately three centuries.

In the present repertoire of radiocarbon dates for the Maltese islands (Trump 1995-6 (6): 173-7) the Burmeghez date (OxA-8165) is contemporaneous with the first Tarxien date available (BM-143),

whilst the Hypogeum date (OxA-8197) is contemporaneous with the last one (OxA-3571). At this stage, a series of another eight radiocarbon dates are planned for human remains at Burmeghez and the Hypogeum; these will assist in establishing the details of dating with greater precision. In the meantime, the available dates show that the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum was not initially, nor primarily, a burial site; it maintains the status initially proposed by Zammit, namely, that it served as a sanctuary first, and as an ossuary much later on in time.

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