

TRUNKLESS LEGS OF STONE: DEBATING RITUAL CONTINUITY AT TAS-SILG, MALTA.

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Introduction

Like the traveller from an antique land in Percy Shelley's sonnet 'Ozymandias', it is a pair of trunkless legs of stone that caught the attention of the present writer and inspired the title of this paper. The damaged statue I have in mind was discovered by Italian archaeologists at the site of Tas-Silg in 1964 and is at present exhibited at the National Museum of Archaeology in Malta (Ciasca 1965: 57; Mallia 1965: 75-76) [Figures 1 & 2]. It represents a figure sculpted in high relief from a rectangular block of soft globigerina limestone, measuring 1.14 m. high, 0.49 m. wide, and 0.47 m. deep [Figures 3 & 4, plate 1a]. The figure wears a skirt and stands on short and swollen calves above a low plinth decorated with running spirals on a pitted background with a border round the top. The feet are partly damaged but the toes of the right foot are visible. Above the waist the damage increases in extent and in depth and most of the thorax is missing; enough of the arms survive, however, to show that they were held across the waist below two folds of the abdomen. Francis Mallia, then curator of the National Museum, was responsible for the publication of the statue: he dated the sculpture to the Tarxien phase, now known to have ended about 2600 cal BC, and maintained that the scars on the surface were 'made by the blade of a farmer's plough in going over the relic year after year and hitting its most prominent parts' (Mallia 1965: 75). Various scholars have claimed that this statue provides proof for ritual continuity at the site, a simple transfer of religious sentiments from a female prehistoric idol of fertility to a Phoenician one (e.g. Amadasi Guzzo 1993: 208; Frendo 1995: 118-119; Vidal González 1998: 112). It is the main purpose of this paper to examine that claim by pursuing in more detail a remark I have made in passing elsewhere (Vella 1997). I hope to show that mere

superimposition of architectural remains does not provide evidence for continuity in religious beliefs.

Unlike the statue that inspired Shelley, the Maltese example has no words inscribed on the pedestal, so its function has to be determined from its archaeological context. The interpretation of the sculpture depends on the inferences we make to explain how the statue found its way exactly where it was discovered by the archaeologists. Assessing the findspot of the statue, therefore, must be the first step in the present inquiry.

The archaeological context

The statue was found lying on its back in the position marked *f* between areas (*vani*) 21 and 22 in the north-east corner of a sondage dug in Area 2 South in 1964 (MM 1964: fig. 4) [Figures 5 & 6]. Excavations undertaken in successive seasons showed that *f* was part of a curvilinear alignment of large blocks (*a-j*, *l-o*) that formed the concave façade of a horseshoe-shaped enclosure aligned ESE-WNW. The retrieval of prehistoric pottery of the Tarxien phase coupled with the layout of this enclosure led the excavators to conclude that these blocks were the remains of the foundations of a prehistoric megalithic temple (Davico 1967). The earliest permanent Phoenician constructions appear to have been a low monumental altar (structure 45) set in a rectangular cut in the bedrock and a "chapel" (structure 42) in an open area immediately opposite the prehistoric temple (Ciasca 1993: 228-230; 1998: 234). Late in the second century BC, the whole area opposite the prehistoric temple was transformed into a yard paved with limestone slabs surrounded by a portico with a flooring (*w*) of white marble cubes set in a mixture of crushed pottery and lime (*cocciopesto*) (MM 1964: plate 17.1). The area behind structure 45 (area 21) was decorated with a fine mosaic floor (*x*) made from white marble tesserae above a

preparation of crushed limestone (y); repairs in the mosaic were made using similar tesserae placed in a different pattern (z) (Ciasca 1968: 21; *MM* 1964: plate 17.2; *MM* 1966: plate 5.1). Traces of the same mosaic were found beyond the concave façade of the prehistoric temple and a passage clearly linked this area (40) with the outer courtyard (area 36). Blocks *l, m, n, o* which had originally formed part of the prehistoric monument were reworked to define the extent of the passage, with vertical channels dug on pillars *m* and *o* presumably serving as jambs for a door (*MM* 1966: plate 12.1). At some point the mosaic between pillars *m* and *o* was removed following an arc, uncovering the prehistoric blocks 0.18 m. below (part of *m, b - d*; *MM* 1966: plate 11.1). The excavators suggested that this foundation trench was essentially dug to accommodate the apse of a palaeochristian basilica built on site at the end of the fourth century AD or the beginning of the fifth (Cagianò de Azevedo 1975: 89, fig. 3b).

Once the physical matrix in which the statue lay on discovery is considered it becomes apparent that its damaged condition cannot be explained by reference to modern ploughing despite the fact that the statue was discovered less than 30 cm. below the surface of the soil: lying on its back, at a depth of *at least* 18 cm. below the mosaic (*x*), its sculpted surface would have been level with the surface of blocks *o* and *e*, and about 13 cm. above the *cocciopesto* floor (*w*). If a plough blade had indeed produced the narrow grooves visible on the surface of the statue, one would expect to find similar marks on the surfaces in the immediate surroundings: none were specifically reported in the excavators' preliminary accounts and nothing of the sort can be discerned in the published photographs; moreover, no marks of the type identified by the Italian mission at San Pawl Milqi (*MM* 1968: plates 20-21) are visible on inspection at the site. The upshot of these important observations is twofold: *the damage on the sculpture was either done by modern excavators or it was done at some point in antiquity*. The first suggestion should be taken seriously in so far as the pick-axe and hoe were constantly in use during the excavations at Tas-Silg and it is not

unlikely, as suggested below, that some of the damage was done accidentally in this way. A close study of the surface of the sculpted block in fact reveals the existence of different surface textures or patinas and different tool marks. The original, undamaged surface of the sculpted side (shown with stipple on **figures 3 & 4**) is smooth with occasional shallow pittings on the skirt and right leg; the pleats of the skirt, unnoticed by Mallia but clearly visible above the left leg on the side [**Figure 4, plate 1b**], were rendered as fine vertical lines. The remaining undamaged sides of the block show marks of a flat tool or chisel, 2 cm. wide, and lack the smooth finish of the sculpted front [**Plate 1b**]. The damage on the sculpted surface of the block (left blank in [**Figure 3**]) is of three types. The upper half has smooth, concave craters left by dislodged surfaces; in one instance, above the folds of the abdomen, the stone was dislodged by a pointed instrument [**Plate 1d**]. On the lower half of the block the carved areas are damaged by elongated grooves, 0.5 cm. wide, that criss-cross the original surface. Finally, on a part of the plinth below the left foot, four parallel marks can be made out produced by an edge 3 cm. wide [**Plate 1c**]. This area lacks the patina that covers the entire block and it is possible that damage was done in recent times by the flat blade of the excavators' pick-axe. This is also a possibility for the upper half of the block where flat parallel scratches (shown with hatches on [**Figure 3**]) seem to have been produced by the blade of a hoe. So this leaves us with a block that was severely damaged at some point in antiquity. But when exactly did this happen?

To answer this question the statue's archaeological context has to be considered again. Lying flat and forming part of an alignment of megalithic blocks it seems that the statue's context is a secondary one: in other words, the statue was deposited here *after* it had served its primary function elsewhere on site. It is clear that the figure was meant to form part of a constructional arrangement, to be viewed frontally in the same way that a similar, albeit much larger, cult statue occupies a prominent position in the first apse past the entrance to the Hal Tarxien temple complex (Evans 1971: plate 15 fig.

2). Lying at *f* the statue *might* have been exposed on at least two occasions [Figures 5 & 6]: the first when the area was being rearranged to lay the mosaic *x* and its underlying layer *y*; the second when parts of the mosaic *x* and layer *y* were removed and an apse for an alleged basilica built. In the first instance the prehistoric blocks *m*, *b*, *c*, *d*, *o*, *l*, *n*, and *g* were reworked when the passage from area 21 to 22 and 40 was laid out: areas of *m*, *b*, *c*, and *d* were lowered to accommodate the mosaic *x* and layer *y*, and in addition, *m* and *o* were adapted to serve as pillars with channels cut to the level of the mosaic (*MM* 1966: plate 12.1). Block *g* was reworked only in part to accommodate the wall foundations of the eastern extent of area 19 with its *cocciopesto* floor which overlay another prehistoric block, *j*, to the south (*MM* 1966: plate 11.2; *MM* 1967: plate 2.2); the hemispherical concavity on block *g* might very well have been meant for a 'foundation deposit' of the type A. Ciasca has recently identified on the slabs of structure 42 (1998: 234, figs 3-4). In theory, therefore, the sculpted surface of the statue could have been damaged when these structural changes were taking place, either in the late second century BC or in the fifth century AD. I am, however, inclined to reject this possibility: if the sculpted block was reworked, and therefore damaged, to accommodate a structural feature, a wall or an apse, its surface would have been properly chiselled flat like the adjacent blocks *m*, *b*, *c*, *d*, and *g*. Instead, the sculpted surface was mutilated and scratched by a pointed instrument that was applied to the surface, as if the intention was to obliterate certain features while leaving sufficient trace of the original. The fact that the statue was battered above the arms might not be fortuitous, indicating instead purposeful mutilation: the decapitation of a carved or applied human head. If what is being proposed here is correct then the story told by proponents of the ritual continuity theory based on this statue has to be revised.

An alternative explanation

A straightforward reading of the data discussed thus far would suggest that some iconoclasts mutilated the statue. The practice of monument mutilation is

known in the literature: one example that comes to mind is the relief sculpture showing the Assyrian king Sennacherib which had the king's portrait defaced at the time of the sack of Nineveh in 612 BC when the palace was looted and burnt (Collon 1995: 144). But it is not only revolutionaries, invaders, or religious iconoclasts that mutilate monuments. In an interesting paper David Grove (1981) suggested that mutilation of Olmec monuments in Mexico was undertaken following the death of a site's chief: the supernatural power of the chief as shaman resided in his altar as well as in any representations of himself; when the chief died monuments were mutilated and portrait statuary and stelae of the chief decapitated or effaced to "neutralize" the supernatural power inside them; the defaced monuments were then ritually buried. Since the sculpted block from Tas-Silg lay in a context with a *terminus ante quem* in the late second century BC, any of the settlers at this site – Roman, Phoenician, Bronze Age, Late Neolithic – could have inflicted the damage. I do not think that the archaeological data from Tas-Silg alone provide a clear answer. The next step is to see whether observations from a number of sites in Malta and elsewhere can reliably establish the notion of intentional mutilation being proposed here.

I will start with the Phoenicians. The earliest archaeological evidence for Phoenician religious sites in territory outside the homeland is found at Kition-Kathari in Cyprus and Kommos on the south coast of Crete. I have already reviewed the relevant material at length elsewhere (Vella 1998) showing that at both sites indisputable evidence is available to show that the arrival of the Phoenicians was marked by religious ritual and special arrangements were made to accommodate these practices, bringing Phoenician merchant communities into contact with the locals. Once the Maltese case is viewed against this background, it becomes difficult to envisage the Phoenicians at Tas-Silg responsible for religious iconoclasm, if, that is, we implicitly assume, like the proponents of the ritual continuity theory, that the Late Bronze Age people were happily using an even older statue of Late

Neolithic date in their religious rituals. But I will return to this point shortly. The extent and nature of Roman activity at Tas-Silg after the Carthaginian garrison on the island had surrendered to Roman authority in 218 BC is difficult to ascertain. The issue of religious continuity at Tas-Silg from a Phoenician Astarte to its Hellenistic and Roman equivalents rests on the combination of inscriptional evidence in Late Punic and Greek recovered on site and the literary sources (Cagianò de Azevedo 1964; *MM* 1963: plates 20-21). Thomas Ashby (1915: 75) had already expressed doubts as to whether the Maltese were ever thoroughly Romanised, while the relative absence of Roman material culture at such an early period elsewhere on the island has led many to speak of a persistence of Punic culture in a period which was politically Roman (Millar 1993; Vidal González 1995). There is nothing surprising here and recent studies are showing that the same happened elsewhere in the Punic west (van Dommelen 1998). Mutilation of the statue in the Roman period is, therefore, unlikely but the suggestion lacks supporting evidence, so the issue is not conclusive.

Intentional breakage of anthropomorphic representations in the Maltese Neolithic is suggested by two pieces of evidence. A limestone statue-menhir from a rock-cut tomb of the Zebbug phase (c. 4200-3600 cal BC) was found broken below the head; the excavators noticed that the whole surface of the stone was covered with red ochre, including the main break at the shoulders, *'thus showing that this object was already broken when it entered the deposit'* (Baldacchino & Evans 1954: 14, plate 3). The second find consists of scattered fragments of a large skirted figure from a communal burial pit of the Tarxien phase (c. 3200-2600 cal BC) at the Xaghra (Brochtorff) stone circle in Gozo; it is thought that the statue may have reached one metre in height when complete (Malone *et al.* 1995: 7, fig. 3). But the context of both finds is a funerary one not a temple, thus preventing us from taking this datum very far in the present discussion. Large damaged statues in temple contexts are known only at two sites. At Hagar Qim Themistocles Zammit (1914: 1) had noted the remains of a pair

of figures, similar to the type discussed in this paper, carved in relief on the stump of a block built into an apse so that it faced into the filling (Evans 1971: plan 18A). The context of retrieval appears to be of a secondary nature, suggesting that it was not impossible for cult images to be re-used as building material. The lack of any contextual data, however, makes it impossible to say whether the block was reduced to its present size before or after being incorporated into the wall.

At the other site, Tarxien, the large cult statue mentioned briefly above, was found damaged (Zammit 1916: plate 15 fig. 2). Zammit wrote that *'the upper portion of the statue must have been carried away, for no fragments of it were found'* (1916: 133), and Evans (1971: 120) concluded that the statue was quarried away as traces of the wedges used could be clearly seen.¹ Again, I find it hard to believe that quarrying would explain the damage which runs vertically through the statue's right side, leaving the rest standing. Why was the rest not quarried too? The possibility that the mutilation was intentional cannot go unmentioned, if only because iconoclasm at Tarxien has already been hinted at by others (Bonanno *et al.* 1990: 202) who do not elaborate. Damage at Tarxien is not only restricted to the statue but is present also on the standing architecture, in particular the westerly five-lobed temple, with its distinctive decorative features; yet, the niche and altar stone adjacent to the statue are untouched (Zammit 1916: fig. 2). It is exactly over this area that Zammit uncovered the remains of a cremation cemetery of Bronze Age date (the Tarxien Cemetery phase) (Evans 1971: 149). Over the paving slabs of this temple, he uncovered a layer of dark brown earth devoid of stones, about 0.70 m. deep (Zammit 1916: 129); above it was the Bronze Age layer of earth and ashes, about 0.25 cm. deep, with pottery urns accompanied by incinerated human bones and other objects (1916: 134-135, plate 23 fig. 1). Zammit remarked that the layer of dark brown earth was *'fine and sandy as if carried in slowly by rain and wind'*; it

¹ Hayden argues that when complete the statue, if seated, would have been around 170 cm. tall (1998: 50 and note 1).

was only 'when about 3 ft. of this sandy deposit had settled upon the pavement, thus covering the lower part of the building', including the ornamented stone, that urns were deposited on 'a beaten floor' (1916: 135-136, 141, plate 22 fig. 3). Evans (1971: 149) has noted that the fine and sandy layer discovered by Zammit was not found elsewhere and suggests that the layer was 'an artificial filling laid down to produce a level floor over the area to be used and cover up the carved blocks, shattered remains of walls, and other debris belonging to the ruins of the temple buildings'. So it seems that the complex was already in ruins before it was turned into a burial complex. What can be surmised is that parts of the statue would have been visible to the people carrying out innovative burial rites inside the earlier remains, undoubtedly an intentional move rather than merely coincidental. It is tempting to propose that the oversized anthropomorphic statue fixed to its plinth with no apparent rivals for attention – a metaphor of power, status and sanctity (Hayden 1998) – could have been intentionally damaged at the very end of the Tarxien phase when archaeologists (Malone *et al.* 1993) believe the Maltese to have reached a religious fervour, isolated from the outside world: the ethnographic literature cited earlier (Grove 1981) would support this interpretation, while the lack of similar damage on smaller statues could be explained by the fact that statuettes could have been intentionally hidden away as a cache, as with the three statuettes discovered beneath the entrance to an apse at Hagar Qim in 1949 (Baldacchino 1951: 10-11).² But although I strongly believe that the suggestion of intentional mutilation on the statue from Tas-Silg is a plausible one, it is difficult to establish it in a definitive way even when other sites are brought into the discussion. So rather

² Evans is wrong when he includes the damaged statue Q/S 22 (1971: 92, plate 40 fig. 9) as part of the cache discovered on 17 October 1949. Baldacchino's museum report for 1949-1950 makes it clear that this statue, with damage to the right arm and shoulder, and left leg and both feet missing, was discovered in the rubble removed from Hagar Qim during the excavations of 1839, and heaped up at a distance of about 25 yards to the north of the temple (Baldacchino 1951: 11).

than debating "ritual continuity" at Tas-Silg on the basis of this datum we should be looking at the issue in a different way. The starting point is that the Phoenicians decided to set up their religious building to Astarte at a site which had already been used to a significant extent during prehistory: the question to be asked is *why*?

Creating continuity

In an article written a few years ago, Richard Bradley (1987) argued that the notion of "ritual continuity" does not provide a proper explanation for the juxtaposition of monuments of different dates at the same site. Bradley explained that there are difficulties in equating the distinctive time scales used in historical and prehistoric studies, and that by resorting to the idea of "ritual continuity" archaeologists and historians are forced to make imaginative leaps across impossibly long periods of prehistoric time, time that has been evaluated by the development of archaeology. At Tas-Silg, begging for continuity from prehistory to history, a staggering millennium-and-a-half in historical years, has implied seeking continuity in the material culture of the Bronze Age and the early Phoenician period. Attempts on these lines have already been made but the reading of the *same* data differs: Brusasco denies there is continuity in the ceramic tradition of prehistoric and early Phoenician Malta (1993: 16, notes 32-33; also Vidal González 1998: 112) while Sagona, who has handled the pottery, is adamant that the earliest Punic tomb groups on Malta, the same ones cited by Brusasco, contain '*vessels of remarkably long-lived, local ceramic traditions*' of Late Bronze Age type (Sagona 1999: 25; also Frenco 1995: 117). But whichever interpretation is correct, the issue of "ritual continuity" is not resolved. For as Bradley (1987: 2-3; 1991: 210-211) has noted quoting Maurice Bloch (1977): '*more than one sense of time can be found in the same society. Everyday activities may be conducted according to a practical understand of time, whilst ritual may uphold a different view of the world.*' Continuity of pottery styles, as debated for Tas-Silg, is located in historical, not ritual time; so the upshot is that we are *not* comparing like with like. For Bloch, ritual time involves the 'merging of the

past in the present': public rituals communicate through media which do not vary, employing archaic forms of a language of postures, gestures, movements and utterances that are carefully preserved, maintained and memorized from generation to generation. In short, as Bradley puts it (1991), public ritual develops at a different pace from everyday existence, and because ritual involves a certain amount of mystification it is particularly hard to challenge and can be employed tactfully to legitimise social order; the past, including monuments in ruins and origin myths, becomes a source to be manipulated (Layton 1989; Bradley & Williams 1998).

The Phoenicians in Malta built their sanctuary to Astarte on a hill overlooking the harbour which was already the site of earlier building remains. The layout of the post-prehistoric remains, in fact, was determined by the position and layout of the prehistoric monument: the Phoenicians placed a large rectangular slab of limestone (structure 45) in a cut in the bedrock opposite the façade of the horseshoe-shaped enclosure, and exactly in axis with it (Davico 1968; Ciasca 1976-1977, 1999: 24-25) [Figures 5 & 7]. The set-up recalls a similar installation at the Phoenician temple of Kition-Kathari in Cyprus, where a series of offering tables each consisting of a rectangular slab of gypsum were laid level with successive floors between 850-450 BC, within an earlier, abandoned construction of Late Bronze Age date (Karageorghis 1971: plate 51; 1976: 98, fig. 18, plates 69-70). Indeed, structure 45 at Tas-Silg can be interpreted as an offering table or altar only once it is seen in conjunction with the similar installations at Kition-Kathari just mentioned, where the contextual evidence was available to argue that the earliest slab was a table where action commensurate with a ritual interpretation was carried out (Vella 1998: 337). Elsewhere at Tas-Silg, a large basin and a standing stone of prehistoric date were incorporated into the new buildings (Ciasca 1969: 39-40, plate 2). The Phoenician activity at Tas-Silg can be seen as an attempt to establish a physical relationship with a past. In fact, I would argue that by incorporating the earlier remains into their new ritual precinct the

Phoenicians sought to justify their possession of new territory. The strategic location of the sanctuary, overlooking two ideal landing places to the south-west (Marsaxlokk Bay) and north-east (St Thomas Bay), turned the construction of a religious edifice into a symbolic attempt to consecrate the appropriation of new territory very close to the first landing place, presumed to have been in the bays below. The Phoenicians moved 15 km. inland (Mdina/Rabat) where rock-cut tombs dated to the first quarter of the seventh century BC testify to the occupation of the most strategic of promontories overlooking the entire central plain of the island, where fertile soil, natural springs and rock scarps provided attractive resources and security. From here, the Maltese Phoenician community could gaze out over its territory and see the sanctuary of Astarte in the distance, standing guard at the point of access from the outside world. We have no evidence whatsoever to posit an active, political role for the locals in this colonial situation, as we can do for the colonial encounters at Kition-Kathari in Cyprus or at Kommos in Crete where the Phoenicians had to contend with a perpetuation of indigenous cults (Vella 1998: chapter 5); and even then each situation is specific to the local context. I am suggesting that at Tas-Silg, through ritual action an ancient monument was appropriated and historical legitimacy was being claimed. Continuity was created through ritual.

Concluding remarks

I close with a summary of the points I have tried to make. Association of materials in the archaeological record has to be interpreted in terms of formation processes rather than simply assumed to have validity on the basis of simple juxtaposition. I have argued that the damage on a prehistoric statue from Tas-Silg has been misread and went on to suggest that intentional mutilation would best explain the scars on the statue's surface. There are difficulties, however, in defending the notion of intentional mutilation of this statue for any *one* phase at Tas-Silg even when other sites are brought into the discussion: the suggestion is attractive but inconclusive. On seeing the limited scope of the

evidence supporting the assertion of “ritual continuity” at Tas-Silg I looked at the issue from a different angle. I have suggested that rather than showing continuity of ritual significance the Phoenician presence at Tas-Silg was a way of appropriating new territory and justifying that appropriation by creating a continuity with the past: this was action steeped in ritual, non-linear time. Only with the introduction of literacy did the Phoenicians promote a linear concept of time, resorting to genealogical lists to claim descent from a rich ancestral past. But that is another paper.

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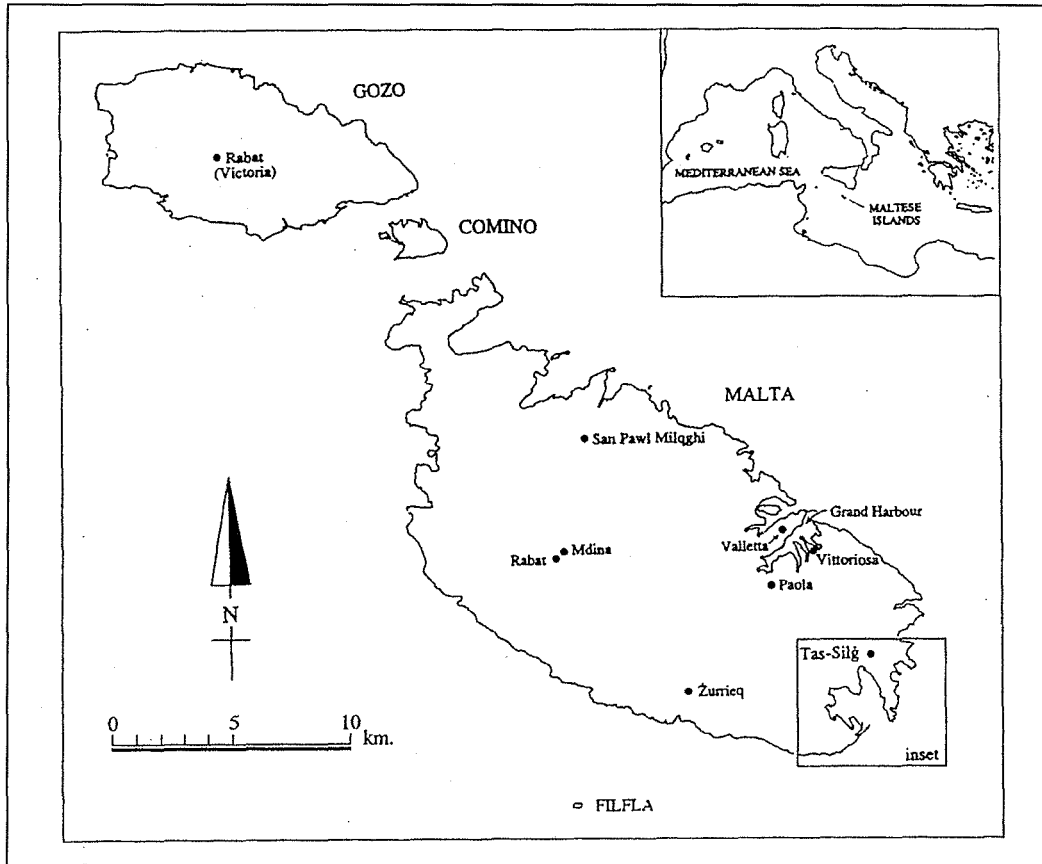


Figure 1: The Maltese Islands

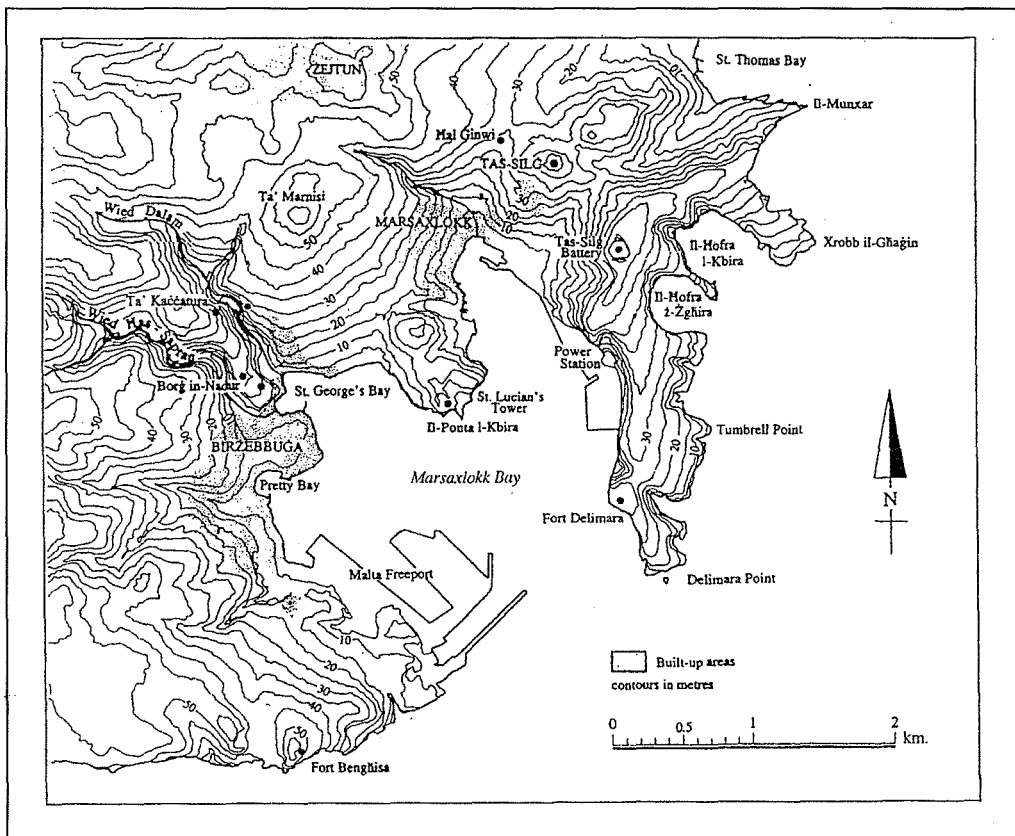


Figure 2: Tas-Silg and Marsaxlokk Bay, Malta

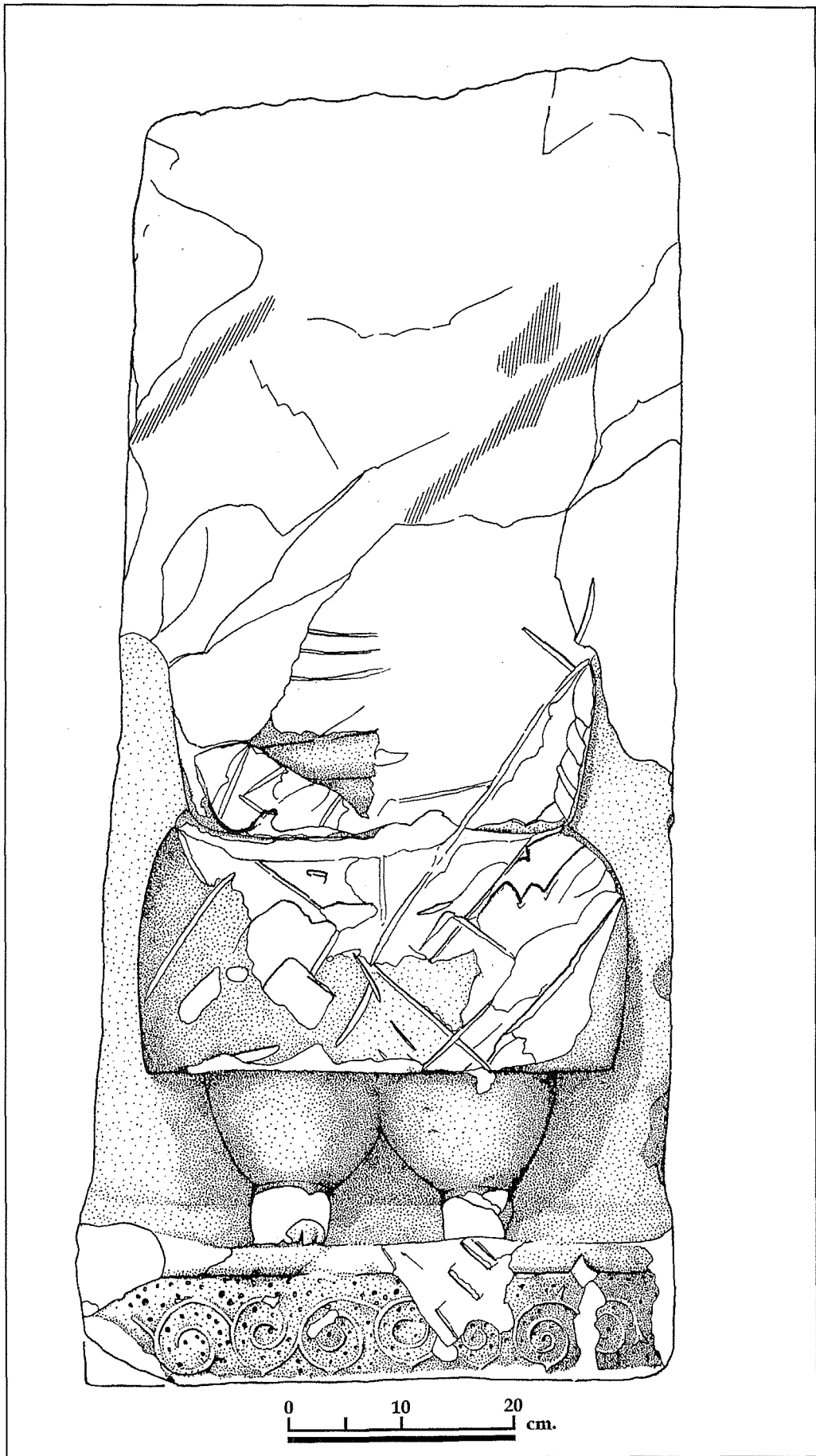


Figure 3: Frontal view of statue from Tas-Silg



Figure 4: Side view of statue from Tas-Silg

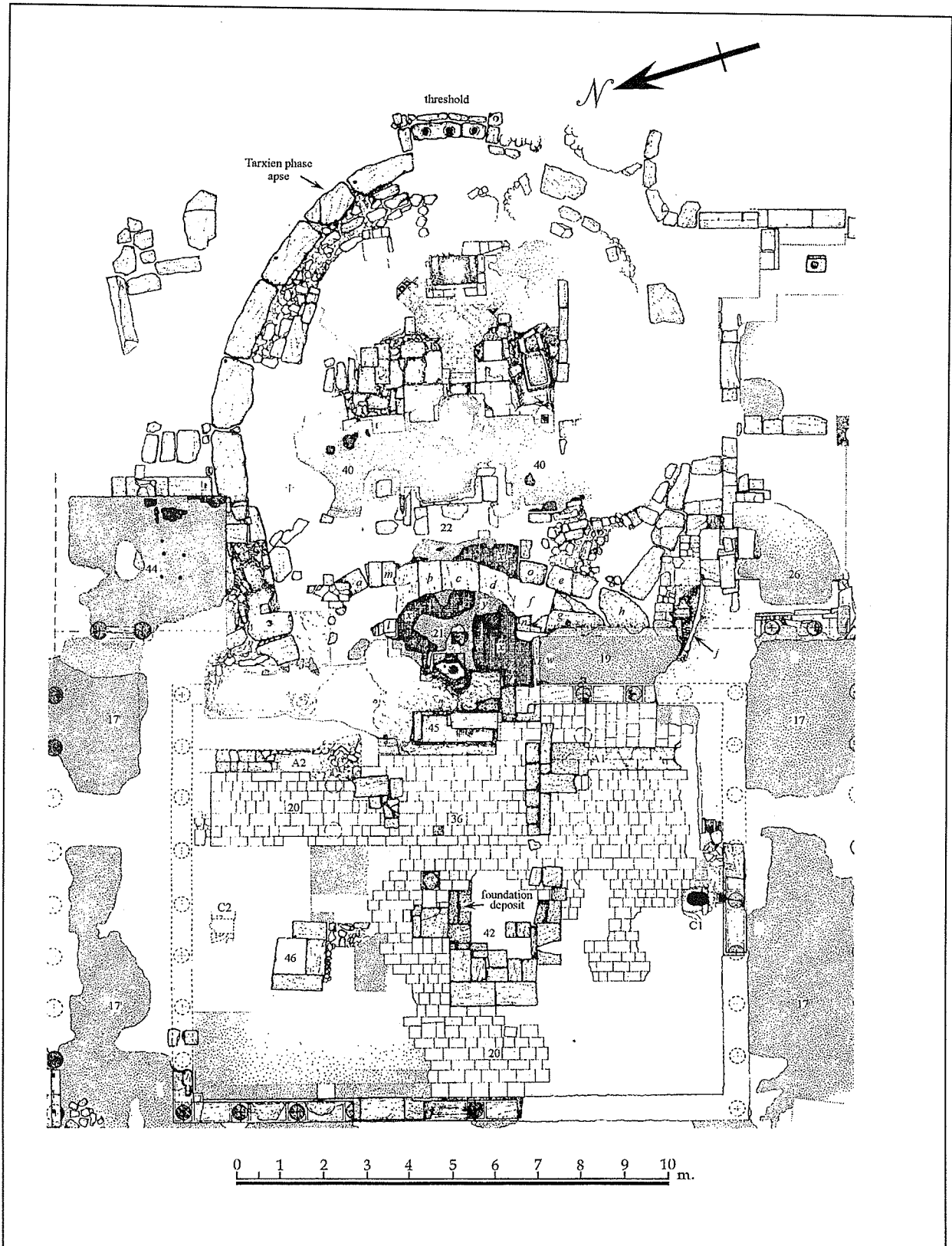


Figure 5: Area 2 South, Tas-Silg

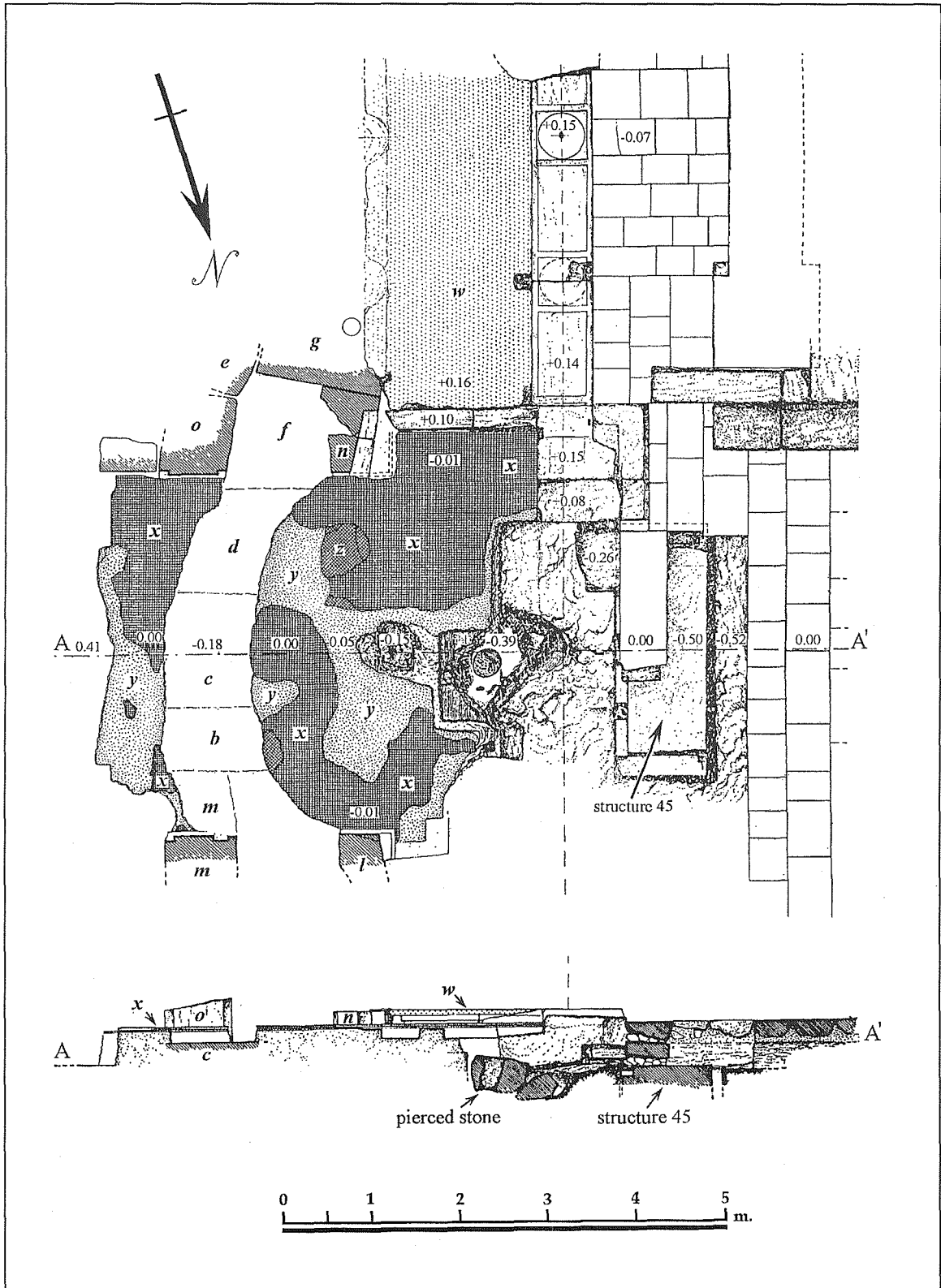


Figure 6: Detail of Areas 21 and 22 in Area 2 South, Tas-Silg

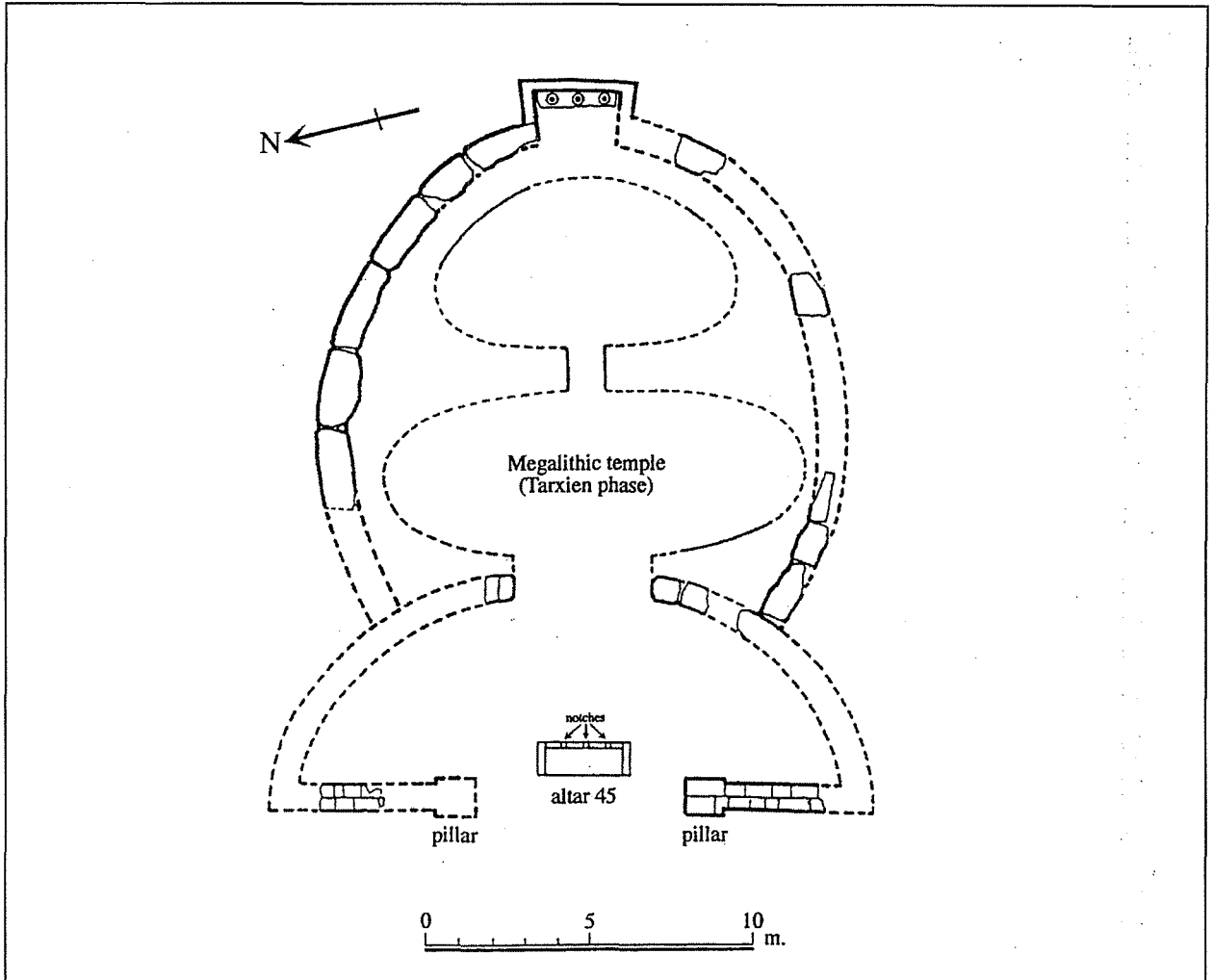
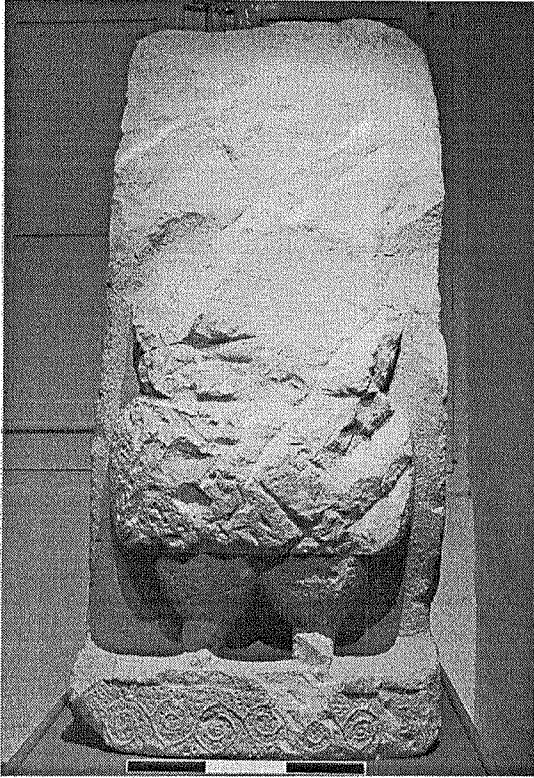
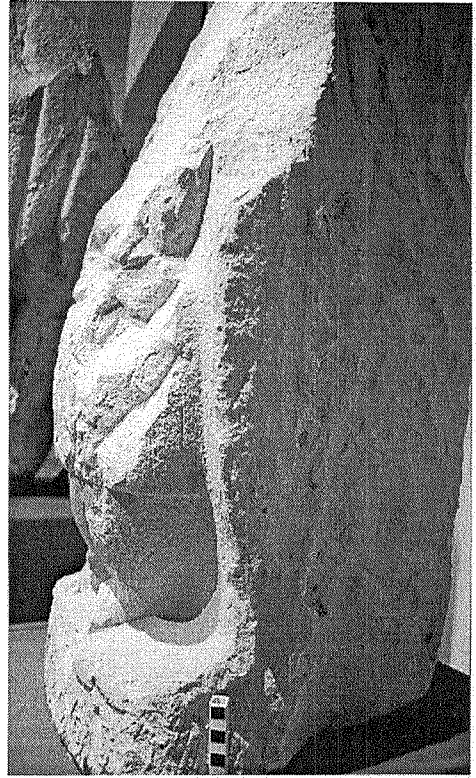


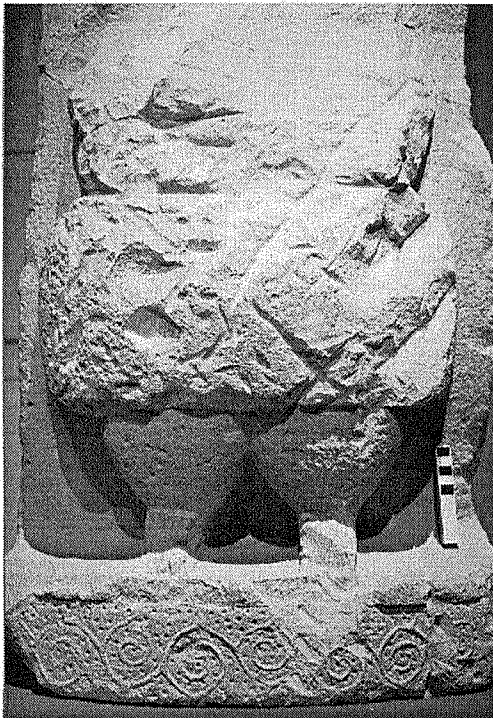
Figure 7: Reconstruction in plan of the megalithic temple and altar 45 flanked by pillars, Tas-Silg



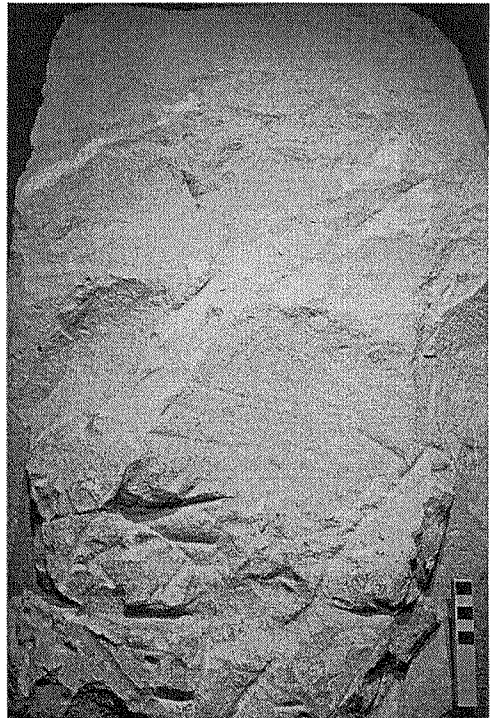
A Frontal view



B Side view



C Detail of lower half



D Detail of upper half

Plate 1: The mutilated statue at Tas-Silg



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The background of the cover is a dark, textured surface with several large, concentric circular patterns in shades of brown and orange. Overlaid on this are two white line drawings of cave art. The first is a handprint on the left side. The second is a bull-like animal (aurochs) on the right side. The text 'Cave Art - Panel II - Ghar Hasan' is positioned between the handprint and the animal.

Cave Art - Panel II - Ghar Hasan

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A small, rectangular inset image in the bottom right corner shows a white and black object, possibly a piece of fabric or a small artifact, against a dark background.