

THE GOZO STONE CIRCLE RE-DISCOVERED

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Every summer between 1987 and 1994 excavations were carried out on an archaeological site on the outskirts of Xaghra in Gozo, about half way between the important prehistoric remains at Santa Verna and the Ggantija Temples. The project involved the Universities of Malta, Cambridge and later Bristol, in conjunction with the Malta Museum of Archaeology. This site has long been known as the *Gozo Stone Circle*. It was given the name *Brocktorff Circle* in 1972 by Dr. David Trump, a former Curator of Archaeology in Malta, in commemoration of Charles Frederick Brocktorff, the German artist who painted the Circle in the 1820s. Earlier in archaeological and historical literature, it has been referred to variously as *Un Edifice Antique de Forme Circulaire*, *A Circle of Cyclopean Walls* or simply as the *Gozo Stone Circle*. But the earliest reference to this site is found in an old manuscript in Italian, in which it is described as *Un Recinto in Forma di Torneo*, i.e. a circular enclosure (M.C.A. Misc. 55: 144).

In the last few years, some archaeologists have been referring to it as the *Xaghra Stone Circle*. As most of the megalithic stones of this *Circle* have long disappeared and a totally new picture of the site has emerged as a result of the recent excavations, it might more accurately be referred to as the *Xaghra Hypogeum*. A prehistoric necropolis has been exposed which is by no means small, compared to the size of the island and our projections of its population in prehistoric times. In this paper, however, I shall continue to refer to it, as I have done over the last forty years, as the *Gozo Stone Circle* (Formosa 1957: 6).

To have a better understanding of this site, it might be helpful to start with some information on the toponomy and geology of the area. The *Stone Circle* is situated close to the highest point of the village of Xaghra, west of Ggantija Temples. It is in line with several other prehistoric sites overlooking the most fertile plain of Gozo,

known as Ta' Hamet and Ta' Xhajma. Below the ridge of the plateau, facing south, there are several fresh water springs. The area has been known locally since antiquity as *Il-Ghejjun* (the springs) and this includes the Ggantija area. A physical survey, combined with historical research, played an important part in the re-discovery of this lost site.

The father of Maltese historiography, Gian Francesco Abela, in his history *Della Descrizione di Malta* (1647), mentions two megalithic sites in Gozo, the first at Xewkija and the other at El Eeyun (Abela 1647: 119). There is no doubt that, regarding the latter site, Abela is here referring to the Ggantija Temples. From his text, it can be assumed that this part of Gozo has been known since antiquity for its megalithic structures. At that time and for many years later, these *cyclopean* structures were believed to be the work of giants. Hence the names *Torre dei Giganti* (Giants' Tower), *Gigantija*, *it-Torri tal-Gigantija* or Ggantija Temples were attributed to these remains. The locals always called them *Il-Gantija*. The name *Gigantea* entered into archaeological literature in 1834 (Marmora 1836: i) and continued to be used up to the beginning of the 20th Century (Mayr 1908). It is recorded for the first time in the correct Maltese version, i.e. *Ggantija*, by the Maltese archaeologist and writer, Sir Themistocles Zammit in 1906 (M.A.R. 1906: ii).

Until very recently, historians and archaeologists observed total silence on Abela's reference to *El Eeyun*, and no attempt has ever been made to establish its relationship with the remains of Ggantija or any other archaeological site. The first mention of the remains of Ggantija was always attributed to Count Gian Antonio Ciantar (Abela & Ciantar 1772-80: 341), although an even earlier attribution than Abela's was recently given to Marco Antonio Ascias (c.1612)

(Freller 1997: 64).¹ With my historical and topographical knowledge of that district of Gozo known as *Il-Ghejjun*, I was able to identify these remains as those of Ggantija, which I brought to the notice of the general public in a lecture delivered on the 25th of November 1992 (Wilson 1993: 8; Bonanno 1996: 42).

The parish of Xaghra was created in 1688. It was then known as Xaghret il-Ghazzenin and later Casal Caccia. When Abela wrote his *Descrittione* in 1647, he could only refer to the ruins by their district, *El Eeyun*.

Another argument from a toponomastic point of view, is that the *Stone Circle* lies between *l-Ghejjun*, (the springs), and *tal-Qacca*, a corruption of *Quccata*, signifying the top of a hill. It is situated on a piece of high ground known locally as *ix-Xaghra il-Kbira*. It overlooks Ggantija Temples and forms part of a flat, mainly rocky, stretch of land, with patches of shallow arable soil, which are now interrupted by rubble walls. The general character of the countryside in Malta and Gozo, on which isolated prehistoric rock tombs and megalithic remains are usually found, is that of scrub or *garrigue*, known locally as *raba' xaghri* hence the name Xaghra (Caruana 1898: 7).

The top geological formation of the *Stone Circle* and the Ggantija area is composed of upper coralline limestone. The surface rock is hard to excavate with stone tools, but a few centimetres below the surface it becomes softer and is fairly easy to work. In March 1955, after Professor John D. Evans excavated important prehistoric tombs at *ix-Xaghra tax-Xemxija* in Malta, he had this to say: "*It was in this softer layer that the chambers of the tombs were excavated and had it not been for this*

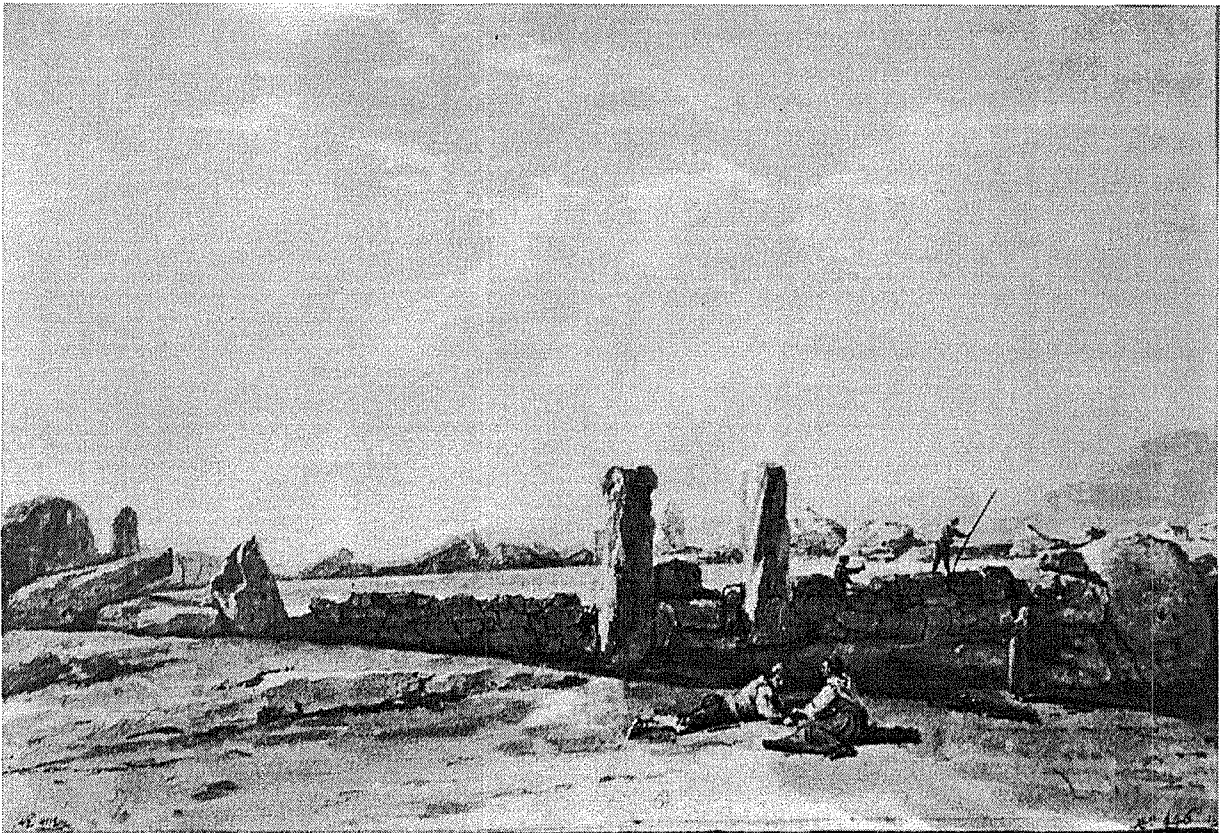
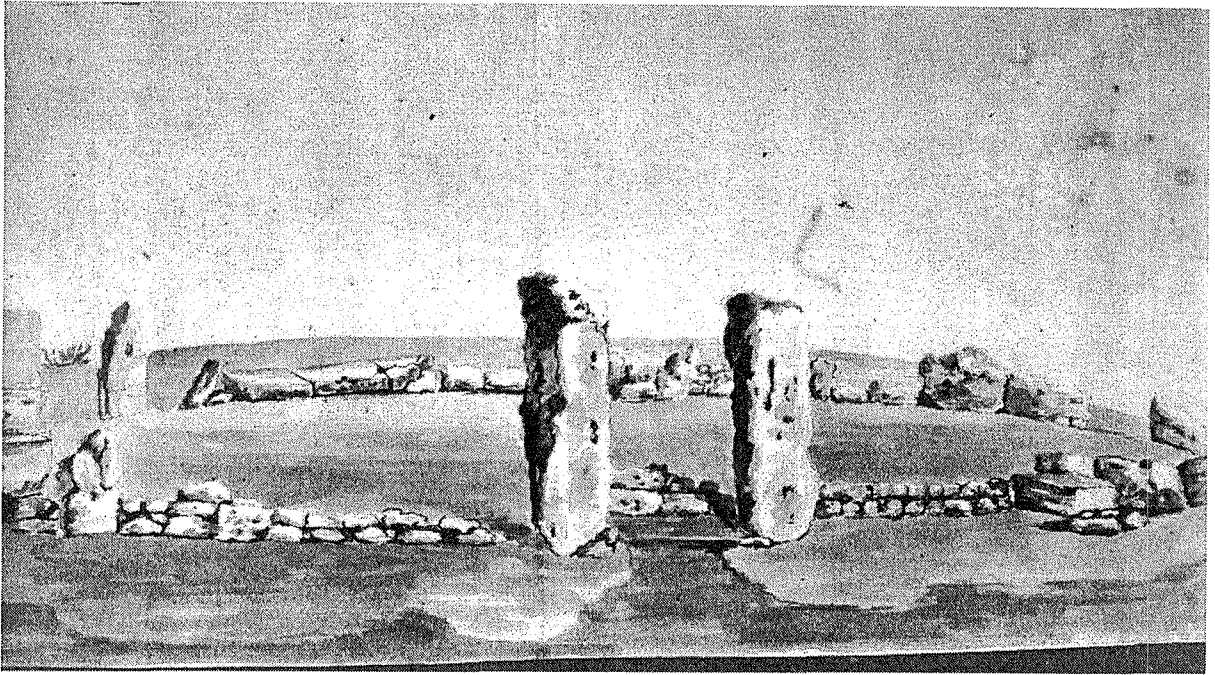
geological peculiarity of the area, the task would undoubtedly have proved too great for the primitive technical resources of the prehistoric worker" (Evans 1955: 5).

Like Abela, eighteenth century Maltese historians, such as Count Gian Antonio Ciantar and the Gozitan, Canon Gian Piet Agius de Soldanis (1746), failed to mention anything about the *Stone Circle*, although they included modest descriptions of Ggantija in their writings. It was a Frenchman, Jean-Pierre-Louis Houel, who brought this megalithic site to the visual attention of the general public (Houel 1782-87 iv: 37, plates ccxlix, ccli). Houel was an artist, a writer, a naturalist and an engraver. He was sponsored by the King of France to pursue his studies in Italy. In 1776, Houel started a tour of Sicily, Malta and the Lipari Islands, reaching Malta a year later. He drew and described the antiquities of these islands, about which little was known at that time. In Malta, he was occasionally accompanied by the French painter Antoine de Favray, and in Gozo it was highly probable that he was shown round the antiquities and places of interest of the island by Padre Bartolomeo Mifsud, the Maltese Capuchin from Zebbug, known as Padre Pelagio. He was the most knowledgeable person at the time about local history and the antiquities of our islands, and he was the only historian who had given a proper description of the *Gozo Stone Circle* before Houel, although it remained in manuscript form (C.M.A. Misc. 55: 144).

In this manuscript, Pelagio produced a detailed study of the Gozo parishes in which he included a *Relazione storica dello stato temporale e spirituale del Casal Caccia e della sua parrocchiale chiesa*. For the first time, we have a rough plan of the Ggantija Temples, a sketch of a large cave, probably in the vicinity, and a plan of a round megalithic structure, which he describes as being halfway between Ggantija and the small church of St. Anthony the Abbot. Without any doubt, this is the *Gozo Stone Circle* described and illustrated later by Jean Houel, whose plan is very similar to that by Pelagio.

Besides this plan, Houel published an illustration of these ruins as he saw them

¹ Reference is made to the [N]ational [L]ibrary of [M]alta MS. 515, "*Relazione della rinovata e grandissima divozione introdotta nella Sacra Grotta di S. Paolo nell'Isola di Malta, con una breve raccolta delle cose notande, ed antichità di dett'isola*" (c. 1612) where Freller is implying that Ggantija is mentioned for the first time in this text. This is not the case. M.C.A. MS. Misc.269, which is a later copy of the Ascias manuscript (1623), is also devoid of any reference to Ggantija. N.L.M. MS. 456, also quoted in this context by Freller, is irrelevant to the subject.



The Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

Houel's depictions of the Stone Circle on Gozo

in 1777. The interior of Ggantija was mostly buried under heaps of boulders and debris which had accumulated throughout the millennia. For this reason, the plans of both Pelagio and Houel are inaccurate, as it would not have been possible to define the internal walls of the apses before Lieut. Col. John Otto Bayer cleared and tidied up the ruins.

In 1787, Houel published the fourth volume of his *Voyage Pittoresque des Isles de Sicile, de Malte et de Lipari*. Malta is represented by eighteen pages of engravings, some of which show archaeological sites. One full plate shows the Ggantija Temples from the back and another the *Stone Circle* from the front. On another plate, Houel shows the plan of Ggantija and the *Stone Circle* together as he saw them. He described the *Stone Circle* as “*Un edifice antique de forme circulaire*”. Houel was impressed by the big stones forming the wall of this Circle, and he called the remains interesting and imposing due to their colossal character. All the original watercolours of Malta and Gozo by Houel are preserved in the Hermitage at St. Petersburg, and we are still looking forward to seeing them exhibited here sometime in the future. Houel’s description of the *Stone Circle* was copied *verbatim* by later writers like Louis de Boisgelin (1804-5 i: 64, plate vii, fig. 2), and by Frederic Lacroix (1848: 53, plate 25).

The first Englishman to record a visit to the *Stone Circle* was the antiquarian Sir Richard Colt Hoare (1819 ii: 239). He visited Gozo on 17 June 1790. Nineteen years later he published the memoirs of his travels in Italy and Sicily, together with those in Malta and Gozo. After seeing Ggantija, he was directed to the ruins of the *Stone Circle* by a local priest. There he noticed huge fallen stones in the form of a circle with two upright stones, which formed the doorway to the remains. He even claimed to have been the first foreigner to discover them. Colt Hoare was a keen traveller, a writer and an artist. In the course of his tours, he filled a portfolio with drawings of the most interesting objects and places seen. Unfortunately, I have not been able to trace any drawings which he may have done in Malta and Gozo. A big fire

destroyed part of Stourhead, the family seat of the Colt Hoares in Wiltshire, and many precious books and manuscripts were lost.²

During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, several writers, travellers and members of the British services visited Gozo, and a few of these published their accounts. They frequently mention the Ggantija Temples, but never the *Stone Circle*. Between 1820 and 1822, the British Commandant administering Gozo, Lieutenant Colonel John Otto Bayer, undertook, at his own expense, the clearance of the Ggantija Temples. He also made a deep excavation in the middle of the *Stone Circle*. The work was mainly carried out by the convicts of the Gozo Prison. I believe that he may have had some assistance from his deputy, James Somerville, a Magistrate and the Collector of Inland Revenue in Gozo, as well as from Don Giuseppe Bellanti, the Librarian of the Biblioteca in Valletta and from Matteo Bonavia, the Superintendent of Works in Malta. Bonavia has left his name carved on a stone at Ggantija. Unfortunately for Otto Bayer, but a blessing in disguise for future archaeologists, the clearance operation at the *Gozo Stone Circle* was interrupted abruptly. The landowner objected to further digging because he thought that there was treasure buried there. It was his intention to find it and take possession of it himself. Otto Bayer had only made an arrangement with the tenant farmer to excavate the site.

On 15 February 1823, soon after the suspension of the excavations, the parish priest of Xaghra, Don Francesco Gafa died. During the excavation, he had collaborated with Otto Bayer on several public works projects, including repairing the Xaghra - Rabat road (N.A.M. 1821-22: 56). Otto Bayer himself fell seriously ill and died a few years later in London, where he had gone for medical treatment. He remained a bachelor, and the notes and sketches of his excavations at

² A portfolio of sepia drawings by Sir Richard Colt Hoare was seen in the Biblioteca Sardi at the Accademia di San Luca, showing the “Ancient stations on the Via Appia between Rome and Capua” Manosc. F.33.

Ggantija and the *Stone Circle* have never been traced. Fortunately, however, during the short period before he died, Otto Bayer received some visitors, both from Malta and overseas, and he took the opportunity to show them round his two excavations during their sojourn in Gozo. We know that two of these visitors recorded what they had seen and their records have survived.



Robert Hay - Egyptologist

At the end of September, 1824, Otto Bayer was visited by Robert Hay and Joseph Bonomi, who were on their way to Egypt, where they eventually made a name for themselves by recording some of the ancient Pharaonic antiquities. Hay and Bonomi were shown to the site of the *Stone Circle* by Vincenzo Bonavita, a soldier in the Royal Malta Fencible Regiment after dining the day before with Otto Bayer. Hay gave a meticulous description of the *Stone Circle*, and both he and Bonomi made sketches and took measurements. I have only been able to trace one small sketch of the *Stone Circle* by Hay. This is how he described these remains: "We found a large circle of stones placed like our druidical ones of the same kind in England. In the centre is an excavation, which was opened by Colonel Otto, where we see large blocks of stones like those described at the Giants' Tower. Out of these excavations were turned large quantities of human bones in complete state of decomposition and I found a tooth

and several other small bones that crumbled at the slightest touch. None were larger than the common size" (B.L. Add. MS 31054: 38v, 39).

This is perhaps the earliest and most authentic description of the *Stone Circle* written soon after Otto Bayer's attempt to uncover it. In studying Hay's barely legible diary of his visit to Malta and Gozo, it is clear that he was very accurate with dates, people and places. Therefore, we can take this piece of information as reliable.

More or less at the same time, Otto Bayer had another visitor, this time an English resident in Malta by the name of E.D. Baynes, a man of refined cultural and literary tastes. As editor of the *Mediterranean Literary Register* he later published an account of this excursion to Gozo in the issues of May and June 1827. On the *Stone Circle*, he wrote, ... "we were shown a very remarkable circle of immense stones ... it contained a considerable area in the centre of which an excavation had been made and an immense quantity of human bones found, greatest part of which, however, on being exposed to the air had crumbled into an ash coloured dust. The heap of these substances which we have seen must have exceeded some cartloads among which was still to be found perfect teeth and portions of various bones sufficiently entire to show that they belonged to the human frame and even what parts they were" (M.L.R 1827: 37).

Between 1814 and 1824, the Governor of Malta was Sir Thomas Maitland. He was also the High Commissioner of the Ionian Islands at the time. His opinion of archaeologists was that they were "fools looking for old stones" (Young 1977: 106). During this period, government officials serving in Malta were sometimes transferred temporarily for special duties to Corfu, and vice versa. Otto Bayer himself interrupted his service in Gozo for two years, during which time he was the Resident in Ithaca.

Another officer, Lieutenant George Whitmore of the Royal Engineers, excavated a Greek Temple in Corfu in 1822. In his memoirs he stated that "my discoveries at Cardachio in Corfu probably

suggested to the Governor of Gozo, Colonel Otto Bayer, the possibility of obtaining archaeological information by an examination of what was called the Giants' Tower ... The summit of a neighbouring hill was also crowned with a druidical circle ... On excavating deeper in these places ... many human bones were found with pieces of very rude pottery in the circle" (Johnson 1987: 106). As in other similar instances in his diaries, Whitmore is never wanting in self-praise. Mrs. Pamela Whitmore, widow of Whitmore's great grandson, informs me that a report which he made on Ggantija has gone missing from the original manuscript (*pers. comm.* 3rd February 1988).

In 1829 an article appeared in *Archaeologia*, the publication of the Society of Antiquaries of London, entitled "Notice of Some Remains in Goza, near Malta". It was accompanied by three engravings. The article was written by Captain William Henry Smyth, the Captain of HMS Adventure, who was responsible for taking soundings in different parts of the Mediterranean, and for drawing up hydrographic charts. He was a member of several learned societies in England, and also happened to be the father of a future governor of Malta, Sir Henry Smyth, and the grandfather of Lord Baden Powell, the founder of the Boy Scout Movement.

In Malta, Smyth was well known in the small cultural circle which met at that time in Valletta. He was in close contact with Otto Bayer as well as with Sir John Hookham Frere, with whom he shared a common interest in antiquities, coins and medals (Smyth 1834: 158). Smyth's publication in *Archaeologia* is important mainly because of its three illustrations. The first shows the *Stone Circle* before Otto Bayer started his dig; the second shows Ggantija with the South Temple completely cleared and the North Temple still covered with centuries of debris; whilst the third is a bird's eye view of the village with the *Stone Circle* perched on the top of a hill and the Ggantija temples further down the slope. In this engraving other ruins are shown east of Ggantija, a few metres away from the temples. Minor excavations carried out in 1953 by Professor Evans, in parts of the nearby

rubble wall, revealed only undisturbed temple period deposits. These megalithic remains, which are an integral part of the temples' complex and perhaps the monumental main entrance to the courtyard and the temples themselves, have always been ignored by archaeologists and completely neglected by the authorities. Public and private constructions were allowed to be built on its peripheries. The public toilets are part of these eyesores and when the cesspit overflows, the liquid seeps into the foundations of these remains. Perhaps the roots of tall trees planted over them about thirty years ago are causing the greatest damage. Their alien presence opposite the facades of the temples seriously interferes with the harmony that bonds the temples with the rest of the countryside.

Two watercolour drawings of this site, one by Charles Brocktorff, the other by Clemente Busuttill, show a trilithon doorway, whilst Robert Hay gives this description: "We returned to the Giants' Tower where we saw an altar that had escaped us before, till informed of it by Col. Otto. It is like all the others and is built into a wall in front of the two temples in the next field that is about twelve feet lower ..." (Hay 39v). Moreover, Pelagio's description of a vast cavern in the vicinity of the *Castello*, meaning the Ggantija, may be sited somewhere in this area and this is what he says: "Pertanto della parte di Levante vicino al Castello nella distanza di passi esiste la detta molto vasta e profonda cava, l'imboccatura della gle, e quel tanto al primo ingresso fermati ..." (M.C.A. Misc. 55: 144v). The distance was filled in later by a copyist of the manuscript who after *passi* wrote down 35, which is the approximate distance between the temples and the wall under which this site is buried. The person who copied Pelagio's manuscript is none other than Don Francesco Buttigieg, the parish priest who succeeded Don Francesco Gafa in 1823. In 1864 Buttigieg was appointed as the first bishop of Gozo (G.C.A. 8).³

³ This version was copied by various persons thereafter. A copy at the Museum of Archaeology is dated 21st February 1859. J.D. Evans (1971: 182-3) published a version which he acquired from Mgr. G. Farrugia Gioioso of Gozo. R.N. Bradley (1912: 68)

Although the three engravings in *Archaeologia* are signed by W.H. Smyth, in my opinion they are the work of a local artist. I have traced the originals to London. A watercolour in sepia, which is a contemporary work and an exact replica of Smyth's *Stone Circle* engraving, came to light with the disposal of the estate of the Busuttil family of artists in Gozo.

Perhaps, the most famous and accurate drawings of Ggantija and the *Stone Circle* are a series of 21 watercolours, drawn by Charles Brocktorff for Richard Grenville, 1st Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, during his visit to Malta and Gozo in 1828. They are now preserved in our National Library (N.L.M. Ms. 1161). We are also fortunate to have fifteen pen and ink over pencil sketches for this original and unique set of drawings which was acquired by the National Museum of Archaeology in 1966 (M.A.R. 1966: 8; Ridley 1971: 17, plate 11).

One of Brocktorff's watercolours shows Ggantija, and in the background the *Stone Circle* can be seen in the distance. In another, he illustrates the *Stone Circle* with the two monoliths facing southeast, and a mound of earth in the centre of the enclosure. A closer and more detailed view of the actual excavation is given in another drawing in which a local farmer can be seen coming out of a cave showing a skull to two men. The temples of Ggantija are seen in the background with the village of Nadur and Malta in the distance. This is the only known pictorial record of the structural remains which were uncovered during Otto Bayer's excavations. Other objects, such as pottery sherds, small stonework and flint implements were discarded. At that time, archaeology was still in its infancy, and excavators were after treasure, rather than after small remains and artefacts which might shed light on the past.

In the summer of 1828, while sailing in the Mediterranean on his yacht "Anna Eliza", the Duke of Buckingham paid a

mentions "an old family document, full of wonderful theories, about the origin of the neighbouring villagers, which accidentally came into his (Nicholas Said of the P.W.D.) possession". This seems to be one of these copies.

two-day visit to Gozo. He was a great antiquarian and collector, and the main purpose of his visit was to see the antiquities of the island. He started off with the *Stone Circle*, and in his memoirs he described it as follows: "On the top of a hill is a low enclosure of large rude stones ... At the east portion of this enclosure are two upright stones, forming a portal into it. In the middle, an excavation has been made, which has discovered a circle of upright rough-stones surrounding a rude altar, consisting of rough unhewn slab, supported by two uprights" (Buckingham 1862 ii: 95).

The last person recorded as having visited the *Stone Circle* whilst it was still intact was the Rev. William Veale Hennah. He was chaplain on H.M.S. Windsor Castle which was stationed in Malta for some years. Around 1831, he wrote a detailed report with plans and measurements of the Ggantija Temples. He made sketches of some of the finds including a stone head, the spiral motives on stone and several pieces of pottery sherds. From the designs on these sherds, they can easily be dated to the Tarxien Period (3000 - 2500BC). They represent the first illustrations on record of prehistoric sherds in the history of Maltese archaeology. After describing the Ggantija temples, Hennah records that "In the same hill, and not far from the 'Torre dei Giganti', there is a curious circle of large stones. Some are of a great size but two only are standing upright. It is called *El Eejun* ... A deep pit in the centre attests to the commencement of the excavation. Many human bones lie scattered around and in it, which appear to have been buried with lime. We suppose from the circumstances above mentioned that this must have been the cemetery of the Temple" (S.A.L. Ms.195H: 9). And it is a surprise to see Hennah's observations confirmed by the recent archaeological excavation, as a result of which the site has been identified as a hypogeum, as well as having been used for other funerary purposes at different periods before and after. However, the lime referred to was simply the natural limestone dust found in the area.

In January 1834, Aliberto de la Marmora, a military man in service with the

Kingdom of Sardinia, arrived in Gozo for a few days to compile a report on Ggantija. His main interests were archaeology, numismatics and natural history. Significant efforts were made to trace the *Stone Circle*, but he was unable to find it, though he was accompanied and assisted in his work by the local artist Clemente Busuttil. Perhaps Busuttil himself was warned by the locals not to take any foreign visitors to these ruins, taking into consideration what the next visitor witnessed on this site, only one year later (De la Marmora 1836 i).

On 28 October 1835, the German Prince, Herman Pückler-Muskau arrived in Malta from Tunis on the Belgian barque *Météore* accompanied by his secretary, Mr. Deacre, and his two oriental servants. Whilst in Malta, he took the opportunity during mid-December to pay a visit to Gozo. In his memoirs he gave what may be the sole existing eyewitness account of the destruction of the *Gozo Stone Circle*. He took it to be an underground burial site and said that a lot of interesting objects had been found there and many of the megaliths had been broken into smaller pieces and used as building material. He commented, "*Now everything is destroyed, and, as we got here today, we found a number of people trying to break the two last pillars which were still there.*" He described the unsuccessful attempt of the Government to acquire the site, at the request of the Gozo authorities, as a "*short-sighted*" economy (Von Pückler Muskau 1840: 466-7).

It is evident, therefore, that the destruction of the *Gozo Stone Circle* started in 1834 if not earlier and continued to the end of 1835. Most of the megaliths had been broken up and used for the building of the nearby farmhouse, which is still standing. One, which was not broken up, was incorporated in the wall of the house. Others, apparently not so obvious today, which formed part of the dividing wall between the site and the adjacent field, were saved because they formed the boundary between two separate properties. The large hole had been filled in, the field levelled and the area had taken on an entirely different appearance.

The *Gozo Stone Circle* was completely lost for over a century, and its history mostly forgotten, though later in the nineteenth century it was occasionally mentioned by scholars, such as the architectural historian James Ferguson, the Maltese archaeologist A. A. Caruana and the German scholar Albert Mayr. From a totally different angle, Giorgio Grongnet de Vassé, well known as the architect of the Mosta Dome, included the plan and an imaginary drawing of the *Stone Circle* in a voluminous manuscript on the *Atlantide*. His theory was that our megalithic buildings were pre-diluvian, and he therefore concluded that the Maltese Archipelago is a remnant of Atlantis, the mythical island which vanished under the sea (N.L.M. Ms. 614).

A few important points on certain features observed by visitors at the *Stone Circle* during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries merit further comment. Houel and Colt Hoare described only a circle of large stones, and Smyth did not elaborate further. But Hay, Baynes, Whitmore and Hennah were all impressed by the large quantity of human bones littering the Otto Bayer pit. The Duke of Buckingham was only impressed by the megalithic structure of the site. Brocktorff depicted the mortuary features of the Circle by drawing a man emerging from the pit holding a skull in his hand, whilst Pückler-Muskau lamented that it was being vandalised. That the site had at some time served as a burial place was well known among the local people. In fact, I have met old folk in Xaghra referring to this particular field as a cemetery for plague victims, well before the recent excavations had started.

It would be interesting to compare these descriptions with that of the modern archaeologist working on this site as an osteologist, that is, an expert on the study of bones: "*The ground was filled with hundreds of bones and skulls which had been deposited within niches across the floor of the cave. Many of these bones after being lifted, found their way to one of the Project's flats at a nearby village. First they covered the table, and then the sofas but soon they took over the whole sitting room floor, until the room became one big ossuary*" (Camilleri & Stoddart).

This hypogeum, which belongs to the Safflieni/Tarxien period (3000-2500BC), is the first to be discovered in Gozo. Burials at ground level on this site have been



Carved stone in rubble wall

found, dating back to the pre-temple Zebbug Phase (4100 - 3600BC). The site continued in use until the Tarxien Cemetery Period (2500 to 1500BC). For the first time in the Maltese Islands, archaeologists have investigated, using modern scientific methods, the mortuary component of Maltese ritual during a span of about 2600 years, i.e. between 4100 - 1500BC. Two surface finds dating to the Borg in-Nadur period (1500 - 900BC), in the adjacent field due south, and a quern built in the wall of the same field, could indicate that the site was occupied by the later Bronze Age people.

It was not until 1959, when I noted the megalithic wall, already mentioned, west of Ggantija, which at that time was completely covered with vegetation and trees, that the story of the re-location of the Gozo *Stone Circle* began. I reported the find to Dr. David Trump, at that time the Curator of Archaeology; he included it in the 1960 Museum Annual Report as “a megalithic site with II B sherds (i.e. Tarxien period 3000 - 2500BC) in the angle between the old and the new road leading into the same village of Xaghra” (M.A.R. 1959: 2). At that time we had no idea what these megalithic remains could have been. It took me several years of interviewing the local farmers, spotting surface finds, studying the area and all

the documentation available, both literary and pictorial, before I was able to come to the correct conclusion. What intrigued me most was a round stone carved in the form of a human face which was built into a rubble wall inside a big cave nearby, today completely sealed with building material. Another object which I noticed in another rubble wall quite close, was a roller stone. This is still *in situ*. Later, I also spotted in a rubble wall in the vicinity a handle decorated with a typical Zebbug period design, which once formed part of a big ceramic container.

On 29 November 1965, during an illustrated lecture organised by the Malta Archaeological Circle at the British Council, Valletta, I announced the identification of this site. My arguments were convincing enough for the Chairman of the Archaeological Circle and Curator of Archaeology, the late Francis S. Mallia, to conclude the meeting by declaring that “all efforts would be made to re-excavate the site at some later date” (T.O.M. 3rd December 1965: 6).

Some time later I was able to discuss the possible location of the *Stone Circle* with David Trump, on site. Trump became convinced that my interpretation of the available data and identification of the site was correct. We even ventured to place Otto Bayer’s excavation at a point under an old fig tree, more or less in the centre of the field. When David Trump published his *Malta - An Archaeological Guide*, he named the site *Brocktorff’s Circle* (Trump 1972: 158, fig. 33).

More ground was gained during the *First International Conference on Archaeology of the Ancient Mediterranean*, which was held in Malta during September 1985. Here I had the opportunity to introduce myself to some of the conference members attending the meeting. I organised several trips to Gozo for some of the participants in order to show them round the archaeological sites. Besides the *Stone Circle*, I showed the visitors, amongst who were David Trump and Marija Gimbutas¹,

¹ Marija Gimbutas was professor of prehistory at the Institute of Archaeology, University of California in Los Angeles and the author of several books and many papers. One of her main interests was the

a new archaeological site at Ghajnsielem, on the Mgarr-Victoria Road. A few months earlier I had had the good fortune to spot and identify a prehistoric settlement, which from surface evidence I took to be contemporary with the temple builders. The American and British archaeologists expressed a keen interest in these two sites. The prehistoric settlement, the first of its type in Malta and Gozo, was excavated in 1987 by a British team. They found it to be a domestic settlement in the form of two oval huts with several layers of *torba* flooring and remnants of mud brick walls (Malone, Stoddart & Trump 1988: 297-301).

The major impetus to salvage the *Stone Circle* site stemmed from warnings in 1983 of a series of projects to develop the area (*pers. comm.* David Trump, 21st January 1983; T.O.M. 12th January 1983: 11, 28th February 1983). In particular, it was planned to open a road which would have cut right through the *Stone Circle* site and the Ta' Ghejzu archaeological site, which lies between it and Ggantija, along 8th September Avenue. Local conservation societies, and some of the foreign delegates to the 1985 Conference, when told of these works already in progress, stressed the urgent need to protect the national archaeological heritage of the Maltese Islands. Joint agreements with learned bodies abroad were now explored in an effort to plan a schedule of archaeological surveys and digs, whilst it was still possible to do so.

The Head of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Malta at that time, Professor Anthony Bonanno, the organiser of the International Conference, followed up the idea of setting up a special project. This became known as the Gozo Project. It incorporated both the Ghajnsielem Settlement Site and the *Gozo Stone Circle*, and eventually developed into a joint venture between the National Museum of Archaeology of Malta, and the Universities of Malta, Cambridge and later Bristol. In the

initial stages of the programme, there was another site on the agenda, that at Srug Street, Xaghra, which had just been partly excavated by an American student in connection with her thesis (Molitor 1988: 15-16).⁵ Later, another prehistoric site was included, situated just below Ta' Kuljat Hill. This was discovered in 1987 by David Trump and Simon Stoddart when I suggested to them that they should investigate a supposed Bronze Age silo pit on this hill (Bonanno 1986: 45).

The work on the *Gozo Stone Circle* commenced in August 1987, precisely two centuries after the publication of Jean Houel's description of these remains in his *Voyage Pittoresque*. This excavation re-awakened interest in local prehistory which had been dormant since the archaeological survey of the 1950s, David Trump's last major dig at Skorba in the early sixties, and the excavations of the Italian Archaeological Mission at Tas-Silg. Besides an array of modern and sophisticated archaeological methods in the excavation proper, use was also made of the latest scientific techniques of pollen analysis and radiocarbon dating, resistivity and proton magnetometer surveys and, above all, computerisation of the data recovered.

Among the people who contributed in some way or other towards the success of the project, I would like to mention Mikiel Bartolo, the late tenant farmer of the fields where the *Stone Circle* is to be found. During my years of research, he proved both supportive and a sound source of local knowledge. Furthermore, during the excavation campaign, one hot July after another, for six years, he welcomed the archaeological team into his simple but tidy house, close to the Circle. During those campaigns, he was one of the very few who welcomed me near the excavation site.

Although some archaeologists have, in retrospect, claimed that it was easy enough to relocate the *Gozo Stone Circle* from the circular form of the site on the survey maps, in practice it was not that simple (Bonanno 1991: 682). It took me

woman figure in prehistory. Although she gave an interesting lecture during the Conference, this has not appeared in the proceedings *Archaeology and Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean*, Ed. A. Bonanno (Malta 1986).

⁵ This site had been discovered in 1971, but was kept undisclosed until Molitor's arrival in Malta in 1984.

five years of research to bring this problem to a conclusion. After all, Professor J.D. Evans placed the *Stone Circle* in a different site, closer to the Ggantija temples, and other archaeologists searched incessantly to locate it, but without success. In a short note in 1929 to Professor Zammit, in which he sent him a photo of the Circle from Smyth's illustration, Flight Lt. R. Forbes-Bentley asked: "Are these stones still there. I do not remember them at all?" (M.A.R. 1929-30: v). The site was completely overlooked in 1946, when the list of ancient buildings and sites in Gozo was drawn up by a Government appointed Commission of experts. The farmhouse next to the *Stone Circle* was listed (Ancient Monuments Committee 1946),⁶ whilst the actual site of the Circle was not included—a clear indication that fifty years ago the site remained unknown.

In 1983, when the site was being seriously threatened by development, the Museum authorities and the Antiquities Board were brought to their senses to take action and save it from the second wanton destruction which this time might have been total.⁷ The next step was to carry out a proper excavation of the site. This took place over consecutive summers between 1987 and 1994.

Now that the first laborious and important stage of the excavation has been completed, it is essential that a full report be published without further delay. It is unsatisfactory for the findings to be published piecemeal.⁸

The excavation of the *Stone Circle* produced new knowledge of the funerary customs of the prehistoric people of the Maltese Islands. It also produced unique and exciting artefacts, such as stone axes, personal ornaments, and statuettes,

including two finely carved stone figures on a couch. There is an urgent need for these invaluable objects to be securely housed in a permanent exhibition under controlled atmospheric conditions. An excellent, and relatively inexpensive, solution would be to convert the farmhouse by the *Stone Circle* into a modern museum, in which all the prehistoric finds of Gozo could be well displayed, close to the area in which they were discovered.

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⁶ This farmhouse, destroyed after a bad storm in 1976 was then described as "a semicircular building with two stone masks of unknown antiquity."

⁷ A letter on the precarious situation, packed with information on the archaeological importance of the area, was handed over to the Chairman Antiquities Board while the Committee was in session on February 24, 1983.

⁸ Publication of the findings was scheduled to start last August (*pers.comm.* Simon Stoddart & Caroline Malone to Anton Mifsud, 23rd January 1999) [eds.].

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