

A remarkable feature at Mnajdra

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During a visit of the Southern Temple (Lower Temple) at Mnajdra in April 2007 a remarkable feature was observed. After studying recent and older literature¹ on the Mnajdra temples, it seemed to me as though nobody had previously discovered or, at least, recorded it. In April 2008 I was informed about a single written reference. Another well-hidden reference came to light in April 2010. Both will be presented below.

As it might affect the interpretation of the temple and religious practice, I considered it important to give the feature some prominence here.

At the entrance to the Southern Temple, the visitor has to cross a limestone slab on the ground. It is just at the entrance of a trilithon which, according to Trump,² forms part of a newly built façade (a second, later façade of the temple). On the surface of the slab, a brown “wavy line” is visible (Colour plate 7). A closer examination shows that it is primarily a geological feature: a layer of calcite on Lower Coralline limestone. Similar calcite layers seem to occur frequently on the islands, for instance, near the Hamrija Tower, only some hundred metres away from the Mnajdra temples, on the bedrock. Other examples have been seen on Upper Coralline limestone near Ghajn Tuffieħa Bay. Primarily it seems to be a “karst” phenomenon, like the formation of stalactites, stalagmites and suchlike.

Normally, at this point the case should be closed for the archaeologist.

But what makes the slab interesting is the inevitable impression it may have on the visitor: the slab had been selected for that purpose and



Plate 1. Mnajdra. Southern (Lower) Temple. Slab with calcite layer at the entrance (view from SSE)

had been placed intentionally into its position (Plate 1 and colour plate 8). On recent coloured ground-plans of Mnajdra³ the “wavy line” seems to be indicated by a thicker green line. So far, I have never seen an interpretation for it. On some photographs of Mnajdra shown in “olċer” literature⁴ the feature is visible, even on aerial photographs.⁵

The “wavy line” reminds me of a feature on two stones with relief bands inside the Tarxien Temple, next to the statue of the Great Goddess (Plate 2).⁶ A snake or “snake-like” feature on a slab from Ġgantija Temple (now at the Archaeological Museum in the Citadella, Victoria, Gozo) seems similar.⁷ Whether these wavy lines depict symbols for water or snakes, I am not in a position to decide. Each of these interpretations, and even both together, might be possible. A snake might be a “guardian” of the entrance. Water might be the separation of spheres – between the “world” outside and the interior of the temple, i.e. the religious sphere (or whatever interpretation might be placed on it). A snake or a water symbol might also be an element related to fertility. Furthermore the snake is also a symbol of life after death, of immortality and transformation (“rejuvenation” through a new skin).

Be that as it may, the position of the slab seems to be intentional and might have had some deeper meaning for the temple builders. The importance of the temple entrance generally is underlined by a small standing stone (cone) near the entrance at Mnajdra (Zammit saw three of them⁸) and sometimes, at different temples, by holes for libations (?) or “tethering holes”.⁹

In my experience, having visited most of the Maltese and Gozitan temple sites, I never remember having seen a similar calcite line or layer. This material, Coralline limestone together with calcite layer, does not seem to occur in the temple buildings. This supports the impression that it has been selected intentionally.

Another singular example of the selection of a calcite-containing stone is a small sculpture from Tarxien.¹⁰ Here, the head of the figure is fashioned out of the beautiful red coloured part of the pebble.

It is not my intention to go further into the possibilities of interpretation for the slab with the “wavy line”. I just want to draw the attention to the peculiar feature, and I now leave it to the specialists for discussion.

After submitting the paper to the editor, I was informed that there already existed a written reference to the “Mnajdra serpent”.¹¹ Christopher Tilley wrote in 2004:

“The external entrance slab has a striking natural vein of dark quartz meandering across its surface and resembling a serpent. It must



Plate 4. For comparison. Tarxien, Southern Temple. Slab with relief band (near the Great Goddess)

have been chosen and placed here because of the presence of this inclusion (not mentioned in the literature)”.¹²

On a final note, in April 2010 I was informed that, in an article about the finds from Tas-Silġ, Italian archaeologists had already presented a photograph, a short note and an indication on the temple plan.¹³ The discovery of the overlooked feature by Maurizio Moscoloni and – perhaps around the same time – independently by Christopher Tilley dates back to the year 2004 or even earlier. But in sum, it is surprising that – in a period of over a hundred years and with crowds of visitors crossing the slab – only three people took enough notice to publish the feature.

For the Italian scholars, the Mnajdra slab was only interesting as it seemed to hint at the presence of flint resources in Malta:

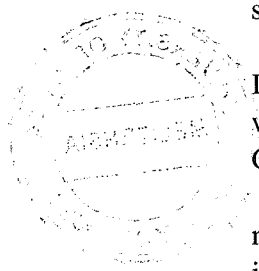
‘[...] una formazione silicea [...] inserita nella roccia calcarea, indiziando che una fonte di selce dovrebbe essere non lontana da questa località.’

‘[...] contains quite a large flint formation [...] which is part of the limestone rock and would suggest the presence of a source of flint nearby.’¹⁴

Nevertheless, I am confident that the Mnajdra feature is calcite not flint, and would therefore not be proof that there are flint resources nearby.¹⁵ The “serpent-like” shape of the vein was not interesting for the Italian scholars and therefore they did not mention it.

‘[...] la collocazione architettonicamente prestigiosa del blocco protrebbe anche sottolineare l’eccezionalità di questa presenza.’

‘The placing of the slab in a prominent architectural position might also serve to emphasise the exceptional presence [of flint].’¹⁶



This statement has to be corrected: it does not seem to be flint but calcite which sometimes occurs naturally on the surface of bedrock. What is exceptional is not the mineral but the shape of the vein seen within the existing religious and symbolic aspects. The accidental discovery

of the slab with the serpent-like vein by the megalith builders, probably during quarrying activities, and its subsequent use, fitted well with the religious beliefs and it was therefore placed at the entrance of the Mnajdra temple.

Notes

- 1 J. Fergusson, *Rude Stone Monuments in all Countries; their Age and Uses*, (London. John Murray, 1872), 418-421, Fig. 179; A. Mayr, 'Die vorgeschichtlichen Denkmäler von Malta'. *Abhandlungen der königlich bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften I.CI. XXI. Bd. III. Abth.*, (München. 1901), 645-721; J.D. Evans, *Malta*, (London. Thames and Hudson, 1959); J.D. Evans, *The Prehistoric Antiquities of the Maltese Islands: a Survey*, (London. Athlone Press, 1971), 95-104, Pl. 9-12, Plan 20; D.H. Trump, *Malta: An Archaeological Guide*, (Malta. Progress Press, rev. ed. 2000), 110-116; D.H.Trump, *Malta – Prehistory and Temples*, (Malta. Midsea Books, 2002), 148-151; T. Zammit, *The Prehistoric Temples of Malta and Gozo*, translated by Karl Mayrhofer as *Die prähistorischen Tempel von Malta und Gozo*, (Malta. S. Masterson, 2nd edition 1998), 56-57; J.v. Freeden, *Malta und die Baukunst seiner Megalith-Tempel*, (Darmstadt. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993).
- 2 Trump, 148.
- 3 Ibid.,149., and A. Pace, 'Mnajdra', in D. Cilia, (ed.), *Malta before History*, (Malta. Miranda Publishers, 2004), 128.
- 4 I. Tetzlaff, *Malta und Gozo. DuMont Kunst-Reiseführer*, (Cologne. DuMont, 2nd, revised and enlarged edition, 1983), Fig. 80.
- 5 Ibid., Fig. 78 ; Evans (1959, Pl. 17; Evans (1971), Pl. 10,1.
- 6 Pace, 'Tarxien', in Cilia, 61.
- 7 Pace, 'Ġgantija', in Cilia, 172.
- 8 Zammit, 56.
- 9 Pace, 'Haġar Qim', in Cilia, 112, 120, plans of Haġar Qim; 113 text; 114 plan; 116-118 photographs; Pace, 'Tarxien', in Cilia, 49, plan of Tarxien, detail B; 65 lower picture (reconstruction of façade); Pace, 'Skorba', 154 plan of Skorba, especially Skorba West; 155, aerial photograph.
- 10 I. Vella Gregory and D. Cilia, *The Human Form in Neolithic Malta*, (Malta. Midsea Books, 2005), 158-159, Fig. 139; A. Pace (ed.), *Maltese Prehistoric Art 5000-2500 BC*, (Malta. Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti in Association with the National Museum of Archaeology, 1996), 85, Nr. U4.
- 11 My thanks go to Ms Patricia Camilleri for the information and to Dr Nicholas Vella for finding the well-hidden reference.
- 12 Christopher Tilley, *The Materiality of Stone* (Oxford. Berg, 2004), 112.
- 13 A. Cazzella and M. Moscoloni, "Gli sviluppi culturali del III e II millennio a.c. a Tas-Silġ: analisi preliminare dei materiali dagli scavi 1963-70 e della loro distribuzione spaziale", *Scienze dell'antichità – Storia, archeologia, antropologia* 12 (2004-2005), 263-284, especially 273 text, 274, Fig. 5 plan and photograph. – Thanks go to Ms Patricia Camilleri for providing the article and to Dr Nicholas Vella for the information about an interview with Dr Reuben Grima in May 2010 in which he mentioned the calcite vein.
- 14 Ibid., 273.
- 15 By means of a Mohs-test on site one may identify the material easily, since silex/flint and quartz are much harder than calcite.
- 16 Cazzella and Moscoloni, 273.

