

Article

# Neolithic Ritual on the Island Archipelago of Malta

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**Abstract:** This paper addresses the ritual of Neolithic Malta in its island context drawing on recent research by the FRAGSUS project. Ritualised club houses placed in horticultural enclosures formed the focal point of the prehistoric Maltese landscape in the fourth and third millennia BC, providing a stable exploitation of the islands by the small populations of the period. This was a period when connectivity was more challenging than in the Bronze Age which followed, when Malta became part of the wider ritual patterns of the central Mediterranean and beyond. The paper provides discussion of the leading issues and arguments applied to this rich case study of island ritual.

**Keywords:** club house; connectivity; Malta; Mediterranean; ritual

## 1. Introduction

It has often been remarked that something rather special, perhaps even unusual, happens in the ritual sphere on islands in prehistory. It is an empirical observation that islands have disproportionately large numbers of prehistoric ritual monuments. This observation has been noted from as far afield as Polynesia with examples such as Hawaii (Kirch 1990) and Easter Island (Boersema 2015). The same observation has been made of islands of the Mediterranean with examples that range from the Balearics (Lewthwaite 1985) to Sardinia (Tinè and Traverso 1992) and to our case study of Malta (Figure 1). This raises questions of why this should be so. Do islands as different in size and isolation as Easter Island and Sardinia have something physically or biogeographically in common that transcends time or is the comparison more in the mind, a social construction of reality, heavily dependent on the socio-political context in which they are situated? We collect together the data and interpretations here for Malta so that readers can address this debate with the most up-to-date information and interpretations, and so that they can come to their own conclusions for an archipelago at the smaller end of the spectrum.



**Citation:** Stoddart, Simon. 2022. Neolithic Ritual on the Island Archipelago of Malta. *Religions* 13: 464. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050464>

Academic Editors: Giorgos Papantoniou, Athanasios K. Vionis and Christine E. Morris

Received: 3 October 2021

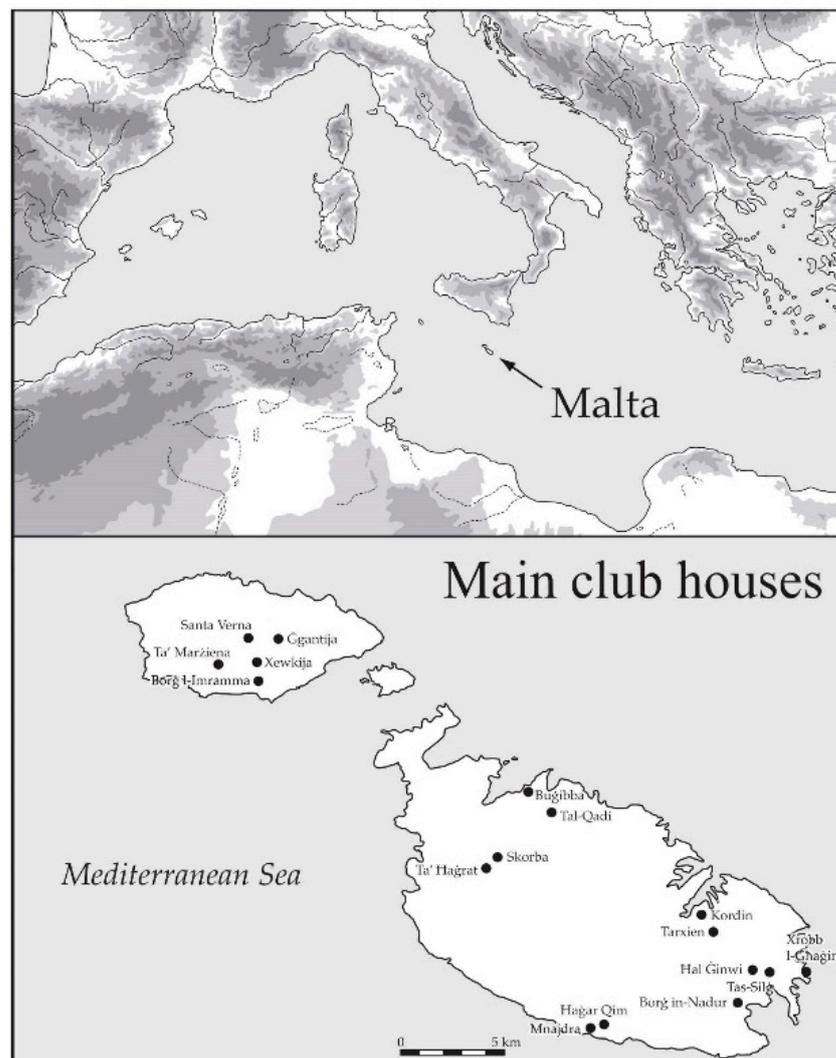
Accepted: 28 March 2022

Published: 20 May 2022

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**Figure 1.** The Maltese islands. The location of club houses, traditionally known as temples.

## 2. The Relationship between Past and Present

Ethnography (a study of the present or near present) has often been studied as a guide to island society. The work of the late Marshall Sahlins is one important example of the way in which the socio-political history of islands, from an anthropological perspective, has been very influential. His early work looked at the relationship between size and socio-complexity, taking an ecological perspective (Sahlins 1963). His later work looked at the complex interaction between different types of society in an island world, clarifying their sense of difference, of identity, particularly when connectivity led to the meeting of different worlds (Sahlins 1981; Sahlins et al. 1995). Other work has also shown the entanglement of radically different worlds (Thomas 1991). In our study of prehistoric Malta, we have to clarify that sense of difference. For this purpose, Malta is fortunate to have its own distinguished ethnographer in the late Jeremy Boissevain (e.g., Boissevain 1980), who identified patterns of ritual distributed across the landscape that have an uncanny topological similarity to the patterns of the prehistoric past. Yet, as we will explore, whereas some of the structural scales may have been similar, the ritual content and periodicity of prehistoric Malta was radically different from the village religions of the twentieth century (Barratt et al. 2018). Boissevain (1996) first expected the rituals that he studied in the 1960s to fade away in a more globalised world. In fact, ritual identity became more accentuated, as Malta became more globalised. Did that same pattern apply to the prehistoric past? As another Maltese ethnographer has explained, ritual mediates between the global and the

local (Mitchell 2002) in the modern world. Do the same criteria apply to the prehistoric world?

Indeed, an important pertinent issue is that the conditions of connectivity on islands in prehistory were somewhat altered from those of the present day. We have to transport ourselves into a different world. Islands today have lost a major component of their maritime character, namely the adventure of access, because of the power of air travel, where the maritime features are only regained when the aerial travellers end up on the beach. The difference between past and present is one of the controversial features in explaining the ancient character of islands and the case of prehistoric Malta powerfully illustrates that issue (Evans 1973; Bernabò Brea 1960; Malone and Stoddart 1998; Robb 2001; Malone and Stoddart 2004; Malone et al. 2020a; Dawson 2021). The issue of the level of connectivity is an element that divides a number of these authors in their interpretation of the ritual creativity of island life. It dwells on how much the cultural achievements and characteristics of humans outweigh or interact with the impact of biogeography. In the case of Malta, what is clear is that the technology of both island resilience and travel changed radically between the early Neolithic settlers of the c. 6000 BC and the early state societies of c. 1000 BC. The navigational and other boating skills of the sixth millennium BC made visits to the island of Malta a substantial venture and a degree of fragile existence once agriculture was established, so that most regular resources had to be locally procured. The navigational and other boating skills of the first millennium BC made crossings from the nearest larger land masses much less of a risk and began a process of regular procurement of external resources that allowed much higher and potentially more stable population levels. The transition from one level of connectivity to another over the course of the fourth to second millennium BC was complex, but we can now draw on data that are both cultural and biological. From a modern perspective, where it is easy (at least outside COVID-19 times) to arrive in Malta from most places in Europe, it is more difficult to imagine how the embedded cultural physicality of the Maltese islands contributed to the creative response.

Here we outline this extraordinary explosion of ritual activity on the Maltese islands in the fourth and third millennium BC. We summarise and develop some of the debates on why and how this took place in the light of the most recent evidence at our disposal. We start by examining the character of Malta from three temporal perspectives.

### 3. Scales of Time and Ritual

The Maltese islands can be studied in Braudelian terms (Braudel 1949): the *longue durée* physicality of the islands; the medium scale of the social and technological context; and the action of individuals at the scale of time witnessed by the actors involved. These scales interact and have a degree of fuzziness at their boundaries, but an investigation of these scales illustrates many of the issues in the identification and exegesis of prehistoric Maltese religion.

### 4. The *Longue Durée*

The Maltese islands are small, totalling 317 square kilometres and one of the best studied larger islands, Gozo, is even smaller, reaching only 67 square kilometres. This size has decreased over time because of rising sea level; indeed, the islands were once a headland of Sicily (until c. 14,000 BP; Furlani et al. 2013, Figure 9). However, the size of the islands was relatively stable in the relevant period of the fourth to the third millennium BC (although memories may have remained in the prehistoric mythologies of a fading land mass (Stoddart 2015)). In the same way, the distance of about 80 km from the nearest landmass, Sicily, also remained relatively constant during the same period, although historical navigators' accounts of the crossing vary from absolute calm to substantial storms, so the distance was still potentially a challenge.

The geology of the island provided another element of stability in the character of the island, entirely composed, as it is, of sedimentary rocks and different forms of limestone interbedded with more impermeable clays. These layers, transformed by fault lines, created

a fractal quality of landscape in the islands where the small islands were themselves compartmentalised into smaller component parts, so that the small was itself divided into smaller, more intimate and personal places (Alberti et al. 2020, p. 267). Grima (2016b) has shown that this fractal quality was even introduced into the subterranean monuments themselves, where structure was provided by the very bedding planes of the substrata. The geology (permeable/impermeable layers and fault lines) also created springs and aquifers, vital for an island system that has no perennial rivers. Water was, and is, a crucial and enduring limiting factor of life in the Maltese islands, one consequently linked to ritual and perhaps to cosmology, as we will discover, and this fact has been extensively explored by Reuben Grima (2016a). Moreover, the globigerina and coralline limestone rock offered malleable material for the construction of the framework for the built environment and the clays and globigerina limestone created immense opportunities for portable material culture within these structures.

The southern European latitude of the islands, nested between continental Europe and continental Africa, has consistently offered long growing seasons, as well as evocative light on land and water alike, characteristics that impressed individuals in the more modern world such as Samuel Coleridge and Edward Lear. These evocative sources of light and dark also undoubtedly impressed the prehistoric people (Stoddart et al. 2020a), particularly when accompanied by violent storms and substantial runoff into the small, intimate, and periodically violent, catchments of the islands.

The absences from the island were and are as important as the presences. There is no current evidence of pre-Neolithic occupation of Malta when, prior to 12,000 BC (Furlani et al. 2013, Figure 9), she was a headland of Sicily, so humans have always had to bring in a number of resources. Some resources, such as animals and plants, had to be brought in on a small scale to initiate agriculture on a larger scale, and then grown and expanded to provide the necessary basis of a stable occupation of islands of this size. Current pollen evidence suggests that this was achieved by c. 5900 BC (Farrell et al. 2020). After the initial import of cultigens, the islands had to become broadly self-sufficient once a population was established, since the large-scale import of food stuffs was not a practical proposition until the first millennium BC. Other raw materials such as some cherts (Chatzimpaloglou 2020a, 2020b), hard stones (Dixon et al. 2009) and obsidian (Malone et al. 2009, pp. 250–53) were similarly imported on a small scale and were probably accompanied by a continuing exchange of humans, both to provide the transport and what we currently assess to have been a limited exchange of genetic material (Ariano et al. 2022). The exotic provenance of materials can be proved, but these materials are difficult to quantify or date. The degree of movement of humans (measured by oxygen and strontium isotopes) is even more difficult to assess, because of the similarities of neighbouring geologies for strontium and the complex pathways for oxygen (Stoddart et al. in press). What is, however, clear is that it was no small venture, compared with today, to cross the waters to Sicily or Africa and what evidence there is of the biology of the inhabitants suggests transmission *was* affected by biogeographical factors (Ariano et al. 2022).

## 5. The Structurelle

This stability of the islands was nevertheless fragile, even though both humans and ritual were surprisingly resilient. Humans rapidly stripped the islands of climax vegetation (Farrell et al. 2020) and humans have subsequently prevented the recovery of that land cover, cutting down the trees within a very short period and, in much more modern times, covering a substantial portion of the landscape with concrete. The result has been a long-standing human-induced period of very substantial run-off of water, removing the sediments derived from the parent rock and preventing the development of stable soils. At times, manuring and terracing have been introduced to mitigate these effects, but at this intermediate scale of time, the islands illustrate a lesson to modern humanity on the over-exploitation of the landscape. As will be discussed below, prehistoric ritual very probably had a role in introducing a regulated approach to the landscape, which itself mitigated the

disastrous effect of stripping the landscape of its vegetation. The monuments were, though, more than the mere ritual; they were strongly embedded in the socio-economic fabric of prehistoric Maltese society.

The human response to these difficulties was one of considerable resilience. Human capital has always been a vital component of the Malta story. In this respect, we can define two important prehistoric stages which engage with a link between connectivity and demography (McLaughlin et al. 2020). For the first c. 3500 years of human occupation of the Maltese islands, demographic levels were very low, probably in the very low thousands for Gozo and not substantially more for the larger island of Malta. The first phase of Neolithic occupation may even have reached a crisis after a few hundred years, a result calculated from the application of a substantial suite of new radiocarbon dates to the available stratigraphies. The second phase of occupation was centred around monuments in the landscapes, introducing a more stable system on which we focus in this paper. From this period, we have evidence, on the one hand, of very high infant mortality, but, on the other hand, of the considerable longevity of some of those who survived adolescence (Stoddart et al. in press). The end of this period of the Neolithic (c. 2450 BC) was marked by a transition towards a much greater degree of connectivity with the rest of the Mediterranean, broadly at the beginning of the Bronze Age. New research by Italian and Anglo-Maltese scholars have detected a new pottery style at the end of the Neolithic period which seems to suggest new contacts (Recchia and Fiorentino 2015; Malone et al. 2020b), most probably the product of more advanced navigational skills. These links also brought risks and settlement rapidly transitioned towards defended sites during the full Bronze Age. By the first millennium BC (Stoddart et al. 2020b), the Phoenicians had made the islands an important node in their maritime network and, from this time onwards (with some fluctuations), the demographic progress was substantially upwards. The major demographic increases did, however, have to await the major modern networks of the Knights of Malta, the British Empire and the European Union. Today, the islands house a population approaching half a million people, sustained by the economic and political power of the European Union. By contrast, for the study of prehistoric ritual, we have to envisage much more intimate population levels of low thousands of individuals and even smaller breeding networks of several hundred (Ariano et al. 2022). These are the scales of interaction recorded in the rituals of the villages of modern Malta, albeit with many differences.

## 6. The Eventuelle

The micro scales of individual action are much more difficult to characterise in pre-history and would have provided the greatest contrasts with the modern world. The structural agency of society at the time of the major prehistoric monuments is subject to some debate. Renfrew (Renfrew 1973; Renfrew and Level 1979) sustained a hierarchical idea of society, where the temples were the central foci of a society, implicitly headed by ritual specialists. A rival approach was that of Gimbutas (1991), who stressed the power of women in prehistoric Maltese society, drawing on the perceived feminine form both in the floor plan of ritual sites and in the representation of the human body. More broadly, Gimbutas saw Malta as an example of pacific, female-centred Neolithic religion, particularly prominent in the Balkans, that was replaced by a more male-centred martial society in the Bronze Age, ultimately incoming from the steppes of Asia. More recently, the idea of a more factional prehistoric society has been proposed (Bonanno et al. 1990; Stoddart et al. 1993), where different interest groups jockeyed for position in an intense, but relatively small-scale, society. This model drew substantially on the work of Boissevain (1964, 1965, 1980), who had variously proposed competing networks for the modern rituals and band clubs of modern village Malta. It allowed for ritual specialists to seek advantage within the complex ritual spaces of prehistoric Malta, but was essentially a much flatter perception of relationships within society. The same perception of a flatter, more egalitarian society has continued in more recent writings (e.g., Thompson 2020).

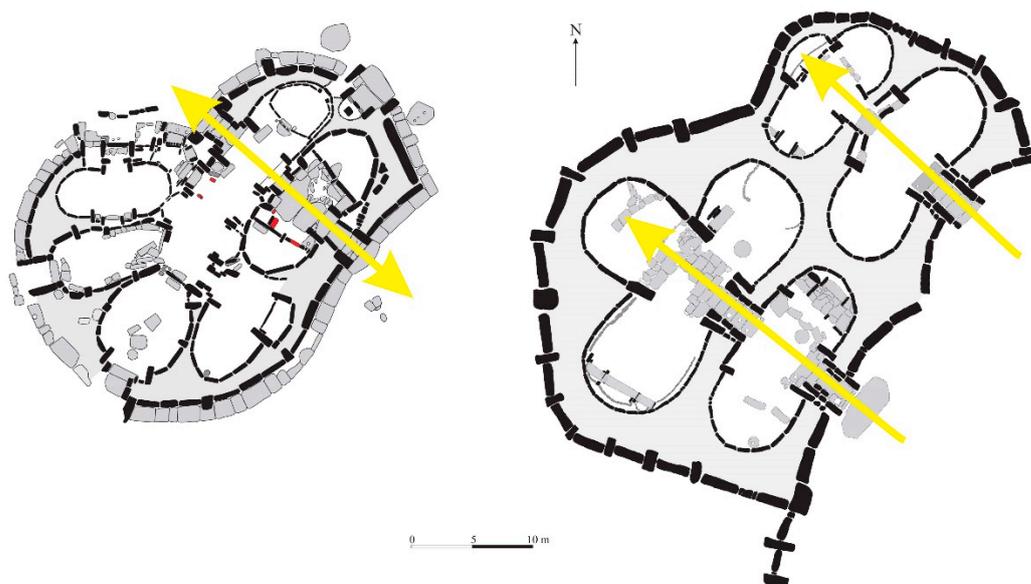
The funerary evidence shows that there was equal participation of all age grades (including the very young) and both sexes in funerary ritual. However, one or two men were placed in structurally significant positions within the funerary stratigraphy, most notably under the very threshold of entry into the best-known funerary complex of the Brochtorff Xagħra Circle. Some individuals appear to have intentionally shaped their teeth as a sign of difference (Power et al. in press a) and one female in the burial complex was adorned with a cap of cowrie shells (Stoddart et al. 2009b, p. 145, Figure 8.47). On the other hand, the rich representation of the human form does not give strong prominence to a particular gender or age, but rather to broad cultural attributes, strongly tied to a collective ritualised identity. As a general trend, all the participants in the funerary ritual went through the same patterns of burial: inhumation placed on the right side, sometimes covered by an animal pelt, perhaps sometimes symbolised by a figurine and accompanied by an offering bowl. This integrity of the human form was followed by collective disarticulation, leaving only a small proportion of the original body intact. Furthermore, the isotopic evidence of diet suggests that there was not a substantial variation in the diet of the members of society, which, according to the latest modelling, was 60–80% animal (heavily sheep and very probably dairy in part), 10–20% plant-based and only 10% fish-based, with a relatively low variation (McLaughlin et al. in press). Given the importance of diet in registering differential wealth and identity, this apparently low level of variance suggests a relatively flat society in terms of access to resources, a point supported by the shared physical resilience. This was also a strongly pacific society (echoing the view of Gimbutas) with very little evidence of trauma or indeed of the means (in the form of weapons) to inflict that trauma on other members of the population, accompanied by clear evidence of curative care of individuals within the community (Power et al. in press b). At the risk of exaggeration, the succeeding Bronze Age appears (again echoing Gimbutas) to have been more prone to conflict, if some of the visual material culture and defensive settlement response is taken at face value.

## 7. The Neolithic Ritual of Malta

What is the evidence for Maltese prehistoric ritual? The main evidence for formalised prehistoric ritual on Malta dates to the fourth and third millennia BC. These are the structures colloquially designated the *temples of Malta*, still laying claim to be some of the earliest free-standing stone structures in the world, impressive structures that have been recognised as long (since the sixteenth century) as the less impressive classical structures on the islands. By contrast, in the first phase of the Neolithic, we only have settlements and some tentative evidence for religion embedded in domestic life from a site such as Skorba. From c. 3800 BC, best illustrated by the excavations of Skorba (on Malta) and Santa Verna (on Gozo), large monumental buildings were constructed, structures that have been designated temples, although we increasingly designate them *club houses*, inspired by the ethnographic work on band clubs on Malta and on comparable socially embedded ritual from further afield, analysed in many non-Western ethnographies (Barratt et al. 2020).

The *club houses* of prehistoric Malta were composed of highly structured, demarcated and cleansed spaces (Figure 2). It is clear that ritual was broadly prescriptive, but also creative. The scale was also monumental, in the best-preserved cases combining shaped globigerina blocks for decorative finesse with unshaped coralline for the main body of the structures. The largest of the structures, that of South Ġgantija, is in excess of 20 × 20 m in area and an original height in excess of 10 m. The opinion is consolidating that these structures were roofed, creating substantial internal dark spaces. The most frequent type of club house was symmetrical, organised about a principal axis rising towards a central apse. The classic example, once again, is the paired structures of Ġgantija. Studies have suggested that the interior was very closely organised so that the left hand was for water and right hand for fire (Malone 2007), developing the theme of dualism noted elsewhere (Tilley 2004). Substantial deposits of animal offerings, principally of heads and feet, were discovered in the best-preserved example of Tarxien, along with numerous offering bowls (Malone 2018). Other material culture was found at visual hotspots within the structures. The interplay of

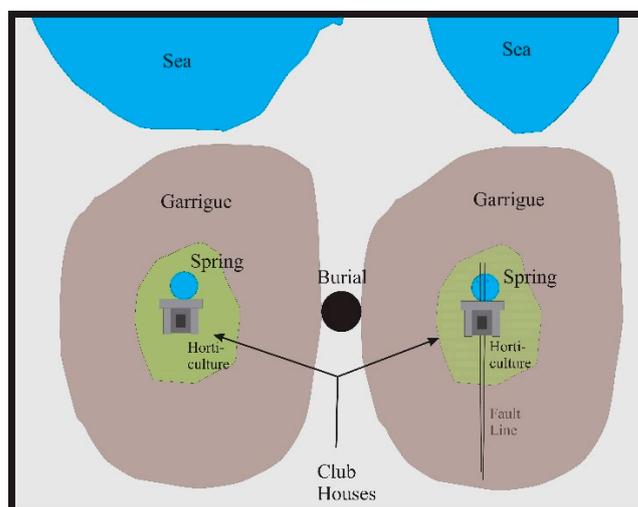
architectural space and liturgical artefacts was exploited through an elaborate theatrical strategy of dark and light, posture and perspective (Tilley 2004), where lines of sight were permanently or temporarily obscured, an interpretation that has been explored through GIS analysis (Anderson and Stoddart 2007), drawing on the best-preserved site of Tarxien, excavated by the father of Maltese archaeology, Themistocles Zammit. The permanent occlusion was, by means of apses, hidden offstage by narrow monumental doorways. These same monumental doorways could be completely closed, as demonstrated by holes in the door jambs. Successive opening of doors and movement of actors hidden within would have created elaborate impressions of sound and light worthy of eastern orthodox liturgy. All these effects would have been greatly enhanced if the structures were roofed. A less frequent type of club house seems to have taken the form of a zone of transition, an architectural rite of passage, where participants would have entered at one end and left by the other open end, replacing the closed apse in the most common format epitomised by Ġgantija (Figure 2, right). This alternative architectural framework suggested a rite of passage from one status to another, perhaps from the sea to the land, or from life into death. The classic example is that of Hslashagar Qim (Figure 2, left), with at least one other example at Tas Silġ. Grima (2001) has applied this idea of ritual transition to all temples (see below), but the case seems even stronger where the architectural framework suggests an entrance and an exit rather than a cul de sac, unless the Maltese archipelago itself was seen as the end point of a journey from the northern Mediterranean shore.



**Figure 2.** Two types of club house: Hslashagar Qim (left) Ġgantija (right).

There is tentative evidence that different club houses may have had different attributes (as interpreted by artistic representations found within them), granting an identity to individual communities associated with them. These attributes appear to have been focused on different living creatures and thus may have formed part of the cosmological structures discussed further below. On the Xagħra plateau on Gozo, the longer-lived club house of Ġgantija appears to have been associated with the serpent, whereas the shorter-lived club house of Santa Verna may have been associated with the snail. On the mainland of Malta, the small club house of Buġibba seems to have been linked to fish, one of the Kordin club houses to the grinding of grain and the large club house of Tarxien to the world of domestic animals. This attribution to parts of the animal world may fit the idea that these club houses were also memory monuments, storing the collective memories of small local communities, which may have consisted of no more than a few hundred people. A cluster of these club houses (Figure 3) may characteristically have shared a common burial ground, as appears to be the case on the Xagħra plateau where the Brochtorff Xagħra Circle

was the focal point between Santa Verna and Ġgantija. This pattern seems to have been repeated on the heights above the modern Grand Harbour where Hslashal Saflieni and the associated site of Santa Lucija were the focal points for the Kordin cluster of club houses on one side and Tarxien on the other. This suggestion provides a future research strategy for investigation of those club houses which lack a burial focus, notably the Hslashaġar Qim and Mnajdra clusters on the southern cliffs of the island of Malta.



**Figure 3.** Club house models of landscape, showing the relationship to different parts of the land and seascape: sea, garrigue, burial places, horticulture and springs.

The evidence for death ritual is also very strongly represented. The main data are derived from two complementary sites. The first, the site of Hslashal Saflieni, discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century, is a complex, deep architectural space which provided a club house for the dead complementary to the one for the living above ground. Sadly, very few of the human remains were preserved. For an understanding of the funerary ritual, we have to turn to the more recent excavations of the Brochtorff Xagħra Circle, where some 220,000 fragments of human bone were recovered, amounting to an estimated minimum of 1001 individuals (Stoddart et al. 2009a, p. 321) if all ages and sexes are included. The ritual procedure, as partly described above, amounted to a highly regulated process of inhumation followed by disarticulation, most probably presided over by ritual specialists, whose liturgical artefacts were found close by. The symbolism appears to have been centred on the recurrent theme of the cycle of life embedded in the longevity of the eternal descent group. Two sets of liturgical artefacts found in a central demarcated zone of the complex appear to echo the cycle of life in material form. One was the stone (globigerina) carving of a pair of corpulent individuals seated on a wooden bed. The first held a small diminutive human form. The second (with the head missing) held an offering bowl. These can be interpreted as child progressing through life stages into the status of an individual buried with their bowl, temporarily personal to them. The second was a set of carved schematic stick figures in different stages of craft completion. Both share elements of the Tarxien dress style, which appears to have been the overarching collective memory of all prehistoric Maltese society. Our interpretation is that these liturgical objects encapsulate, visually and metaphorically, the transitions of life within a framework of eternal memory: childhood and death and craft process.

## 8. Landscape and Cosmology

There is strong evidence that the cosmology of prehistoric Maltese religion can be reconstructed from the placement of the club houses in the landscape. This can be analysed at different scales, starting with their preferential location and investigating their horizontal and vertical relationships with landscape by incorporating increasing scale.

The club houses were preferentially located close to springs (Grima 2004; Ruffell et al. 2018), a preference which allowed the club houses to be the centres not only of consumption but of horticultural production (Figure 3). Study of the soils has shown the improved conservation and enhancement of the soil quality in the immediate environs of these impressive structures (French et al. 2020). In the case of Ġgantija, the club house was deliberately located above a spring which still remains active today, facilitated by a fault line that runs below the structure (Ruffell et al. 2018) and similar bedding planes or fault lines underground at Hslashal Saflieni may have merged the percolation of water with the very structure of the monument (Grima 2016b). The soils around the above-ground club houses have become depleted today, moving towards the arid terra rossas covered with garrigues that are frequent on the overworked limestones of the Mediterranean as a whole. The club houses, in the past, were maintained as ritually defined precincts of intensive horticulture, a tamed Eden, within a wild uncultivated space grazed by sheep and goats that extended across the wider, wilder landscape. The practice of rituals within these precincts was complementary to the socio-economic success of the communities, drawing on the stability that the gardens created. The location of the club houses close to reliable water sources, as convincingly shown by Grima (2016a) on an island-wide basis using a combination of geological prediction and toponyms, must have facilitated the relative success of these monuments. The importance of water is also given emphasis by the presence of very large ceramic containers for liquid, most probably water, in many of the large temple and burial complexes such as Tarxien, Santa Verna and the Brochtorff Xagħra Circle. Grima has suggested that the size, longevity and success of temple clusters was strongly correlated with their agricultural catchment (Grima 2007, 2008), an interpretation given further precision by the recent FRAGSUS project (Grima et al. 2020).

The club houses were arranged in clusters within the horizontal landscape. Generally, these were arranged across a façade (e.g., Ġgantija) or around a court (Mnajdra) or, more informally, stacked horizontally (Hslashaġar Qim and Tarxien). These clusters can be envisaged (as first proposed by Renfrew) at the centre of territories attached to living communities, in some cases attached to a focal burial ground. The formation of the land and the visual qualities of its geology may have inspired the prehistoric inhabitants (Tilley 2004). Equally, access to the sea (as shown by Caruana (1896), Zammit (1929, p. 5), Pace (1996, p. 5) and more recently by Grima (2004) in his GIS work) seems to have been an important criterion, as well as proximity to fresh water, as already described.

This relationship to the sea has also been interpreted cosmologically. Grima (2001, 2003) has suggested that the internal organisation of the temple may itself be related to the interplay of land and sea, as has Tilley (2004). The internal “marine” courts, often surrounded by raised curbs decorated with spirals recalling reflections of water, might have been deliberately flooded with pooled rainwater to enhance this effect, making a contrast with the “terrestrial” apse islands decorated with vegetation carved in relief at Tarxien. Grima has taken this further by suggesting that graffiti of boats at Tarxien and a canoe-shaped grindstone at Kordin II reinforce this pattern. This internal spatial configuration of the club houses could thus have mirrored the Mediterranean island seascape of which Malta was part. This idea may be reinforced by the fact that points of reference, the places in the non-human world of sea and land, are mainly represented in relief, whereas the humans are represented in the round (Grima 2003), setting up a specific cultural categorisation that is special to the Maltese islands.

Scholars have hypothesised that a vertical landscape was also critical, potentially composed of three layers, drawing on comparative ethnographies: the sky, the land and the subterranean (Stoddart 2002; Tilley 2004; Malone 2008; Malone and Stoddart 2009, pp. 374–46; Grima 2016a, 2016b). The structural and cosmological stability of these club houses was guided by their orientation with the celestial world. The entrance appears to have been orientated on the winter solstice, complementary with the life rituals which were undertaken within (Barratt et al. 2018). The principal apses were broadly orientated towards Sicily, the principal point of origin of these very same communities (Stoddart et al. 1993). By contrast, the opening of the one funerary structure, the Brochtorff Xagħra Circle,

where an orientation can be calculated, appears to have been set on the summer solstice, complementary to death rituals practised within. These deep funerary structures gave access to a lower landscape inhabited by the dead and other beings.

These three levels were populated by different beings that the prehistoric Maltese took care to represent in their art (Malone 2008). The world of the visible earth was the most familiar and the most represented. The form of representation was generally corpulent, but a corpulence attached to gender ambiguity. The figuration of the human form generally adopted a sacred style of gathered hair (Stoddart and Malone 2018), limited individuality and flounced skirts when clothed. This was a timeless style, redolent of ritual time and of stability in a fragile world. Animals were also represented from this world, most notably at Tarxien, which (as already mentioned) may have taken the domestic animal (pig and sheep) as its attribute. More rarely, the occupants of the upper world, the sky, namely birds, were represented, communicants perhaps with the celestial markers observed from the club house entrances. With equal rarity, the occupants of the lower worlds, monsters and fish were also part of the repertoire, most probably associated with the unknown yet originally familiar world of the dead.

### 9. The Power of Inter-Related Scales

One interesting recurrent feature of the creativity of the prehistoric world of Malta was the morphing between scales in a wide range of material forms of the same shape and style (Malone et al. 1995; Tilley 2004; Stoddart and Malone 2008; Vella Gregory 2016), leading to a comprehensive conceptualisation of the cosmos under one roof in the case of the architecture of the club house or burial enclosure. The exquisite aesthetic and skill of the small and the overpowering extra-human dimensions of the colossal (Mack 2007, pp. 5, 11, 55), as well as scales in between, were important features of the Maltese-built and peopled ritual environment. At the same time, human bodies were disarticulated and their parts reassembled in a larger collective form. The miniaturised had a capacity to be more elemental and more redolent of ritual (Mack 2007, p. 72) and yet recombined as part of a unified architectural complex.

In the ritualised ceramic repertoire, we have minuscule vessels of less than a centimetre across that were scaled up to very substantial containers of more than a metre in diameter (Figure 4). These two scales show the considerable investment in liturgical apparatus that contrasts with the simpler fare of the few settlements which have been excavated (Malone et al. 2020a). A good example of the small scale is a container for ochre found in the inner sacristy of the Brochtorff Xagħra Circle. A good example of the larger scale is the stone vessel found in an inner apse of Tarxien, substantial enough to wash a human body. In the representation of the human form, there is a comparable range in scale from much less than a centimetre to an original size of at least two metres in scale. The posture and character of the human form, however, tended to vary more across this range (Malone and Stoddart 2016). The corpus of human figurines may now reach some 250 examples of which nearly 40% come from the Brochtorff Xagħra Circle. Some of the smallest representations are human heads on animal phalanges from the Brochtorff Xagħra Circle. Individual heads were also carved at life size and sometimes larger, notably from the club houses of Ġgantija and (probably) Tarxien. Full representations of the human form range from small, corpulent, seated figurines at the Brochtorff Xagħra Circle, through larger seated stone versions found at Hslashagħar Qim, to the massive standing figure in the right apse of Tarxien (Figure 5). This brief analysis of the permutations of scale shows that one underlying trend was the liturgical role of the object. Funerary sites seem to have had the more intimate, meaningful liturgical items, whereas the club houses appear to have contained the more rhetorical, visual displays of larger scale which looked over and gazed on their audiences (Malone et al. 1995). A further scaled creation was the model of the club house. One example took an exterior perspective of a one-apse structure. Other examples appear to be simple representations of the floor plan. These scaled models appear to have been more explanatory, perhaps guides to the ritual process. What is interesting is that there

was a guiding cultural and stylistic logic which bound together these different scales into one working system of ritual performance. It is a detail of understanding of the workings of ritual that is extremely rare in prehistory. This article has presented some of the key characteristics and some of the debates regarding their character and meaning.

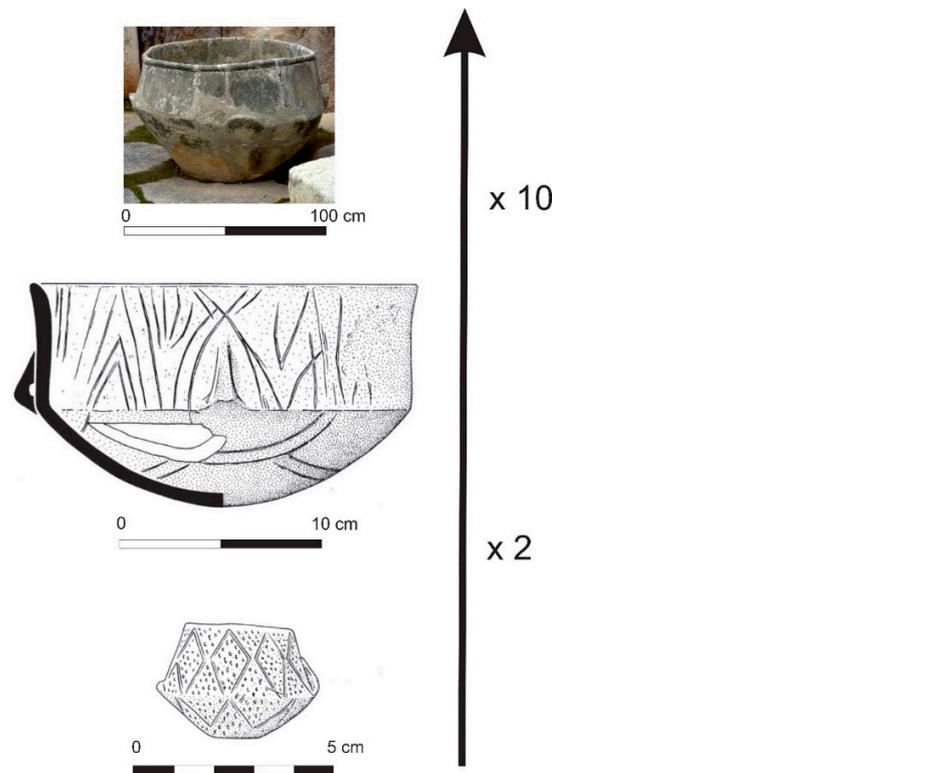


Figure 4. Scales of vessel.

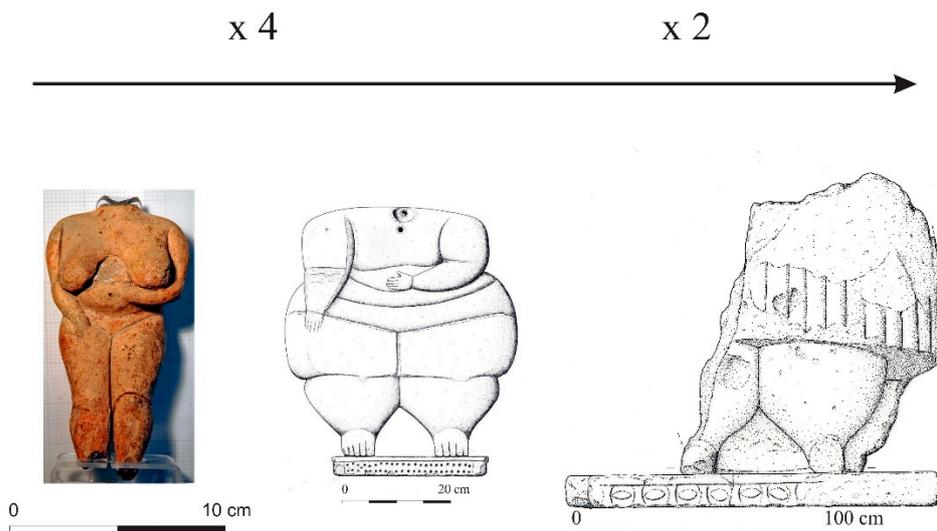


Figure 5. Scales of figurative sculpture.

### 10. The Ending

One facet of prehistoric island religion which has been more recently uncovered is its demise. Where sites have been more effectively excavated, there appear to have been deliberate acts of closure, or even of iconoclasm. In the Brochtorff Xagħra Circle, the liturgical artefacts seem to have been deliberately back-filled into a demarcated enclosure,

colloquially described as the sacristy. A standing human figure of something less than life size was also deliberately broken up and its parts distributed across the burial area. At the club house of Tas Silġ, another standing figure appears to have been deliberately toppled and slighted. At Tarxien, the central part of the site may have been deliberately covered with an agricultural deposit. The upper levels of other club houses were unfortunately excavated in a period when the subtleties of stratigraphy were not recorded.

The circumstance of this closure can now be explained in cultural and ecological terms. It is very probable that the club house horticulture was no longer serving the needs of the community. The promises of the divine authorities were not being fulfilled. There is evidence of increasing aridity in the landscape (French et al. 2020) and some evidence of stress within the human remains discovered in the later phases of the Brochtorff Xagħra Circle (Stoddart et al. in press). A combination of factors, including fundamentally the social, appears to have contributed to the end to what had been a very stable system of club house ritual, which lasted, on present estimates (McLaughlin et al. 2020), for at least a thousand years from 3400 to 2400 BC and was preceded by a formative period of a further 400 years from 3800 BC. A subsequent transitional period of two hundred years (2400–2200 BC) was followed by a probable hiatus of two hundred years, before replacement by another system of ritual in c. 2000 BC, during the arrival of the Bronze Age. A very different stylisation of the human form then accompanied cremation. The islands of Malta were now part of a connected Mediterranean world which lacked the distinct identity of the preceding Neolithic. This was a world which adopted defended locations in the landscape and prioritised the burial of single individuals. The new ritual of the Maltese islands was now shared with the rest of the Mediterranean through the medium of enhanced connectivity. In contrast to the maintenance of ritual identity uncovered in the modern, globalised by Boissevain, the ritualisation of Malta in protohistoric times came to be shared or at least *glocalised* (Eriksen 2001, p. 302) within the wider Mediterranean, where local variants could be easily placed and recognised as part of a much wider framework.

## 11. Island Ritual?

We posed the question at the beginning whether there were special circumstances that made ritual on islands qualitatively different from those in other geographical circumstances. It is true that islandness can be a state of mind which can affect some substantially large land masses, such as not only Sardinia (24,090 km<sup>2</sup>) and Cyprus (9251 km<sup>2</sup>) discussed elsewhere in this journal (Papantoniou and Depalmas 2022), but the “island nations” of Sri Lanka (65,610 km<sup>2</sup>; Bacon 2016), the British Isles (in its imperial form 315,159 km<sup>2</sup>; Lavery 2005), Japan (377,975 km<sup>2</sup>; Isozaki 1996) and even Australia (7,617,930 square km<sup>2</sup>; Broeze 1998). The issue is often one of comparative, that is relational, scale since the inhabitants of such islands consider themselves in contradistinction to the inhabitants of their neighbouring continents. The inhabitants of smaller islands in the appropriate socio-political circumstances and conditions of connectivity (Stoddart 1999) can sense even more profoundly that challenge of scale. We contend that the richness of the Maltese evidence does show that inhabitants of the small islands did have a highly developed creativity that in some considerable degree relates to their relative physical circumstances. These circumstances include their sense of security and connectivity, which may interpret the physical distance between them and their neighbours in different ways in different periods. We are dealing with gradations of connectivity, cultural as well as biological, that must have left their impression on the construction of identity of the communities concerned. We leave the readers to decide for themselves the temporality of the sense of distinctive difference that we have presented for the fourth and third millennium BC, which contrasts itself with previous and subsequent periods.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding except as reported indirectly under acknowledgements.

**Data Availability Statement:** Many of the supporting data of the FRAGSUS project can be found in the Cambridge Apollo repository (e.g., <https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/312497>, (accessed on 2 March 2022); <https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/315523>, (accessed on 2 March 2022)).

**Acknowledgments:** The ERC-funded FRAGSUS project (2013-7; Grant agreement No. 323727; PI Caroline Malone; Cambridge Co Investigator Simon Stoddart) and an earlier Templeton grant (PI Caroline Malone and Simon Stoddart) have contributed greatly to this article, as has particularly the published work of Reuben Grima and Chris Tilley. The FRAGSUS project has now been published (French et al. 2020; Malone et al. 2020a, 2020b; Stoddart et al. in press). The publication of the Templeton grant will be completed with the publication of a Cambridge University Press volume in the near future and this article heralds steps towards this achievement (Malone, Stoddart et al. in preparation), where many of these ideas will be presented more systematically, with a full measured catalogue of much of the redolent material culture of the extraordinary club houses of Malta.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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