ISLAND IDENTITIES: RITUAL, TRAVEL AND THE CREATION OF DIFFERENCE IN NEOLITHIC MALTA

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Abstract: Malta's Neolithic megalithic 'temples', unique in the Mediterranean, provide a striking challenge to the archaeological imagination. Most explanations have employed a simple functionalism: the temples resulted from Malta's insularity. Such explanations lack the theoretical grounding provided by studies of agency and meaning, and they do not sufficiently account for Malta's pattern of integration into and differentiation from a central Mediterranean regional culture. I argue that: (a) contextual evidence suggests that the temples created settings for rites emphasizing local origins and identity; (b) even in periods of greatest cultural difference, the Maltese had contacts with nearby societies, and Maltese travellers probably recognized cultural differences in important ritual practices; and (c) when ritual practitioners began reinterpreting a common heritage of meanings to create the temple rites, they also created a new island identity based on these rites. In effect, after two millennia of cultural similarity to their neighbours, the Neolithic Maltese *created* a cultural island, perhaps in reaction to changes in the constitution of society sweeping Europe in the fourth millennium BC. The result was an island of cultural difference similar in scale and, perhaps, origin to many other archaeologically unique settings such as Val Camonica, the Morbihan, Stonehenge, and Chaco Canyon.

Keywords: Copper Age, cosmology, ethnogenesis, identity, Mediterranean, trade

INTRODUCTION: WHY IS AN ISLAND?

On 3 June 1780, an Englishman named Patrick Brydone, travelling with two companions, three servants, and several hired boatmen, sailed from Sicily to Malta in a small, oar-driven boat. Brydone describes the trip:

> A little after nine [p.m.] we embarked. The night was delightful; but the wind had died away about sunset, and we were obliged to ply our oars to get into the canal of Malta. The coast of Sicily began to recede; and in a short time, we found ourselves in the ocean. There was a profound silence, except the noise of the waves breaking on the distant shore, which only served to render it more solemn. It was a dead calm, and the moon shone bright on the waters; the waves, from the late storm, were still high; but smooth and

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even, and followed each other with a slow and equal pace. – The scene had naturally sunk us into meditation; we had remained near an hour without speaking a word, when our sailors began their midnight hymn to the Virgin. The music was simple, solemn and melancholy, and in perfect harmony with the scene and with all our feelings. They beat exact time with their oars, and observed the harmony and the cadence with the utmost precision. We listened with infinite pleasure to this melancholy concert, and felt the vanity of operas and oratories. There is often a solemnity and a pathetic in the modulation of these simple productions, that causes a much stronger effect, than the composition of the greatest masters, assisted by all the boasted rules of counter-point.

At last they sung us asleep, and we awoke 40 miles distant from Sicily. We were now in the main ocean, and saw no land but Aetna, which is the perpetual pole star of these seas. – We had a fine breeze, and about two o'clock we discovered the island of Malta; and in less than three hours more, we reached the city of Valletta.

(Brydone 1780, I:216–217)

Brydone's evocative description is interesting for many reasons. It demonstrates that one can row and sail a small, traditional oar-propelled craft across the 100 km strait from Sicily to Malta in less than 24 hours, keeping Mount Etna in sight the entire way – a point I shall return to later. But it also reminds us of the powerful uses of both landscape and other peoples in fashioning identities. Here Brydone, a Protestant, scientifically-minded Romantic from industrializing Britain (Ingamells 1997:150), merges his images of nature, in the form of the serene, moonlight-drenched Mediterranean, and of the traditional past, in the sailor's primitive, Catholic (and hence to Brydone superstitious), yet deeply moving music, to validate his particular subjectivity – to experience a melancholy, transcendental spirituality which both the surroundings and the sailors help evoke but cannot experience.

Travellers have always used their experience of other places and peoples to define themselves, and I would argue that this did not begin with recorded history. But understanding such things in prehistory is not easy. Neolithic Malta, however, offers us a rare opportunity to see how such a process of prehistoric self-identification may once have happened.

At the same time, we may also shed light on an enduring archaeological mystery – the genesis of the Maltese temples. Two facts about Neolithic Malta have captured – or enslaved – the archaeological imagination: its insularity and its temples. On two water-locked slivers of land, Neolithic people built dozens of monumental temples and used them for over a millennium. They were unique: none of their neighbours in the Neolithic central Mediterranean created such a florid record of ritual. Why did they alone do this? Archaeologists have come up with varied interpretations, some quite sophisticated. But when talk returns to causal explanation, virtually without exception past archaeologists have focused, through relatively simple functionalism, upon Malta's islandhood. Ultimately, the temples arose because of Malta's marginal island environment, limited carrying capacity, narrow range of

resources, fragile ecosystem, isolation from the main currents of communication, and so on. In this case, insularity has supplied archaeologists with a master concept for explanation, much as 'the Neolithic' does for explanations of British megaliths.

But islands are more than physical land surrounded by water. Islands are ideas. In this paper, I shall argue that islands did not fashion Maltese temple society but that, rather, Maltese temple society *created* cultural islands in the process of forming a local identity.

This is thus an essay in the 'archaeology of identity'. Without reviewing the several traditions of studying this complex topic, it is worth noting a few general points. While many authors doubt whether fixed ethnic identities existed in pre-state societies (Emberling 1997; Hegmon 1998), people in all societies express multiple social identities that can endure over long spans of time. Social identities are expressed through a variety of material media, and no single medium holds a special key to social identities. Meanings such as group identity may be created and expressed through a wide range of products, styles, techniques, attitudes, symbols and dispositions (see Dietler and Herbich 1998; Hegmon 1998). The implication is that understanding how ancient people created social identities requires not cross-cultural generalizations so much as careful contextual study of how symbols were constituted and used in a specific situation. In this essay, I focus on ritual symbols rather than technological choices, style, or other dimensions of material practice. This is partly because ritual practices often draw upon the cosmological systems which underpin beliefs about identity and different kinds of people and also simply because the Neolithic Maltese themselves considered ritual symbols of central importance. As Evans-Pritchard (1940) said of Nuer cattle, we must rely upon the natives to tell us what is important.

MALTESE NEOLITHIC TEMPLE SOCIETY: RE-ORIENTING THE QUESTION

The Maltese archipelago includes Malta and Gozo, comprising a total area of 320 km^2, and several uninhabited islets (Fig. 1).[1] Both islands are gently sloping limestone plateaux. Maltese soils are thin, the climate is hot and dry, and the islands lack useful resources such as good-quality chert, obsidian, ochre, metals and hard stones for axes. Before humans arrived, the islands were forested, though without many large land animals. Though the evidence is very slight, the islands probably became deforested rapidly after Neolithic colonization, as humans depleted old forests and goat browsing discouraged new growth (see Evans 1971:24; Stoddart et al. 1993:5).

On current evidence, Malta and Gozo were first colonized by humans around 5500 BC by settlers from Sicily, the nearest land mass (Evans 1959, 1971). For the next two millennia, Maltese Neolithic cultures remained closely tied to those of southern Italy and Sicily (Giannitrapani 1997a). The pre-temple Neolithic economy was based on subsistence horticulture of wheat, barley and pulses, and on herding of sheep, goats, cattle and pigs. Settlements were apparently clusters of small huts (Trump 1966). The settlers must have come provided with a symbolic culture and their cosmologies, gender and status ideas, and social institutions would have

been generically similar to those found in Sicily and southern Italy. Picturing the social geography of the middle Neolithic central Mediterranean, we should probably see Malta as part of a network of societies stretching across southern Italy and Sicily, all different but all nonetheless sharing a common basic repertory of symbols and institutions. The ethnographic texture, or pattern of variability within a generally similar 'culture area', may have resembled some parts of New Guinea (Feil 1987; Knauft 1993) or the Pueblo cultures of the American Southwest (Ortiz 1979).

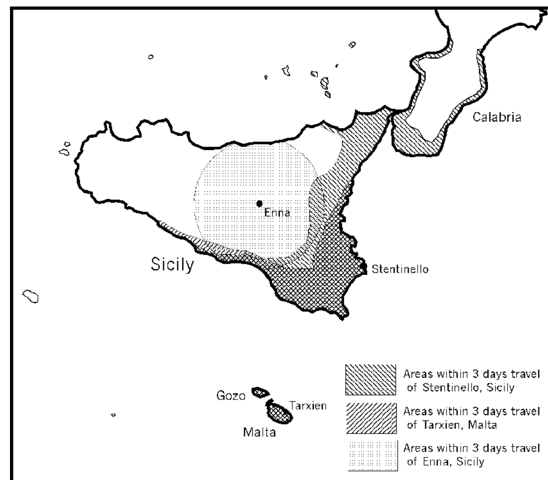


Figure 1. *Malta in the central Mediterranean. The shaded zones show the areas within an estimated three days' travel time from Malta, the Neolithic village of Stentinello near Siracusa, and the modern town of Enna in central Sicily.*

Around 3600 BC, the Maltese people began to build megalithic 'temples'.[2,3,4] About 30 temples are known in Malta and Gozo (Fig. 2), and others may once have existed. The temples are low, sprawling, stone structures containing between five and twenty rooms, enclosed within a massive retaining wall and presented with a forecourt for public assembly. They have attracted antiquarian attention since the eighteenth century for their massive size and the great building efforts they represent, their dense concentration in two tiny islands, and, above all, for their uniqueness. None of the contemporaries of the Maltese in the Mediterranean built megalithic structures of any kind, and there are no clear parallels for the temples' form and use.

Why did the temples exist? Most archaeologists agree that the temples were used primarily for ritual (Bonanno 1996). Beyond this, one line of interpretation has focused upon social relations. Renfrew (1979) viewed the temples as the administrative centres of redistributive chiefdoms. Others (Patton 1996; Stoddart et al. 1993; Trump 1981) have argued that the temples gave power to a priestly elite (see later in this article). A second line of interpretation has focused upon the temples' symbolic meaning. Traditionally, they were viewed as loci for 'Mother Goddess' worship (Piggott 1965; see Anati 1985 for critique). After a lull in the 1970s and 1980s, symbolic interpretation has been stimulated by shifts in archaeological theory and by recent finds (Stoddart et al. 1993). Whittle (1996:321–322) interprets temple construction as part of a generally increasing commitment to culturally defined 'places' in the later Neolithic, perhaps spurred by general regional developments, and Malone et al. (1997) place the temples within a structuralist-inspired cosmology of life and death (see later).

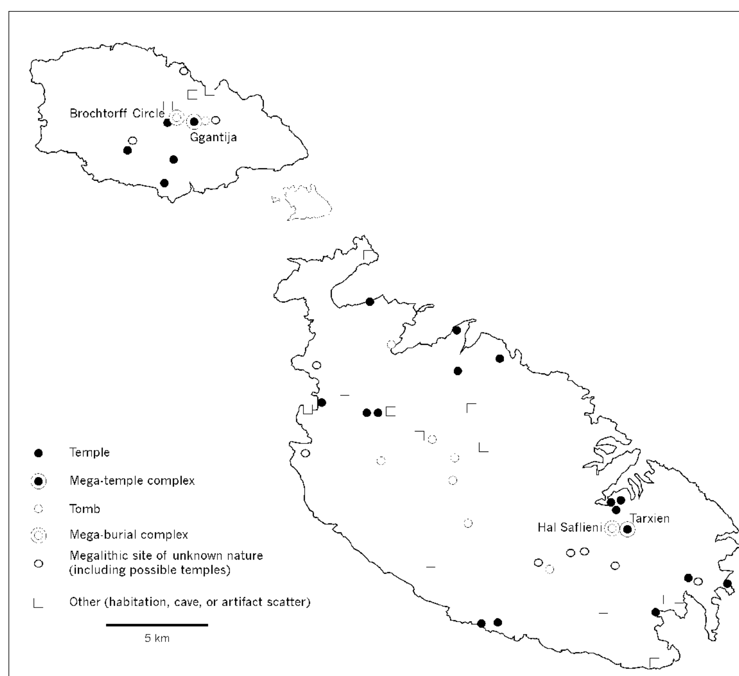
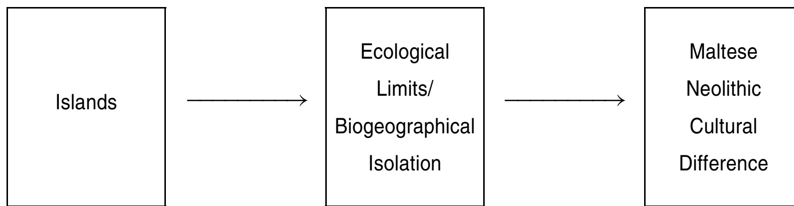


Figure 2. *Temples and other sites in fourth- to third-millennia Malta and Gozo (data from Evans 1971:229–234 and Fig. 1).*

But why did the Maltese alone build megalithic temples? On the level of explanation, most archaeologists have returned to the theme of islands (Fig. 3).[5] One variety of island-oriented explanation emphasizes biogeography. Because Malta was isolated, it experienced a gradual, inevitable divergence from a common regional culture (Evans 1959; Patton 1996). The temples arose as Malta in the fourth–third millennia 'realized its biogeographical potential for isolation' (Stoddart et al. 1993). A second strand of argument often invoked to explain the end of temple use is environmental. Trump (1976a) stressed the potential environmental fragility of the Maltese islands. Renfrew (1979) saw temple-building rivalries as peacefully diffusing inter-group conflict in growing populations living on increasingly scarce resources. This theme persists in recent work. Malone et al. (1993; see Stoddart et al. 1993), with a Malinowskian angle on ritual, argue that as environment and economy worsened and population increased in the course of the fourth and third millennia, fertility-related rites were heightened in a cycle of beseeching and propitiation (see Trump 1966, 1981). Thus, Malta's island situation made it especially vulnerable to economic and environmental problems.

Without extended discussion of these often insightful studies, it is worth noting their limitations as causal scenarios. Empirically, arguments construing temple construction as a functional response to island environmental conditions lack a



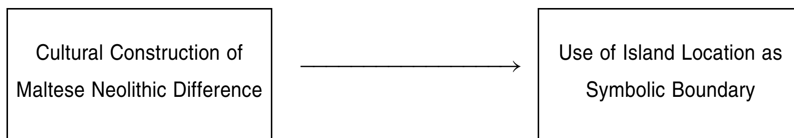


Figure 3. *Conceptual linkages between insularity and cultural difference.*

convincing mechanism, as there is little concrete evidence either for or against environmental improvement or deterioration in this period (see Trump 1976a). Without reliable multi-period settlement data, population pressure must remain a supposition. As Cowgill (1975) points out, we cannot assume population growth was a universal fact of prehistoric life. In fact, given the almost complete lack of environmental and habitation data for the Maltese Neolithic, a wide range of scenarios is compatible with the known facts.

Conceptually, island-oriented explanations sever Maltese temple society from its regional context by laying the emphasis heavily upon Malta's isolation during the temple period. But we must question how isolated Malta really was. Malta was no Pitcairn Island, lying remote below the horizon. Rather, it formed part of a well-travelled communication network, implying extensive contact with other peoples (see later). Temporally, such explanations typically deal with the Maltese temples only at their peak, making it difficult to contextualize their long-term development. Since the Maltese began building small proto-temples before the temple period, their cultural divergence cannot be explained purely by temple-period environmental conditions. Nor is it clear, if basic conditions of island biogeography such as isolation are to blame, why Malta appeared closely integrated with neighbouring regions for two millennia of Neolithic life before rapidly becoming isolated in the early fourth millennium BC. On the level of theory, few explanations incorporate concepts of social choice and action. This is most obvious in the passive reproduction of culture implied by 'cultural drift'. Similarly, functionalist views bypass human agency in the path from environmental cause to cultural effect. Conversely, recent attempts to interpret the meaning of temples have not theorized the linkages between beliefs, social institutions and processes, preferring instead to float at the level of disembodied meanings. Thus, no interpretation has dealt with people with the subtlety afforded by a full agency model (Dobres and Robb 2000).

This brief discussion points to directions in which we may re-orient the question. We should look for a solution to the emergence of cultural difference which views difference as the product of active social choices, which can incorporate rapid change, and which integrates prehistoric agents and their knowledge of social geography. What I find most intriguing about Maltese temple society is its historical process of divergence. At 5500 BC, Maltese societies shared common ways of life, material culture, and presumably ideas and values with their mainland neighbours. In the course of the fourth millennium, the pace of divergence heightened so that, by 3500 BC, a very different kind of society had emerged. From a common central Mediterranean heritage, the Maltese created a unique society. This is a problem of 'schismogenesis' (Bateson 1936): how did Malta become different?

Temple-period archaeology and political relations

The major sources for political relations in Malta, both before and during the temple period, are burials, traded items, and the temples themselves. In the pre-temple Neolithic, the Maltese practised burial in caves and rock-cut tombs, with little clear evidence of social hierarchy (Evans 1971). Such burials probably provided a ritual means for the creation of genealogical relations (Robb 1994a). Such rock-cut tombs were probably models for the later temples, which attempted to recreate their form above ground (Bonanno 1996; Evans 1971; Trump 1981). The pre-temple Maltese also carried out long-distance trade, procuring exotic polished stone axes and obsidian. Architectural structures imply some ritual practices. At Skorba, Trump (1966) excavated a sequence of oval huts with stone foundations. The earliest – a long structure with a thick stone wall – resembles unusual contemporary buildings in Sicily and southern Italy and may have been a communal structure (Morter 1999). In the later pre-temple levels, Trump interpreted an oval structure as a shrine, based upon the presence of figurines, and a hut directly preceding the temple construction held a peculiar collection of 11 grinding stones. Such oval huts, sometimes with enclosing walls, a forecourt, and idiosyncratic collections of artifacts, may provide architectural antecedents for the later temples.

With the Ggantija period (3600–3000 BC), the Maltese started building temples. About 30 temples are known in the islands (see Fig. 2), and others may once have existed. Earlier small oval rooms were elaborated to form first trefoil structures, then increasingly complex multi-apsed buildings. Along with this structural replication, internal furniture such as altars and tables became common. Temple building was clearly locally controlled, as construction methods and architectural details vary considerably between temples. It was also a continuous process: all temples whose chronological development can be reconstructed show many remodelling episodes, particularly in the Tarxien period (3000–2400 BC), when a general cycle of rebuilding appears to have taken place and several especially elaborate temple complexes were formed by renovating old temples and adding new ones nearby.

Our image of the Maltese temples is dominated by their appearance today – roofless ruins laid open to the blinding sun – and by their oft-published floor plans,

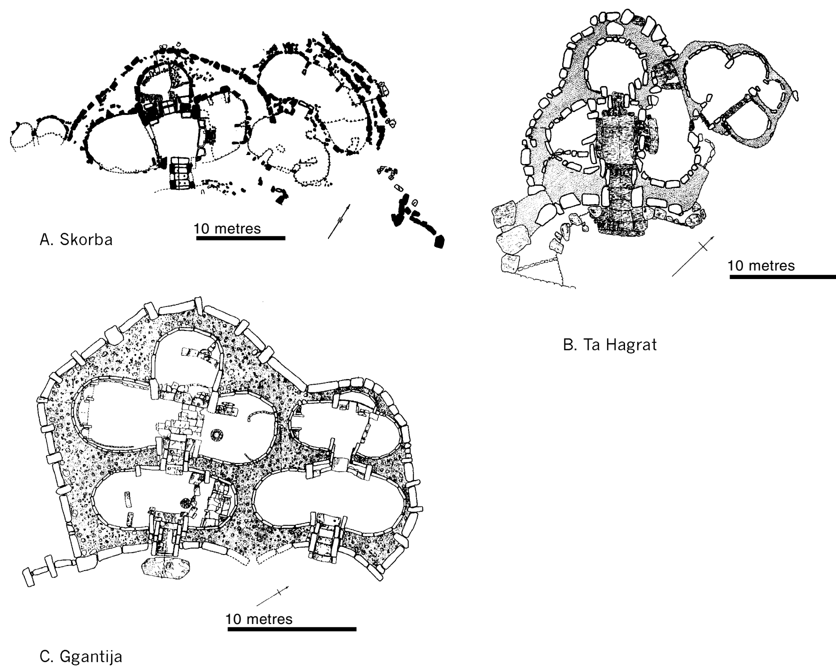


Figure 4. *Temple architecture: (a) Skorba; (b) Ta Hagrat; (c) Ggantija. Sources: Evans 1971: Plans 8, 9, and 38c.*

which show complex arrangements of apsidal rooms around a central axis, resembling madly fissioning mushrooms (Fig. 4). In use, however, the temples would have been low, confined spaces, dark, convoluted, and probably amplifying sounds and smells. Tarxien and other temples are decorated with carved stone facades which may have been encrusted with red ochre and traces of ochre-pigmented plaster have been found on some temple walls (Evans 1959, 1971). The temples' outer walls usually define a semi-circular forecourt to the south, sometimes paved with crushed limestone paste. Contextual evidence for the uses of the temples is lacking, since most sites, except for Tarxien (Evans 1971; Zammit 1930) and Skorba (Trump 1966), have had only small excavations. Their inner furniture usually includes built-in stone tables sometimes interpreted as 'altars', and also included doors and partitions of organic materials. Finds within temples include chert and obsidian tools, polished stone axes and amulets, pottery, and small figurines of females, individuals without clearly defined sexual attributes, and animals. There are architectural details of puzzling significance, such as holes in the walls or floor without obvious purpose. Animal sacrifices may be suggested by finds of domesticated animal bones and flint blades, and feasting may be suggested by finds of large numbers of carinated bowls (Evans 1959:137).

The temple-period landscape also included other ritual sites, burial sites and habitations. About a dozen megalithic sites of unknown nature are known, usually severely damaged by modern activity (Evans 1971). Many people were buried in small underground collective tombs similar to those used in Copper Age Sicily and southern Italy. Two mega-burial sites are known, the hypogeum of Hal Saflieni (Evans 1971) and the Brochtorff Circle on Gozo (Malone and Stoddart 1996; Malone et al. 1997; Stoddart et al. 1993). The Hypogeum was a multi-level galaxy of several dozen artificial underground rooms, often decorated with ochre paintings or carved replicas of temple architecture. Seven thousand burials were supposedly found there early in the twentieth century. At the Brochtorff Circle, a megalithic circle on the surface enclosed both a pre-temple period cemetery of collective tombs (Malone et al. 1995) and a temple-period maze of underground interconnected chambers at which complex mortuary rituals took place.[6] Much less is known about habitation sites. Only one pre-temple (Trump 1966) and one temple-period (Malone et al. 1988) habitation site have been excavated, revealing small oval or round huts with an unexceptional range of living debris. Interestingly, at Skorba (Trump 1966), Ggantija period huts were clustered near the temple, suggesting temples may have been located in villages.

Archaeologists have generally agreed that the temples imply some form of ritual specialists or elite (Bonanno et al. 1990; Evans 1959; Renfrew 1979; Stoddart et al. 1993; Trump 1981). The shift from small, general-purpose ritual structures to large, special-purpose buildings often signals the formation of social hierarchies (Adler and Wilshusen 1990), and it seems likely that the onset of temple cult was accompanied and instigated by increasing social inequality. Organizationally, the enormous voluntary labour needed to build temples would have been coordinated by a subgroup of people. Architecturally, the limited space inside temples and the careful walling and paving of a forecourt implies an opposition between ritual participants and audience. Within the temples, both access and lines of sight to many areas were restricted, especially since some areas were apparently screened off with perishable materials. Access pathways for Skorba, Ta Hagrat, and Hal Saflieni suggest that access became increasingly restricted as the temple period progressed (Bonanno et al. 1990). 'Oracle holes' connecting tiny back rooms with central areas of the temple may have allowed hidden participants to utter pronouncements (Evans 1959). We may thus perhaps infer both a division between ritual participants and non-participants, on whose behalf rites may have been conducted, and a graded hierarchy of access to knowledge among ritual practitioners.

Ritual participation would certainly not have been the only route to status in Neolithic Malta. At the very least, we may infer positions of status related to the control of boats, navigation, trading, gardening, fishing, and other activities. Age, gender and community identity would have structured individual identities. An individual's lifecycle would thus have involved progression through a pathway of semi-exclusive, negotiated statuses, ultimately finishing with the transformation to the ancestors (Robb, in press). Kinship groups – perhaps implied by partitioned burial areas in the Hypogeum (Evans 1971) – would have united individuals of diverse roles,

ages, and genders. Temple building may have also been a source of pride and rivalry among local communities (Bonanno et al. 1990; Stoddart et al. 1993).

To what extent would such statuses have coincided, creating systematic social inequalities? Recent ethnographies have shown that cultural forms of power and prestige are often symbolically differentiated and assigned to narrowly defined statuses. Whether or not one believes in the typological reality of the 'Great Man' category (Feil 1987; Godelier and Strathern 1991; Knauft 1993), we should not expect all social distinctions to revolve around powerful central figures (Robb 1999). Cosmological inequalities in particular occur in social contexts ranging from egalitarian to highly theocratic. The mosaic of roles and activities would have been cross-cut by dimensions of identity such as age, gender and kinship. If we imagine the ancient Maltese as social agents, we must admit the probable existence of multiple agencies in conflict as often as not. Social life would not have been a seamless whole under the rule of priests, but a fragmented, shifting balance of contradictions: an uneasy, difficult to interpret mixture of equalities and inequalities.

The meanings of temples and cosmological geography: local origins

What was the nature of temple rites? Architectural parallels provide a starting point. Temples may have originated as above-ground replications of rock-cut tombs (Bonanno 1996; Evans 1971; Trump 1981) and the explicit architectural and archaeological similarities between complex temples and the underground, multi-chambered Hypogeum and Brochtorff Circle burial monuments have been convincingly drawn by Evans (1971), Bonanno (1996) and Malone et al. (1997). But these structural parallels use formal similarity to emphasize contrast. Unlike most European megaliths, Maltese temples were never used for funerary ritual. The structural parallels and functional contrast between temples and burial monuments suggest an isomorphism between the above-ground world of the living and the below-ground world of the ancestral dead. If ancestors were understood not merely as predecessors but as important social beings connected with regeneration or permanence, the contrast is between a subterranean world of transcendental social reality and its superficial current incarnation.[7]

The place of the temple in this contrast, however, is deliberately ambiguous (Fig. 5). Architecture structures ritual experience (Barrett 1994; Thomas 1990). The temple shared important experiential features of the burial world: its dark enclosed quality, its branching, labyrinthine inner structure, and the shift from the immediacy and change in sounds, smells and light to a remote, unchanging zone. Temple architecture may have had eerie acoustic properties (Devereux and Jahn 1996). Red-plastered walls may have been a deliberate reference to burial contexts, which were normally strewn with ochre, or an invocation of the semantic properties of the colour red. Externally, some temples may have been partially dug into the ground by up to a metre (Evans 1971). The temples' enclosing walls are far more massive than would

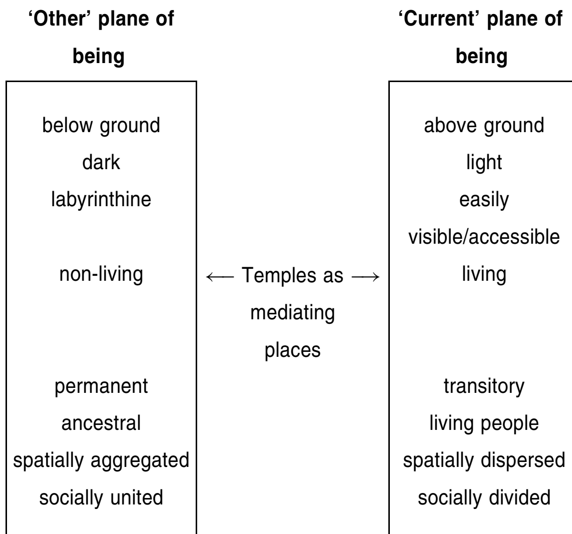


Figure 5. *A possible system of meaningful distinctions in Maltese temples.*

have been necessary simply to stay upright, sometimes functioning to retain rubble-filled spaces, so as to enclose the chambers, like tombs, within rock. The visual identification of temples with the surrounding earth would have been heightened by their flat, low structure and the use of dun-coloured local limestone and, perhaps, flattish daub roofing.[8] Material details may have referenced temporal perceptions as well. Houses were ephemeral structures of small stone and daub, which would have needed frequent rebuilding (Malone et al. 1988; Trump 1966). The material qualities of stone may have been associated with the permanence of ancestral presence (see Parker Pearson and Ramilisonina 1998). Like tells in the Balkan Neolithic (Chapman 1998), temples were massive, human-created, earthbound, visually prominent places which formed part of the world individuals were born into and may have been built before living memory. They may have anchored history to specific locations in the landscape.

As a rhetorical statement, then, temple architecture created mediating places in a layered world: structurally above ground but experientially below ground, they allowed humans to re-create access to a timeless ancestral plane. Architecture is static, but ritual was dramatic. Architectural features within the temples embody stories by placing participants within predefined positions, movements and attitudes. Temple facades and forecourts provide the entrance to a series of portals, often defined through stone panels dressed with particular care. These define entrance and emergence as inherently dramatic moments, with leaving and rejoining the implied audience as the initiation and conclusion of operations upon reality, using the conceptual tools embodied in the tomb, temple and surrounding landscape. Given the system of meanings defined here, for participants and audience in the forecourt, ceremonial emergence from the temple may have marked the culminating moment of a cosmogonic drama: the creation of the inhabitable world.

The social context of rites suggests a strong link between this cosmology and local identity. The temple-period population of Malta and Gozo was probably between 5000 and 10,000 people, based upon available agricultural land (see Renfrew 1979). As Renfrew (1979) and Trump (1981) note, clusters of temples may mark the territories of six to ten communities. Each temple may thus have been used

by a local group of perhaps 200–500 members. Between periodic rites, participation in building and maintaining the temple would have implicated those labouring as part of a long-established community of believers and strengthened their commitment to a place and group. Clay and stone models of temples found at Ta Hagrat, Skorba, Hagar Qim and Tarxien surely represent more than architects' models (Trump 1981), and may have been symbols of group identity (see Blake 1997).

Above the level of the local group, temple-based rites may have provided a way for islanders to have understood themselves as culturally related. If temples were understood as places of mediation with ancestors, then temple-using groups may have also shared a narrative of common origins and regarded each other as cultural kinfolk. Moreover, one especially large and elaborate temple complex has been found on each island: Tarxien on Malta and Ggantija on Gozo. Located within a few hundred yards of each of these is an underground hypogeum where multi-stage mortuary rituals took place and hundreds or thousands of people were interred (Hal Saflieni on Malta and the Brochtorff Circle on Gozo; Malone and Stoddart 1996). If these hypogei are not merely the only ones found to date (see Stoddart et al. 1993), the pairing of super-temples and hypogei may have been used in periodic island-wide ritual cycles. Local rites of social reproduction would have been replicated in a pan-island context, re-creating the identities of all islanders together as the dead were finally interred.

MALTA AND THE EXTERNAL WORLD

Local relations were balanced by overseas contact. It is important to consider not only the traditional archaeological question of the extent of inter-regional island contact, but also the fundamental social question of what contact *meant* culturally.

The argument for isolation

Malta in the temple period has almost unanimously been regarded as isolated, turned inward and rejecting contact with the external world (Bonanno 1996; Evans 1959; Patton 1996; Stoddart 1999; Stoddart et al. 1993; Trump 1981; but see Giannitrapani 1997a, 1997b and Whittle 1996). The argument for isolation is built upon four observations. First, the amount of obsidian, which was obtained from Lipari or Pantelleria (Tykot 1997), drops sharply in the temple period. Secondly, few imported pots have been found on Malta. Third, unlike earlier pottery styles, temple-period ceramics differ markedly from contemporary Sicilian and Italian pottery. Finally, no neighbouring peoples made monumental ritual structures similar in any way to the temples.

While all of these indicate changed conditions of contact, they must be interpreted within a regional context. Throughout the central Mediterranean, the obsidian trade dropped sharply after the initial Copper Age. Declining obsidian on Malta thus probably reflects not Maltese isolation so much as a general regional trend having to do with a new repertoire of traded objects. Similarly, pottery in general seems not to have been an important inter-regional trade item in the Copper Age. Hence the lack of traded pottery on Malta may not necessarily indicate lack of

contact; popular Copper Age trade goods such as ochre and polished stone tools are well-represented on the islands (see later).

Similarly, while fourth–third millennia pottery on Malta has its own characteristic styles, the same is true of any region throughout southern Italy and Sicily (see later). Hence, again, we may be seeing not Maltese isolation from external cultures, but rather a region-wide shift in the scale and texture of the cultural map towards more localized styles. We may also question the implicit assumption that cultural contact leads automatically to similar pottery styles. Central Mediterranean Neolithic ceramics had complex social meanings (Malone 1985; Pluciennik 1997; Skeates 1998). Some Neolithic styles, notably Serra d'Alto and Diana wares, were found over broad areas because they were probably associated with long-distance trade networks or widespread ritual practices (Malone 1985). But if the meaning of ceramic styles subsequently shifted from emphasizing inter-group contacts to emphasizing local identities, then increased contact between societies may well have resulted in heightened local styles.

This leaves the temples and hypogei themselves, which are indisputably unique, as the primary evidence for Malta's isolation. If we then use isolation to explain the temples, the result is a circular logic in which the temples are ultimately used to account for their own existence.

The argument for contact

The evidence for overseas contact includes both the practicalities of travel and the implications of trade goods (see also Evans 1977:13–14).

Malta and Sicily are sometimes inter-visible; Mount Etna in particular can sometimes be seen from Malta, especially during eruptions (Brydone 1780:225–226; Trump 1966:49). Under Neolithic navigational conditions, with small boats or canoes either rowed or sailed, the 100 km separating Malta and Sicily could have been crossed in one to three days. Travel would probably have taken place during the summer when the sea is calm. Long-distance maritime communication would have been far easier than land travel, which would have involved crossing rough, roadless terrain and negotiating with many potentially hostile groups. Figure 1 gives a rough estimate of areas within three days travel time of Malta, the Stentinello site on the Sicilian coast, and an inland point, the town of Enna (estimating 75 km of sailing and 20 km of walking per day). This shows that people living on Malta could easily have had at least as much contact with south-eastern Sicilians as would people living elsewhere in Sicily.

Interaction with Sicily and the mainland can actually be demonstrated by traded items (Giannitrapani 1997b; Trump 1976b). While Maltese items recognizable abroad are limited to sporadic pots (Tusa 1993:406–407), imports into the islands are more visible. Throughout the Neolithic, the Maltese had imported flint from Sicily to supplement the low-quality material available locally (Zammit-Maempel 1977). High-quality flint from the Monte Tabuto area of Sicily was particularly in vogue during the temple period, when it almost completely supplanted obsidian and made serious inroads into the consumption of local chert (Evans 1977:19–20; Nicoletti 1996:56; Trump 1976b:27). Obsidian came to Malta from Lipari and from

Pantelleria (Tykot 1997), passing down the coastline of Sicily en route (Robb and Durham 1998). Polished stone axes were used for clearing land and for shaping timber for houses and boats, as well as for display and exchange. 'Axe-amulets' pierced for suspension were probably made from axes nearing the end of their use-life (Skeates 1995). The nearest source for the requisite hard stones would have been Calabria and north-east Sicily, although some greenstones may have come from much further away, in the Alpine zone (Leighton 1992; O'Hare 1990). Almost 200 axe-amulets were found at the Hal Saflieni hypogeum (Evans 1971) and others have been found in temple sites. Among other lithic resources, imported lava from eastern Sicily was occasionally used for grinding stones (Evans 1971), Sicilian alabaster was used for figurines (Trump 1976b) and semi-precious stones were used for beads (Evans 1971). Red ochre is another identifiable import, as none occurs on the islands. Maniscalco (1989) argues that specific pottery vessels were used for trading ochre from Sicily to Malta. Ochre was used abundantly in burials (Evans 1971), at ritual sites, to decorate figurines and to make a reddish paste to decorate incised ceramics (Evans 1959).

Among less archaeologically visible materials, timber may have been an important import. As the islands became deforested, large, old timbers would have become scarce (Trump 1976a). Timber was needed for the 5–10 m spanning beams supporting temple roofs (Evans 1959) and for boats. Even a relatively small dugout canoe (for example Fugazzola Delpino and Mineo 1995; see Stoddart et al. 1993) would have required a straight tree trunk a metre in diameter and 10 m long. Wild resources such as deer antler or boars' tusks, known from several temple sites, may have been imported if island populations of these forest animals were depleted in the two millennia before the temple period. Other potentially limited resources may have included fuel and salt.

Interaction with Sicily was thus necessary and regular. It is impossible to estimate the total quantity of traded items but imported materials were used in some of the most basic economic tasks such as clearing land, woodworking, and decorating pottery. A local group or extended family could not have led a normal economic life without access to them. Their archaeological scarcity or abundance must reflect patterns of deposition, reuse and recovery rather than their use, which must have been substantial.

Interestingly, though Stoddart et al. (1993) and Patton (1996) have argued that trade and ritual were inversely related, traded items would have been equally necessary during periods of intense ritualism, regardless of whether actual levels of trade increased or declined. Traded items were central to practices of social reproduction. Imports involved in rites included the polished stone axes, exotic flint and obsidian found in temples and perhaps even the roof beams of the temples themselves. Imported axe-amulets may have had social biographies and heirloom histories. While axes are rare on Malta, small axe-amulets are common, suggesting perhaps that Malta was the terminal point in a chain of axe circulation and re-working (Skeates 1995). If Malta was a trade cul de sac, ceremonial deposition of axe-amulets may have helped to reduce the number in circulation and thus perpetuate the need to carry on trade. Red ochre is an even more extreme example. Sprinkling the

deceased liberally with ochre was a standard burial practice on Malta; some rock-cut tombs accidentally discovered by workmen in wet conditions were even reported as covered in 'fresh blood' due to the ochre impregnating the site (Evans 1971). Ochre was used to decorate hypogei such as Hal Saflieni, and the very walls inside at least some temples were plastered with ochre-pigmented plaster (Evans 1959, 1971). If we envisage trade and ritual as representing antithetical principles of Maltese culture, we must confront an antinomy by which the exotic was domesticated and the foreign was covertly incorporated within the heart of Maltese difference. Perhaps, by this means, the social relations of trade were integrated into the hegemony of ritual.

Regional patterns of contact and difference

Beyond actual imports, cultural similarities between Malta and nearby regions underline the fact that temple societies existed in a regional context, not in splendid isolation. Maltese Neolithic economic products and technologies show no features that are not shared with southern Italy and Sicily and sometimes with the entire central Mediterranean. Some social idioms were also prevalent throughout the region, such as participation in the obsidian trade, the functional and symbolic use of fine greenstone tools and the production of dark burnished pottery with incised designs. In ritual, Malta shared the copious use of ochre in burials with many Sicilian sites (Castellana 1995; Maniscalco 1989; Tusa 1993). Malta's underground rock-cut tombs strongly resemble contemporary tombs in Sicily and southern Italy (Castellana 1995; Evans 1959; Whitehouse 1972, 1981). Among Malta's more peculiar structures, circles of standing stones like the Brochtorff Circle are known from Sardinia. The Hypogeum of Hal Saflieni resembles a 35-room hypogeum at Calaforno in Sicily and a smaller one at Malpasso (Evans 1984; Giannitrapani 1997b; Tusa 1993:250–252). The Hypogeum and the Brochtorff Circle resemble the *domus de janas* tombs of Sardinia (see Evans 1984) in the use of underground room clusters to contain the dead, ochre wall decorations, and the use of carved stone to mimic architectural elements such as pilasters and lintels. Even closer to home, recent re-dating of the Sicilian early Bronze Age (EBA) places the earliest EBA as contemporary with the final centuries of the Maltese temples. Some Sicilian early Bronze Age tombs display numerous architectural parallels with the temples, including the massive facades, small square portals, and carved stone pilasters. In addition, the burial rite practised appears to have been generically similar (Giannitrapani 1997b).

Thus, Malta's apparent isolation at least partially reflects archaeologists looking at Malta in isolation. Moreover, throughout the central Mediterranean, other societies were undergoing parallel transformations. After the broad horizons of the late and final Neolithic, the Copper Age generally was a time of ceramic diversity. On Sicily alone, there were at least three distinct regional styles, with at least two others in southern Italy (Cazzella 1994; Tusa 1993). Generally, different regions made dark burnished wares in a common repertory of recognizably post-Neolithic vessel forms, such as conical-necked jars, broad carinated bowls, askoi, and linked double or triple bowls, while varying how they accomplished the surface finish and decoration. While Maltese ceramics are different from Sicilian and Italian

ones, they differ in much the same ways as other regions differ from each other; they form part of a pattern of post-Diana regional fragmentation. Likewise, while Malta's figurines are unique, many contemporary groups in Sicily, Italy and Sardinia also made figurines, *all* completely different from each other (Graziosi 1974; Holmes and Whitehouse 1998). In other regions, figurines were no longer made at all – a 'negative' mutation of the tradition. Rather than stressing Maltese singularity, it may be more accurate to see a widespread central Mediterranean Neolithic tradition of small ceramic figurines undergoing marked regional differentiation.

In fact, throughout the fourth and third millennia in the central Mediterranean, we can see many other small enclaves which were equally 'strange': the enigmatic 'ziggurat' of Monte d'Accoddi in north-western Sardinia; the *domus de janas* tombs and menhir monuments of Sardinia; the Salentino and Bari areas, where small enclaves of people began to build long passage tombs; the Alpine valleys with their distinctive rock art; Valcamonica and the adjacent areas of statue-menhir use; and the Lunigiana area with the densest concentration of prehistoric stelae in Europe. Malta was only one of many 'islands' of cultural difference in existence at this time. Except perhaps for Monte d'Accoddi, none of these areas was completely unique. Like Malta, they represent reconfigurations and exaggerations of elements common to a regional repertoire. Throughout the central Mediterranean, a Neolithic pattern of low-level inter-regional contact and generic cultural similarities was replaced in the final Neolithic or Copper Age by a paradoxical combination of heightened inter-regional contact and strategic, specifically targeted local differences, primarily in ceramic decoration and ritual practices.

TRAVEL, COSMOLOGICAL GEOGRAPHY AND IDENTITY

My argument thus far suggests that Malta's cultural difference, expressed in temple architecture and practices, does not passively reflect geography or the degree of actual contact but rather represents something else: perhaps a cultural reaction to, or re-working of, contact. How would this cultural landscape have looked to participants within it?

It is an anthropological truism to state that cultural difference is intimately bound up with space, time, identity and politics. In all societies, foreign places and peoples provide a symbolic resource of the first order (Helms 1988): the exotic as a category defines the local, normal or natural through opposition to it. The real or imaginary alien may be shunned or feared as perverse and dangerous, or sought after as a source of higher knowledge and power, or both. Moreover, spatial zones are often, perhaps generally, associated with significant times such as the past, the original creation, the modern world, and so on. Movement in space thus can also be travel in time (Helms 1988:33). Given this, travel through symbolically loaded space becomes a cosmological venture, with travellers enduring real and spiritual dangers, gaining privileged experience and knowledge, and returning as changed individuals. In most societies, only a subset of people travels to the foreign world and they do so for highly varied reasons. Even when people travel to obtain necessary substances, the venture is never disconnected from cosmological ideas and

diverse personal motives (Helms 1988:66). Once home, their contact with the foreign can be an important asset in internal politics and leadership.

Geography is social knowledge: travel forges and fixes relative identities. Were the ancient Maltese conscious of cultural difference? The answer must be 'yes'. Ethnographically, people in all societies are aware of cultural differences between themselves and their neighbours, especially in symbolically loaded realms such as ritual, cuisine and hygiene. Such differences are used to identify, characterize, stigmatize or respect others, providing tangible evidence of the foreignness of the exotic and the normality of home. For example, Barth describes how knowledge of cultural difference was understood in New Guinea Mountain Ok societies. In one small group, investigating secret male rituals involving ceremonies and sacrifices to male ancestral skulls, Barth noted:

> Sitting in the temple one evening, I was told with a mixture of sensationalism and disgust: 'You will not believe this, but we are not lying: In Imigabip [the neighboring community, 10 km to the west] they have a *female* skull in their temple!'
>
> (Barth 1987:3–4; original parentheses and emphasis)

Here, even relatively minute reconfigurations of belief were scrutinized and discussed as evidence of the 'otherness' of other societies, whose liturgical perversity confirmed the ritual-based authenticity of the native group. If, as argued earlier, ritual was deeply important to the Neolithic Maltese sense of identity, it seems fair to infer that the Maltese would have been aware that the groups they were visiting in Sicily and Italy had none of the practices so central to their own world. Maltese society need not have been very different from Sicilian societies in most respects but, to the degree that Maltese identity was formed in temple-based rituals, crossing the seas would have meant consciously crossing an ideological frontier to strange lands where people lived differently. Whether this encounter was regarded with indifference, horror or attraction, it would have reinforced the Maltese's knowledge of their difference.

Implicit in this encounter is an opposition between the local, original, and ritually recreated Maltese identity and the foreign, non-temple users known through trade relations and perhaps thought of as having a different origin. Between the two lay the sea, which must surely have been a signifier: uninhabitable, unstable, potentially dangerous and separating Maltese from 'others' (see also Helms 1988:25). The opposition between the island home and the foreign lands contains an implied story, the journey, with the boat as structural mediator. Given this, temples, with their structural and aesthetic associations to the land and to the past, would have provided the anchor for autochthonous origins, linking time and geography. It may be no accident that, seen from afar, the low, flat, earth- and stone-coloured temples in the centre of gentle plains or upon crests of slopes would have mimicked islands, creating a visual play: meta-islands or islands upon islands (see also Chapman 1996). Thus, I suggest that the Maltese temples stood at the conjunction of two systems of cosmological distinctions: mediating the above-ground living world and the below-ground ancestral world, and geographically providing the

paradigmatic definition for the autochthonous, original inhabitable world in contrast to both the sea and alien societies. Perhaps, for the Maltese, the present was a foreign country.

Within this cosmology, the distinction between Maltese and 'other' would have been constructed through the experiences of both temple ritual and overseas travel. Temples may have dominated Maltese cosmological geography, much as they dominate our archaeological imagination: as diacritics of Maltese identity. In constructing a new value system based on rites of autochthonous origins, what was also being constructed was Maltese difference, or the otherness of other people. The rise of the temples, thus, would have involved two fundamentally linked changes: the construction of new cosmological value structures linked to geographical knowledge and the construction of a new island identity based upon cosmology.

In conclusion, the rise of temple-based religion on Malta was also the process of the construction of cultural difference. Parenthetically, this may make Neolithic Malta one of the very rare situations in prehistory to which we can apply the concept of 'ethnicity' in a sociologically rigorous sense, as the mutual construction of a self-ascribed identity based upon a concept of original unity (Emberling 1997; Jones 1997). This Neolithic Maltese identity appears to have endured for at least a millennium before the radical social changes introducing the Bronze Age. Individual temple sites were used through much of this span, their place value (Chapman 1998) perhaps growing with age.

Islands were key to this process of differentiation, not as environmental determinants, but as ideas. Islands are inhabited metaphors, natural symbols of boundedness and separation. Here, in the fourth-millennium context of regional identity formulations, new social relations emphasizing local originality and distinctiveness were mapped onto the idiosyncrasies of local geography to render immanent the new cultural gap between the group which was in the process of becoming Maltese and the groups in the process of becoming 'others'. In cultural terms, the Maltese didn't live on an island – they built themselves one.

How did it happen? ethnogenesis and exegesis

Though novel, temple rites must have arisen from historical roots.[9] This is both logically inescapable and suggested by archaeological evidence. Maltese temples and rites did incorporate elements found in earlier Neolithic societies and in contemporary societies elsewhere in the central Mediterranean (see earlier). The reformulation or crystallization of these elements into temple religion happened very quickly. Though most temples have at best only 'fuzzy' dates based upon ceramic sequences, the available evidence suggests that the Neolithic temples arose within a few centuries around 3600 BC (Evans 1971; Stoddart et al. 1993; Trump 1981). In human terms, we must imagine the transition from rites based at small, oval proto-temples to full-scale temples taking place within perhaps ten generations. This formulation of a major ritual system, rapid in archaeological terms, must rule out any explanation which implies a gradual ritual intensification, such as unconscious cultural drift or response to millennium-long environmental

deterioration. Rather, it implies that human action lay behind the rise of temple religion.

The basic mechanism of cultural divergence must have been exegesis and reinterpretation. Barth (1987) gives a clear picture of how cosmology is made and remade. He argues that cosmological symbols do not dictate rigid beliefs but rather furnish flexible, ambiguous sheaves of potential meanings. Reformulation of cosmologies happens through a complicated process of remembering, forgetting, reinventing, exegesis, and creative elaboration of these potential meanings. In the short term, a conclave of ritual practitioners, selectively remembering and reinterpreting fragments of sacred text, collectively realizes that piety does not suffice and baptism is necessary for salvation; in the long run, dozens of new sects arise. This process of local exegesis generates a map of closely related, neighbouring groups sharing a common repertoire of symbols constructed and enacted in a bewildering variety of actual practices (Barth 1987). Historically, such ongoing reinterpretation results in landscapes of regionally affiliated cultures, which can be analysed at many scales of difference (Knauft 1993:206ff.). Within such regional cultures, specific local reinterpretations can have major social effects with long-term consequences, such as high levels of headhunting (Knauft 1993) or warfare (Kelly 1985).

Viewing regional differentiation in the prehistoric central Mediterranean through this lens, we must imagine the rise of Maltese temple societies as the fruit of intense reworking of inherited rites. Without detailed chronologies for most monuments, the only evidence on how such a process may have unfolded comes from the seriation of temple plans and from a handful of stratigraphies, particularly at Kordin III, Ta Hagrat and Skorba. Both sources tentatively suggest that temples developed from simple oval prototypes through simple trefoil forms to five-apsed and more complex forms (Evans 1971; Trump 1981). Continuity and the value of place were clearly important, since several temples are situated over the remains of early proto-temples. At each point, development built upon existing models through replication and elaboration, for instance in adding pairs of apses along the major axis of a temple. The evolving relationship of temple and tomb is especially interesting. While early temples probably imitated rock-cut tombs (Evans 1976:143), with temples and tombs perhaps developing in parallel throughout the temple period, by the late Tarxien period the final building phase at the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum seems to have been an explicit attempt at the replication of temple architecture in an underground burial setting (Evans 1971:57–58). Thus, it seems likely that the Maltese took a generalized Mediterranean Neolithic belief linking ancestors, local origins, and the underground and replicated and elaborated it to make it the focus of a major ritual system. One critical 'mutation' not pursued in related cultures may have been the linkage of two symbolic axes, a vertical one contrasting the above-ground and below-ground worlds and a horizontal, concentric one contrasting the original centre with foreign lands.

The social context of this ritual intensification can only be reconstructed speculatively. Temple-centred cosmology would have provided a rich matrix for generating social metaphors and identities and ritual intensification must have involved some positioning among actors working within such distinctions and in specific historical

circumstances. Both the exotic and the autochthonous may have provided symbolic bases for power. Boats as material possessions and as structural mediators, for instance, are symbolic foci of power for individuals and groups in many tribal societies (Arnold 1995; Broodbank 1989). In Neolithic Malta, boats could have supplied a metaphor for power to compete with temples, aligning trade goods and foreign social relationships as an alternative power base to participation in original epiphanies. On the level of social organization, trade and travel may have been carried out by specific segments of the population for specific purposes – for instance, young adult males seeking to accumulate bridewealth (e.g. Kelly 1993) or senior males competing for status (Malinowski 1922). While Mediterranean archaeologists have often focused narrowly upon traded objects (Skeates 1993), the social relationships created through trade would have furnished traders with prestige and introduced a range of powerful symbolic connotations.

At the same time, one effect of temple-based rituals may have been to sublimate internal divisions – a temporary recreation of a period of original unity in a socially divided society. The institution of temple ritual may also have been broad enough to draw opposed elements within society into a more or less explicit ritual hegemony, for instance, via labour contributions to temple construction, demands on kin for food for feasting or contributions of exotic items from traders to their kin engaged in conducting rites. Such interactions might have helped to cope with the structural problem of integrating things and relationships from the symbolically hostile outside world into an inward-looking ritual system (see Glass 1988; Helms 1988).

Why Malta? Why then?

In the present state of knowledge, it is enough of a challenge to identify the relevant lines of inquiry without aspiring to provide serious answers to these major questions.

Ritual innovations often happen in periods of political ferment (Cherry 1978). Maltese temple societies arose precisely at the moment when many central Mediterranean societies were changing dramatically in one of two ways. In many areas, particularly in mainland Europe, new social orders incorporated a heightened symbolic focus upon the public consumption of exotic goods by individuals (Shennan 1982; Sherratt 1994). This was an ideological shift in the construction of personal identity, in which many exchanged items symbolized a new incorporation of male gender ideology into political prestige hierarchies (Robb 1994b, 1999). In Italy and Sicily, the harbinger of this revolution was the great late–final Neolithic increase in the obsidian trade. In the Copper Age, metal objects began to supplant obsidian as the most significant traded good, accompanied by the evolution of typical artifact complexes associating male-related symbols with traded goods and drinking vessels. In other societies, of which Malta is the paradigmatic example, the new social order took the form of a florid ritual system.

European prehistorians have often viewed trade and ritual as alternative social orders but this obscures those internal connections that may have driven processes of divergence. If Neolithic societies were a balance of contradictions running on tensions from multiple social agencies, they would have contained the potential

for rapid change in many directions. A change in the meaning of trade in one society could have had a rapid destabilizing influence on its neighbours. Such a model might provide an agency-oriented interpretation for both the rapid 'chaining' by which prestige goods economies seem to have spread and the exuberant ritual systems which flourished in their interstices. In the Mediterranean of the fourth to the third millennia BC, the emergence of trade as an organizing pole for greater amounts of political activity would have upset long-standing balances between sources of power within societies. In some societies, this resulted in authority structures becoming more egalitarian and increasingly concentrated around trade, economic intensification, male gender symbolism, and alliance. This appears to have been the common pathway in mainland Mediterranean societies. On Malta, in contrast, changes in the regional social environment had the opposite effect: they strengthened those at the apex of the ritual hierarchy.

But why did Malta take the road less travelled? Here one can imagine a number of possibilities. Sherratt (1981) has argued that these changes also involved the spread of intensified plough agriculture, pastoralism and specific social practices such as feasting. If this was the case (and the local evidence is inconclusive), Malta may have had a low 'ceiling' for intensification, lacking niches for pastoralism, with its customary exploitation of unfarmable hillslopes, and ploughing, which elsewhere opened up heavy alluvial clay soils. Malta's limited range of products may have posed a problem, if the focus of trade shifted from establishing ritualized relationships to acquiring specific prestige goods. Another line of thought focuses upon inequality. With the rise of intensified economies, the major challenge for ambitious individuals would have been how to recruit willing labour for economic production. In Italy and Sicily, there is little evidence for restricted technologies or exploitative social control. But, on Malta, other limiting factors may have allowed greater social control. In an economy with a relatively low ceiling, increased production or population may have led to internal stratification based upon access to land or resources. Increased trade may have heightened inequality based upon control of sea-going boats. If so, it is possible that heightened ritual sublimated or masked increased inequality (see Levy 1992).

These hypotheses return to the nature of islands, although the linkage of insularity and culture is mediated by a detailed conception of agency, internal social tensions and external stimuli. But many of the cultural 'islands' in the central Mediterranean at this time are located firmly on the mainland and it is equally possible that subtle historical contingencies or local cultural variations now inaccessible to us were responsible.

CONCLUSIONS: ON CULTURAL 'ISLANDS'

Over the last two decades, the tendency in Maltese Neolithic studies has been to emphasize the internal social processes behind the temples (Bonanno et al. 1990), with biogeography and environment providing conditions for human action and social processes rather than simple determinants (Stoddart et al. 1993). This essay extends this line of thought by viewing insularity not as an insuperable external

condition but as a potential symbol within a cultural geography. If nothing else, it successfully exposes the limits of the existing data. One would wish for excavations to establish the chronology of temple development more securely, for further exploration of regional cultural patterns, for ceramic provenience studies, for studies of non-ritual structures and sites on Neolithic Malta, for detailed reconstructions of the Maltese Neolithic economy and for many other research programmes. Even so, theorizing the relationships between islands and culture in terms of human agency rather than function is a worthwhile exercise. It provides the Maltese Neolithic with a firmer theoretical footing, accommodates both Malta's cultural difference and extensive contact and trade, and does not require us to postulate population pressure or environmental degradation without supporting data. The pace of change poses a problem for biogeographical or environmental explanations, as it is not clear why Malta's distance from Sicily or limited economic potential would have had sudden, dramatic effects after several millennia of little influence. Because human agency can result in radical cultural change in short spans of time, this interpretation makes sense of the relatively abrupt emergence of temple ritual.

Beyond Malta, this interpretation suggests that we should deconstruct geography as we know it, as empty space on a grid-framed map. Since geography as social knowledge is always available as symbolic resource for cosmology and identity, it may make little sense to interpret regional patterns in archaeology disconnected from their context of cultural geography. For instance, islands as a biogeographical category may display certain regularities of social development (Patton 1996), but regarding them purely in terms of objective geographical qualities may mask, rather than reveal, the forces behind some of the most interesting aspects of island histories. The problem posed by Malta is surely less akin to the biological dynamics of animal species on islands than it is to the historical development of pockets of cultural uniqueness anywhere else.

To make ourselves is to make ourselves different. In Malta's case, the construction of difference was helped by an accident of geography which supplied an almost irresistible natural metaphor for boundedness and separation – almost irresistible, for this metaphor was rejected in the millennia both before and after the temple period, and Malta's insularity only became a cultural preoccupation when social circumstances called for such a metaphor. But prehistory is full of 'cultural islands' on land and on sea. Stonehenge, the Gulf of Morbihan, and Chaco Canyon are among the most famous. These 'islands' occur in decentralized, generically tribal societies. They share a common general size – few are more than 40 km across – and scale in terms of population. They arise from the recombination and elaboration of cultural elements common to much broader regions, and they frequently share a pattern of fuzzy cultural boundaries combined with striking and unique local ritual systems. Finally, they often arise in periods of dispersed but continent-wide social change. Perhaps the late Neolithic 'commitment to place' (Whittle 1996) reflects a paradoxical Europe-wide pattern of increasing inter-regional contact combined with the strengthening of local identities. If the Maltese Neolithic example is typical, such 'cultural islands' may generally arise as identity cells – the product of reworking a regional symbolic heritage into a local, cosmologically grounded identity.

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Notes

1 For brevity, in most contexts in this paper, I use 'Malta' and 'Maltese' to refer to the entire archipelago rather than just the island of Malta in particular.

2 The term 'temple' is used out of archaeological convention rather than because it is really appropriate. A better term would have to encompass the temples' specific cultural meaning, uses and personnel, much as 'kiva' does for modern Pueblo ritual structures or 'chapel' and 'church' do for Christian ones.

3 The period of major temple use on Malta, *ca* 3600–2500 BC (cal.), has a confused terminology. It is sometimes referred to as 'Neolithic', and sometimes as 'Copper Age'. The latter is less literally accurate, as no copper is known from Malta in this period, but has the virtue of remaining in keeping with contemporary Sicilian and Italian cultures which are usually called Copper Age or Eneolithic (Evans 1971; cf. Cazzella 1994:12 for Sicily: 'The term Copper Age can be of use if we forget about the copper itself.'). To emphasize continuity with earlier traditions, I use 'Neolithic' to refer to both the pre-temple and temple periods (cf. use of the term 'eneolithic' [*eneolitico*] in Italian classifications of this period).

4 The culture history of Malta has been synthesized primarily by Evans (1959, 1971, 1984) and Trump (1966); see Stoddart et al. (1993) for a recent summary. By the 'temple period', I mean the period of major temple use, the span of time between 3600 and 2500 BC (in calibrated dates), identified ceramically through Ggantija (3600–3000 BC) and Tarxien (3000–2400) style assemblages.

5 Many archaeologists have termed Malta a 'natural laboratory' (Evans 1977; Trump 1966); the implication is that islands are Petrie dishes – rigidly isolated places with extreme 'pressures' where strange developments are inherently likely to take place. The stress on Maltese isolation may be in part due to a desire to identify a 'prime mover' or major causal factor to explain the temples (e.g. Evans 1977:21).

6 Full publication of the Brochtorff Circle excavations by Malone, Stoddart, and co-workers is expected in 2001 and should add much detail to this picture.

7 In the southern Italian Neolithic, Whitehouse (1992) has outlined a similar system of structural oppositions which may have represented the inherited culture within which the Maltese temples were reasoned out. Similarly, most temples open towards the south or south-east. If temples replicated structures associated with death, their orientation may be due to a transfer of the cosmological geography of death, since most Neolithic burials were positioned to face south or south-east, implying a NW/SE cosmological axis (Robb 1994a).

8 There is little archaeological evidence as to temple roofs, but several small models of temples appear to show flat roofs made of slabs, beams or planks (Fig. 4d). Daub laid on beams and branches (Trump 1966) may have also been used.

9 It is worth noting that, since calibrated radiocarbon dates showed Maltese megaliths to be 1000–2000 years earlier than Mycenaean civilization (Renfrew 1979), nobody has seriously suggested that the temples arose as a result of new peoples migrating into Malta. The reason is simple: there are no contemporary megalith-building societies anywhere in the Mediterranean which could have furnished plausible migrants.

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Biographical note

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ABSTRACTS

Identités d'une île: rituels, voyages et créations de la différence à Malte lors de l'ère néolithique

John Robb

Les 'temples' néolithiques de Malte, uniques en Méditerranée, représentent un défi à l'imagination archéologique. La plupart des interprétations ont recours à un simple fonctionalisme: les temples résulteraient de la condition insulaire de Malte. De telles explications ne tiennent cependant pas compte des aspects théoriques fondamentaux découlant de différentes études sur l'activité et la signification de ces temples. Le schéma spécifique de Malte, poursuivant une intégration dans la culture régionale de la Méditerranée centrale tout en développant une différenciation explicite de celle-ci, n'est pas assez respecté. Je soutiens que: a) l'évidence contextuelle semble indiquer que les temples étaient conçus, par les rites y attachés, de façon à renforcer l'origine et l'identité locales; b) même pendant les périodes de très grande différence culturelle, les Maltais étaient en contacte avec les sociétés avoisinantes, et les voyageurs maltais discernaient probablement des différences culturelles dans les coutumes rituelles importantes; et que c) lorsque les praticiens rituels commençaient à réinterpréter l'imaginaire collectif pour façonner les rites propres au temple, ils créaient simultanément une nouvelle identité insulaire fondée sur ces rites. En effet, après deux millénaires de ressemblance culturelle à leurs voisins, le néolithique maltais créait une culture insulaire propre, peut-être en réaction aux changements intra-sociétaux dans l'Europe du quatrième millénaire avant J-C. Le résultat en était une différence culturelle comparable - peut-être aussi en ce qui concerne son origine - à d'autres sites archéologiques tels que Val Canonica, Morbihan, Stonehenge et Chaco Canyon.

Insel-identitäten: ritual, reise und die herausbildung von unterschieden auf malta während des neolithikums

John Robb

Maltas neolithische megalithische 'Tempel' - einzigartig im Mittelmeerraum - regen auf eindrucksvolle Weise die Phantasie der Archäologen an. Die meisten Erklärungen bedienen sich eines simplen Funktionalismus: die Tempel sollen aus Maltas insularer Abgeschiedenheit resultieren. Derartigen Interpretationen fehlt jedoch die theoretische Basis. Weiterhin begründen sie nicht ausreichend Maltas Muster der kulturellen Integration in bzw. der Abtrennung von der Welt des zentralen Mittelmeerraumes. Der Verfasser stellt fest, daß (a.) kontextuelle Argumente es wahrscheinlich machen, daß die Tempel den Hintergrund für Riten bildeten, die eine lokale Herkunft und Identität betonten, (b.) die Malteser selbst in Perioden größter kultureller Unterschiede Kontakte zu den umliegenden Kulturen pflegten und maltesische Reisende höchstwahrscheinlich die kulturellen Unterschiede in wichtigen rituellen Praktiken erkannten und (c.) als die Ausübenden dieser Handlungen begannen, zur Entwicklung der Tempelriten ein gemeinsames inhaltliches Erbe zu reinterpretieren, sie damit gleichzeitig auch eine neue Insel-Identität entwickelten, die auf diesen Riten beruhte. So schufen die Malteser nach zwei Jahrtausenden kultureller Ähnlichkeit zu ihren Nachbarn während des Neolithikums zur geographischen auch eine kulturelle Inselstellung - dies möglicherweise in Reaktion auf die gesellschaftlichen Umwälzungen, die Europa im vierten vorchristlichen Jahrtausend erschütterten. Das Resultat war eine Insel deutlich abweichender kultureller Prägung, die in ihrem Erscheinungsbild und vielleicht auch ihrer Ursache vielen anderen einzigartigen archäologischen Denkmälern, wie z.B. Val Camonica, Morbihan, Stonehenge und Chaco Canyon, ähnelt.