

An Iconography of Insularity: A Cosmological Interpretation of some Images and Spaces in the Late Neolithic Temples of Malta

Reuben Grima

Institute of Archaeology, UCL.

This paper proposes a fresh model for interpreting some of the iconography and megalithic architectural forms that emerged in Malta during the Late Neolithic. Recent studies of the relationship between the Maltese archipelago and the world beyond, and between the monumental megalithic sites and their landscape setting, will inform an interpretation of some of the iconography and architectural forms that characterize these sites. Patterns in their use of spatial order, architectural devices and carved reliefs are interpreted as elements in a programmatic recreation of an island cosmology. It is suggested that the prehistoric islanders used these images and spaces to express and mediate concerns with cosmological order.

Introduction

The art and architecture of Late Neolithic Malta has intrigued and attracted archaeologists in an almost unbroken tradition of research stretching back to the 19th century. Much of this research has centred around the monumental megalithic buildings that were raised during the late fourth and early third millennium BCE, usually referred to as temples in the literature. The iconography and architectural forms employed in these buildings have, more often than not, tended to be considered separately from the question of the prehistoric islanders' views of the archipelago and the world beyond. This paper proposes an alternative reading of the iconography and spatial organisation of these buildings, which is informed by the setting of these sites in the landscape, and the relationship between this culture and the outside world. The state of the debate on these two issues will be reviewed first. It will then be argued that some aspects of the iconography and architectural order of the temple buildings may be better understood as elements in the construction of the islanders' cosmology.

The Maltese Archipelago and the World Beyond

The idiosyncrasy of the monumental megalithic architecture that characterized Late Neolithic Malta has often been explained in terms of geographical and cultural isolation. The Maltese archipelago is one of the more remote island groups of the Mediterranean (Patton 1996, 104; but compare Held 1989, 79). The communities responsible for the megalithic temples that were built between the late fourth and early third millennium BCE have generally been considered to have had limited or sporadic contact with the outside world (debate reviewed in Robb 2001). In an interesting variation of this theme, it has been suggested that the main axis of temple complexes may have been aligned towards other islands beyond the Maltese archipelago (Stoddart *et al.* 1993, 16), as competition in the construction of Maltese megalithic monuments may have replaced competition in the pursuit of exchange with the outside world. Once again, this interpretation links ritual elaboration to economic, political and ideological isolation (Stoddart *et al.* 1993, 17).

More recent contributions have put this issue in a different perspective. In a study of prestige and ritual behaviour, it has been persuasively argued that the inhabitants of the archipelago maintained strong links with the outside world throughout the period of temple construction (Hayden 1998). Another recent and stimulating re-interpretation of the evidence has furthermore proposed that the idiosyncrasy of the temple complexes was a deliberate construction of difference, through which the islanders sought to identify and distinguish themselves from outsiders (Robb 2001). This interpretation follows other recent contributions on island contexts elsewhere, exploring the idea of insularity as a cultural construct (debate reviewed in Broodbank 2000, 18-21; Gosden and Pavlides 1994). As Broodbank (2000, 17) has argued, insularity may be “a domain of active social contention and manipulation”, while the significance of the sea as obstacle or medium may also be culturally constructed. In the interpretation proposed by Robb, the megalithic architecture that characterized Late Neolithic Malta was deeply engaged in the construction of insularity as identity and difference, inseparable from geographical knowledge and cosmological values (Robb 2001, 195-196). This interpretation will be returned to below.

The Landscape Context

The landscape setting that was chosen for these megalithic complexes has not attracted much discussion in the literature. In one early contribution, it was noted that temple complexes are often located near sheltered creeks and bays (Zammit 1929, 5). This relationship hardly received any further attention in the discussion of the role and purpose of these buildings. In a notable exception, it has been pointed out that “most of the temples on Malta are located within easy distance of the coast, or else in strategic locations close to main valleys that also lead down to the sea”, and that coastal areas “act as natural frontier zones linking an island’s interior with maritime resources and the external world” (Pace 1996, 5).

Looking at the distribution of known temple sites on the familiar ‘dots-on-a-map’ representation of their location against an outline of the islands’ coastline would not seem to bear out this proposition. A number of sites, such as Skorba on Malta, or Ġgantija, Xewkija, and ta’ Marziena on Gozo appear to be located a considerable distance inland (fig. 1). Such a representation may easily mislead, however, as it does not indicate which parts of the coastline allow access to the sea, or how natural features such as the characteristically deep wadis may have conditioned the choice of routes to travel across the landscape. As noted by Pace (*ibid*), an understanding of topographic features such as valleys and embarkation points is essential for a reading of the location of temple sites. When these features are taken into account, it appears that temples were almost invariably sited between embarkation points and the interior. This case will be argued in greater detail in a future contribution.

As in the preceding discussion on the relationship between the archipelago and the world that lay across the sea, the evidence of site location suggests a concern with mediating the boundary between these two worlds. The placing of monuments and symbols in a landscape is one way to give cultural meanings to that landscape. The evidence of site location may in turn be a useful tool in our interpretation of prehistoric monuments and symbols that survive in the landscape, as eloquently demonstrated by Bradley (e.g. Bradley 1997). The patterns that have been noted in the lo-

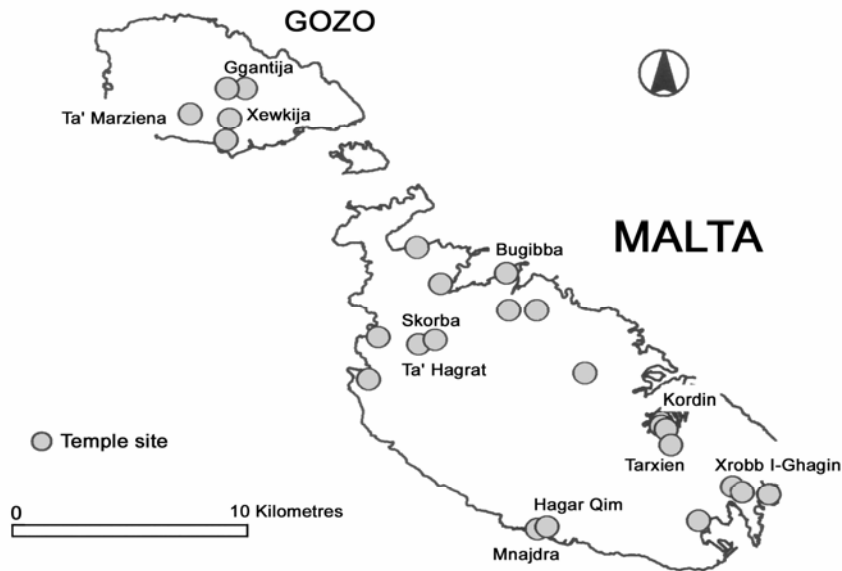


Figure 1. The Maltese Islands: location of sites referred to in the text, and other known temple sites.

cation of Maltese temple complexes will inform the following interpretation of some of the architectural forms and iconography that were employed in these buildings.

Architectural Spaces and Boundaries

The megalithic temple complexes share a number of common characteristics that identify them as a distinct architectural form. In plan, the fundamental components are an external forecourt, leading to an internal central space or court, which in turn leads onto sub-circular rooms, usually referred to as apses in the literature. Within this basic formula there is considerable variability and development in the number of apses, their proportions and disposition in relation to each other and to the central court. This variability has been discussed in detail and modelled as evolution of the basic plan across time, from the earlier three-apsed structures to the more intricate plans of the Tarxien phase (Evans 1959, 84-125; 1971, 218; Trump 1972, 25-27). More recently, space syntax and access analysis (Hillier and Hanson 1984) have been applied to these plans to model and quantify their increasing complexity (Bonanno *et al.* 1990, 195-201).

One key observation resulting from access analysis was that these buildings are characterised by internal partitioning and sub-division of space, which becomes increasingly elaborate with time, culminating in the Tarxien phase. This has been interpreted as an indication that access to the inner reaches was becoming more carefully controlled by an elite, in a society that was becoming increasingly stratified (Bonanno *et al.* 1990, 195-202).

At this point, however, it may be useful to recall Leach's (1978) observation that access analysis, by focusing on the succession of spaces that are its units of analysis, may draw attention away from the boundaries that separate them. In terms of the social practices that are embedded in architectural forms, these boundaries are at least as significant as the spaces themselves (Leach 1978, 400-401; Van Gennep 1909).

Boundaries in the temple plan are strongly demarcated. Doorways are monumental compositions, often with raised thresholds and holes where barriers may have been fitted. The boundary between the internal court and the apses around it is also marked in a variety of ways (Evans 1996, 41). Three principal devices are used repeatedly to mark these boundaries: elevation, screening, and sculpture; each will be considered in turn.

Elevation: in the simpler, three-apsed plans, a raised threshold marks the transition from the central court to the surrounding apses, with the floor level in the apses at a higher level than in the court. One of the best-preserved examples of this arrangement is the larger temple at ta' Hāgrat (Fig. 2). Here the threshold of the main entrance into the court is also at a higher level than the court itself, resulting in a sunken, rectangular court surrounded by a raised kerb on all sides (Evans 1971, 30-31). At Ġgantija, the three inner apses of the south temple may originally have formed a three-apsed structure (Evans 1971, 180). A raised threshold has been preserved across the central apse, the floor level of which is at a higher level than the court. Early watercolours of the northern apse show that a raised kerb also separated the northern apse from the court (Evans 1971, pl. 28, 5, 6, pl. 29, 1). The most extreme example of elevation being used as a device to demarcate the boundary into an apse is the central apse of the south temple at Tarxien, which is raised about sixty centimetres above the floor of the court leading to it (Evans 1971, 123).

The use of different floor levels for different areas in the temple complex may have interesting implications for the management of rainwater. The extent to which these buildings were roofed over is a matter of long-standing debate. The corbelling that survives in the apses is generally accepted as evidence that these were roofed over, but the question whether the courts were also roofed is still a more open one. If courts that were open to the sky are admitted as a possibility, this immediately raises the question of how rainwater runoff was managed. The sunken court at ta' Hāgrat has already been noted. Intriguingly, the raised edge along the inner end of the main entrance threshold would effectively have prevented water from escaping from the court and flowing out of the site. This raised edge is at a lower level than the three raised apses around the court, meaning that even if the court were flooded, the apses would remain dry. It should also be noted that the floor of the court is paved with what may have originally been a single huge slab (Evans 1971, 31). This paving, which in itself represents a tremendous investment in effort and planning, would also have slowed down the draining away of any ponded water, unlike the floors of crushed limestone dust which are usually found in the apses. Considered together, these different characteristics suggest a rather surprising possibility: if the court at ta' Hāgrat was not roofed over, it could be argued that this area was designed to allow the ponding of rainwater.

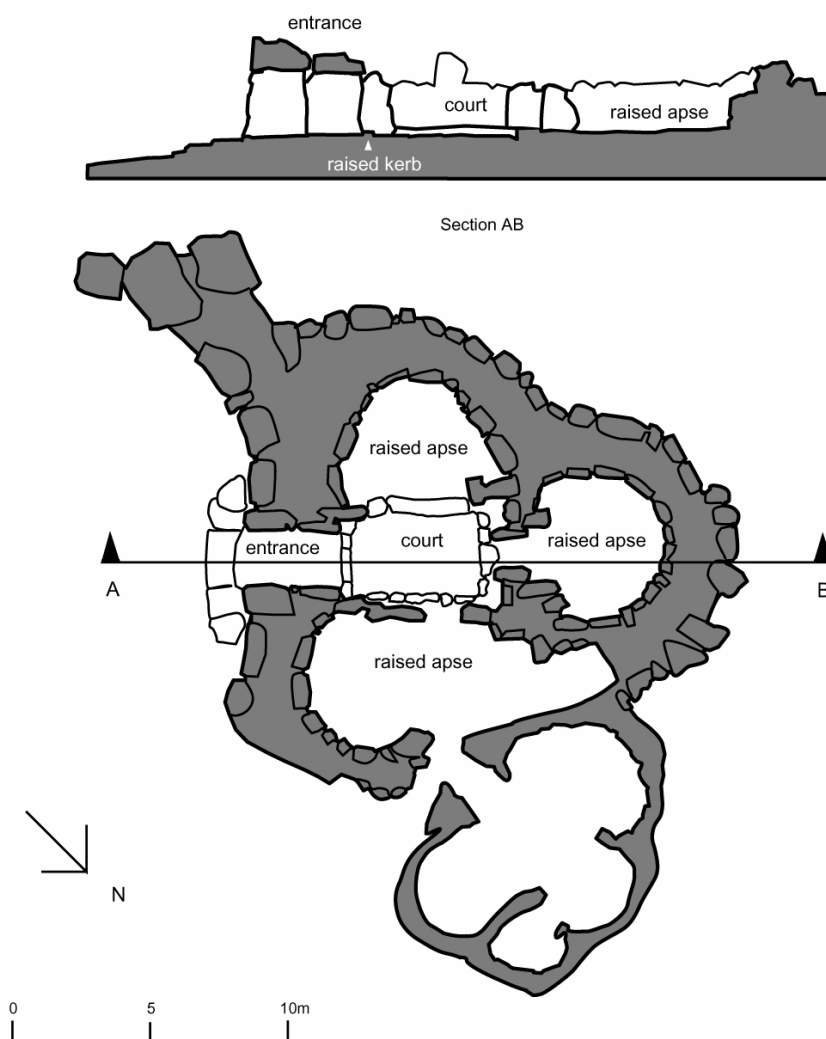


Figure 2. Ta' Hagrat: plan and section showing raised edge across threshold, and sunken court (redrawn from Evans 1971).

A similar arrangement may be observed in at least four other sites. In the main entrance to the south temple at Tarxien, a similar raised edge may be observed across the threshold (Evans 1971, 118). The eastern end of this raised edge has been chiselled away, probably in a modern intervention intended to facilitate water runoff from the interior. Once again, the floor in the central court beyond this threshold is paved in monolithic stone slabs, while the raised lateral apses are floored with crushed limestone dust. In the nearby temple known as Kordin III, a comparable arrangement may be observed (Evans 1971, 72). The temple site recorded at Xrobb

l-Ghaġin also has a raised threshold across its entrance, formed by a narrow slab set on edge (Evans 1971, 27). A fifth example is the southern entrance in to the main complex at Ħaġar Qim (Evans 1971, 82). In all these five examples, the presence of paving in the court makes the height of the raised threshold above the floor level within very evident. Two further possible examples of this characteristic are less certain, because the original floor of the court has not been preserved or recorded. These are the south temple at Mnajdra, and Kordin II, where it has been suggested that the raised thresholds are a result of the removal of the original flooring (Evans 1971, 69). These curious features deserve further investigation, and until they are more fully understood, the possibility that they form part of a system for the deliberate control of water cannot be discounted. This possibility will be returned to below.

Screening: In the Tarxien phase, further developments in the treatment and elaboration of the boundaries between court and apse may be observed. One process that has been observed repeatedly on a number of sites is the insertion of screens or partitions, usually marking off apses from the central courts (Evans 1996, 41). In the Ġgantija phase three-apsed temple at Skorba, a cross-wall with a central doorway was built across the central apse, and a kerb installed across the two lateral apses (Trump 1966, fig. 3). In the south temple at Ġgantija, the first northern apse is separated from the court by an elaborate screen incorporating altar-like platforms and a central opening with a raised, semicircular threshold (Fig. 3). It has been noted that this arrangement is very similar to that across the south-western apse of the south temple at Tarxien (Evans 1971, 174). The latter forms part of the most elaborate and well-preserved example of this spatial organisation yet discovered. The two southern apses of the south temple at Tarxien are both separated from the court by elaborate examples of such screens. The screen across the south-western apse shows some similarities to the model of a temple façade that was also found at Tarxien (Evans 1971, 120). Another instance of liminal screening is encountered in the central temple, where a raised slab about sixty centimetres high lies across the threshold



Figure 3. Ġgantija, south temple: watercolour by C. de Brochtorff c.1829 showing screen across north-eastern apse, with running spiral motifs. (National Library, Valletta, Malta).

leading from the outer to the inner court.

Sculpture: These threshold and screening arrangements are often characterised by elaborate surface treatment. In several examples, the vertical outer face of the elements forming these boundaries was treated with a pattern of drilled holes, often referred to as pitted decoration. As noted earlier, this may be seen on the raised thresholds to the inner apses of the south temple at Ġgantija as well as the raised threshold and door jamb arrangement into the eastern apse of the three-apsed temple at Skorba (Evans 1971, 37; Trump 1966). In the south temple at Mnajdra, there is a clear association between this pitted treatment and the doorways (Evans 1971, 98).

Another surface treatment that has been noted in association with these boundaries is relief carvings based on a spiral motif (Evans 1996, 41; Pace 1996, 11). The most elaborate and well-preserved examples known are, once again, those at Tarxien. The screens across the southern pair of apses in the southern temple are treated in this way, as well as the elements on either side of the doorway from the first court to the inner court. The result is an almost continuous register of spiral motifs along three sides of the first court. The elevated central apse of the same temple is also treated in the same way. The vertical face of the raised platform forming this apse is decorated with more spiral motifs. If there were no intervening obstructions on the central axis, this panel would have been visible from the first court, and may have been intended to be read as a continuation of the register of spirals around this court. The raised stone screen lying across the threshold on the central axis of the central temple at Tarxien also bears a relief carving of a pair of spirals on its outer face. Immediately beyond it, the doorway is flanked by two facing panels showing more spiral motifs. In the south temple at Ġgantija, the screening arrangement across the first northern apse, noted earlier, is also treated with spiral motifs (fig. 3). In the partially preserved temple at Buġibba, a square block bearing spiral motifs appears to have flanked the doorway from the first court to the second (Evans 1971, 111).

This rapid consideration of surfaces treated with drilled holes and spiral carvings suggests that the two treatments are closely related. They both appear to occur in the same spatial contexts, in association with liminal features such as thresholds and doorways. On the pair of facing panels in the central temple at Tarxien, the spiral relief carvings are set against a background treated with drilled holes, strengthening the impression that the two treatments are closely related, and possibly interchangeable. In the raised central apse of the south temple at Tarxien, the vertical face of the raised platform appears to have been treated with drilled holes at an earlier stage, and re-worked with a spiral motif at a later stage. The lowermost ten centimetres of this slab were covered when a flagstone floor was installed against it. As a result, the drilled treatment in this band was left intact when the rest of the slab was cut back to form the spiral reliefs (Evans 1971, 123 suggests an alternative explanation). On the strength of the available evidence, it is generally accepted that the spiral motifs are a chronologically later development than the drilled hole treatment. The co-extensive and spatially equivalent use of these two treatments furthermore suggests that one may be a successor of the other, and that both may have performed a related function. Other relief slabs that occur in juxtaposition to the spiral reliefs bear representations of animals and fish. These will be considered more closely below.

Cosmology, Architecture and Representation

This overview of some of the principal devices used to define spaces within the temple complexes prompts various observations and questions. There is a consistent grammar of relationships between the devices considered. Elevation, screening and

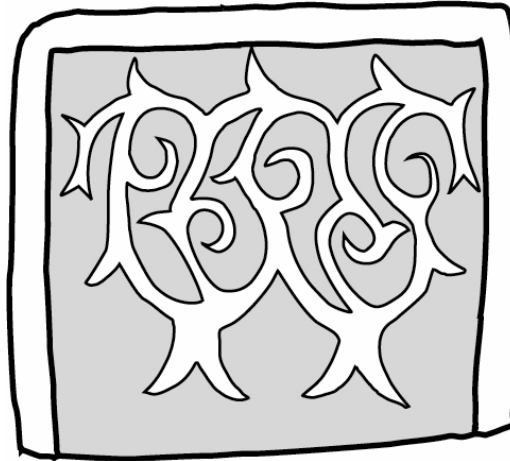


Figure 4. Tarxien, south-western apse: low relief of a tree-like motif.

surface treatment are used systematically and repeatedly across the sites that have been considered here. This consistency suggests that these devices form an integral part of a meaningfully constituted spatial order.

Architectural space in a wide variety of ethnographic contexts may incorporate elements of the cosmological order of the culture that creates them (Parker Pearson and Richards 1994). The identification and reconstruction of such cosmological significance from material evidence alone is a less certain enterprise. Could the spatial ordering of the temple complexes articulate elements of the world-view of their builders? If so, how may these perceptions and systems of representation be reconstructed and understood?

The use of images within this spatial order is a likely starting point in the search for an answer. A closer look at the evidence will be helpful here. Relief carvings in temple complexes are by no means limited to the spiral motifs in liminal areas. Other themes are also represented, and although these are rather less frequent, they may help inform our model. Low reliefs also occur in different spatial contexts apart from the boundaries considered so far. Nevertheless, all the reliefs that are considered here share a characteristic border, which is usually left in high relief along the top and sides of the panel (figs. 4 and 5). This device may be observed framing reliefs showing different themes, from different sites and in different spatial contexts. It lends support to the idea that they form a group of meaningfully constituted compositions that may share a common grammar of representation and juxtaposition. This possibility is pursued here.

The iconographic evidence is most elaborate and abundant at Tarxien, which has

been better preserved and better recorded than most of the other major temple complexes. A particularly interesting area is the south-western apse of the south temple. As noted earlier, this apse is separated from the court by an elaborate screen carved with spiral motifs. Within the apse itself, there are various other relief carvings. Immediately beyond the doorway through the first screen, an elaborate threshold arrangement incorporates more elements treated with variations on the spiral motif. Beyond this, there are the remains of a finely finished structure which once stood across the innermost end of the apse, and which has sometimes been described as an altar (Evans 1971, 119). This structure incorporates a partially preserved panel showing a number of animals in low relief. The surviving part of the panel shows a row of six animals facing towards the right, where the panel is interrupted near the mid-point of its original length. Moving from left to right, the animals appear to be four sheep or goats, a pig, and a ram. A roughly cube-shaped block was placed at the left end of this panel. A similar block probably stood at the right end of the panel, where the platform on which it would have been seated has been recorded (Evans 1971, 120). The three visible sides of the surviving block each show a similar low relief carving (fig. 4) of what has been variously described as a spiral ornament (Zammit 1930, pl. 3) and as a tree-like motif (Evans 1971, 120). To the left of this composition and facing towards it, another elongated slab which has been preserved in its entirety shows a low-relief of more sheep or goats, this time in two registers, with eleven animals in each register.

A more isolated, but nevertheless exciting piece of evidence comes from the partially preserved temple at Buġibba. Along one edge of the first court of this building, a block showing low reliefs of fish was found in situ, adjacent to the block showing spiral motifs that was noted earlier. The low reliefs occur on the two visible vertical faces of the block. Three fish appear on the longer side, while a fourth is represented on the shorter side (fig. 5). Another relief slab from the south temple at Ġgantija bears a representation of a snake. Although it is first recorded within the inner north apse of this temple, its original position is less certain than the examples from Tarxien and Buġibba (Evans 1971, 175).

The more overtly representational carvings of animals and fish at Tarxien and Buġibba may be the key to a reading of the less explicit spiral motifs. These reliefs are positioned very distinctly in relation to the spatial demarcations of temple spaces observed earlier. The quadruped reliefs are grouped at the inner end of an apse, well behind the boundary defined by the screen across the front of the apse. The representations of fish, on the other hand, are placed along the edge of a court, closely associated with spiral reliefs, and in a position equivalent to that where spiral motifs are more usually encountered. If the model of systematic and meaningful demarcation between apses and court holds true, and if this division indeed represents two cosmological domains, the quadruped representations are clearly positioned in the inner domain, i.e. the apse, while fish are represented in the outer one, i.e. the court. This relationship prompts the suggestion that the cosmological domains that are being represented here are land and sea, perhaps the two most inevitable components of an islander's cosmology (cf. Broodbank 2000, 21-23; Helms 1988, 24-28).

The possibility that rainwater may have been allowed to collect in temple courts,

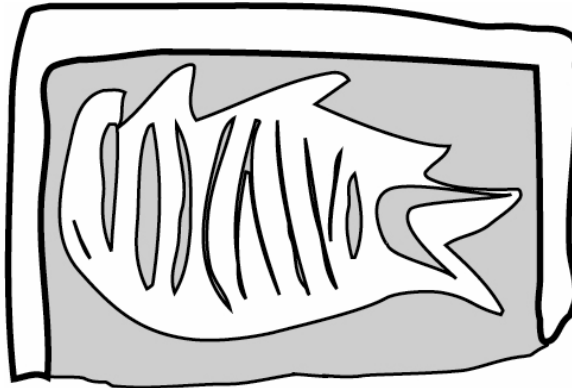


Figure 5. Buğibba, court: one of the low reliefs showing a fish.

noted earlier, is worth recalling here. If this were the case, this deliberate flooding would have played a powerful part in this cosmological programme, transforming the domain representing the sea into a pool of water, which would have had to be crossed to reach the apses representing dry land. Reflections on the surface of the water may also have played a part, replicating the temple interior and the sky.

An Iconography of Insularity

The spiral motifs found in these buildings have been generally interpreted as abstract designs with cultic significance. This interpretation may be reconsidered in the light of the above discussion. In a consideration of the evolution of modes of representation, Arnheim (1974, 164-165) has argued that terms such as ‘symbol’ or ‘abstract’ are problematic and do little to explain early art forms. If motifs are consigned to the realm of the abstract when it is not clear what they represent, there is a serious risk of imposing an ethnocentric divide between ‘representative’ and ‘abstract’ art. Such a division takes today’s visualist traditions and categories for granted as timeless and absolute, and transfers them into the past (Witkin 1995, 29-82).

As noted earlier, the reliefs with spiral or curvilinear motifs share certain characteristics with the reliefs showing animals or fish. They are contextually associated, usually appearing as part of the same arrangement, and stylistically connected by the raised border found around all the reliefs under discussion, as noted above. Rather than treat the spiral and animal motifs as separate categories (Malone and Stoddart 1996, 48-49; Pace 1996, 10-11), here it is proposed to integrate them in a single model based on their spatial context and inter-relationships.

It has been noted how running spiral motifs are closely associated with the spatial setting of the court, and particularly with boundaries marking the court off from lateral apses, or doorways linking the court to other parts of the complex. In the model that is being suggested, the use of these motifs is closely associated with the cosmological domain of the sea. The apparent exception of a related motif that is used in an apse rather than a court is the block noted earlier in the south-western apse of the south temple at Tarxien (fig. 4). In spite of its stylistic similarity to spiral motifs, however, the motif that is repeated on the three visible vertical faces of this block is

different in structure. As noted earlier, its branched structure, stemming from a pair of thickened vertical elements, has prompted its description as a tree-like motif (Evans 1971, 120). Comparison with the structure of the spiral motifs encountered around the court reveals a number of differences. While the branching, tree-like structure is hierarchic and makes use of different thicknesses for different elements to show their place in the hierarchy, the structure of spiral motifs around the court is rhythmic and repetitive, with no distinguishable variation in the thickness of the elements in the composition. On many of the panels on the screens between court and apse, spirals follow each other in a horizontal series, facing the same direction. In the more elaborate examples at Tarxien, two horizontal running registers are typically shown on each panel, one facing left, the other facing right. Other variations may also be noted, as in the case of the threshold slab in the central temple at Tarxien, where a symmetrical composition of two reflected spirals is preferred. In spite of these variations, however, there is a consistent emphasis on horizontal repetition and regularity, with individual spirals retaining the same form, size, and topological relationship with other spiral elements, across the whole interlocking composition.

Depictions of the sea may take a variety of forms in different cultures and artistic conventions, ranging from zigzag lines to patterns of repeated curves (Crowley 1991). Spiral motifs are among the more widely attested patterns that have been adopted to represent water and the sea. In the prehistoric Aegean, for example, some Early Bronze Age Cycladic 'frying pans' that are roughly contemporary with the Tarxien reliefs bear depictions of fish and boats surrounded by a sea of spirals (Broodbank 2000, 252, fig. 81; Sherratt 2000, pl. 247). In such representations, the clear association with evidently maritime motifs leaves little doubt that the intention was to use spirals to represent the sea. The contextual associations that have been noted so far in the case of the Maltese temple reliefs suggest that a case may likewise be made for interpreting spirals as a representation of the sea. The emphasis on repetition and rhythm that was noted earlier is consonant with the behaviour of waves as they may be apprehended, organized and represented by an observer (See Arnheim 1974 for a discussion of some of the cognitive processes that may be involved). The hierarchically structured, branching motifs that are encountered within the apse, on the other hand, capture and represent a very different set of characteristics. Evans' intuitive suggestion that this design resembles a tree is borne out by its context. In the same way that fish are represented in the domain of the court, and animals in the domain of the apse, the less curvilinear reliefs around the court may be read as representations of the sea, while those at the far end of the apse may represent plants, shrubs or trees (fig. 6). The apparent difference in the treatment of these subjects may be explained simply by the nature of the subjects themselves. While animals and fish may be recognizably portrayed with an outline alone, the representation of more amorphous bodies such as the sea, or organic bodies such as a tree, is somewhat more challenging, and the use of more stylised conventions to fulfil the task is all the more likely.

Earlier it was noted that a visualist approach to these images might be inappropriate. This point should be elaborated further. Optic systems of representation have often been contrasted with haptic ones. Simply put, optic systems represent objects as

they appear from a single fixed viewpoint, while haptic ones represent objects as they are experienced and understood (Witkin 1995, 67-78). The reliefs under consideration here share many of the defining characteristics of haptic systems compiled by Witkin (1995, 71-72). First, objects tend to be experienced and represented as isolated and self-contained. Second, "...objects can be located relative to each other as part of an arrangement of complete and separate things" (Witkin 1995, 72). Both of these hold true for the reliefs under consideration. At no point do different elements appear within a single panel, nor is there any attempt to show engagement or interaction between different elements. On the other hand, relationships between elements are articulated through the meaningful arrangement of the different images in ordered space. In haptic systems, furthermore, the image is an embodiment of what it represents (Witkin 1995, 72). In the present reading of the evidence, the relief blocks themselves may be said to stand in for the elements they represent.

A related characteristic of the blocks on which reliefs are carved is that elements are never mixed on a block, even when there are several panels on different faces of the same block. At Bugibba, for instance, it was noted how one block has two reliefs showing spirals, while an adjacent block has two reliefs showing fish. On the block showing the tree motif at Tarxien, the same motif is repeated on the three visible vertical faces. The 'altar' block from an insecure context in Hagar Qim, likewise, has the same representation of a tree-like pattern on all four sides (Evans 1971, pl. 41). This systematic and repetitive treatment lends further support to the idea that the blocks themselves are literally meant to re-present a subject (cf. Arnheim 1974, 216).

These different representations are evidently related by their spatial setting, which in turn acquires and reinforces its meaning through the reliefs. The devices of elevation, screening and representation work together to conjure up a cosmology of land and sea. The ethnographic evidence suggests that such systems of cosmological representation are not passive reflections of a perceived reality, but active tools in the creation of order and meaning of experiences and perceptions. Furthermore, the cosmological representation we are concerned with here is a spatially embedded one, which must itself be bodily experienced and traversed. This point will be made clearer below.

Crossings

Against this background, other features that are encountered in these buildings may appear in a new light. The first of these is a group of graffiti of boats at Tarxien, which have been studied and recorded by Woolner (1957). Although these graffiti do not appear to have attracted much attention during the excavation of the site between 1915 and 1919, the more deeply incised are clearly visible in the original excavation photographs, removing any doubts about their authenticity. These graffiti are found at the entrance to the south-western apse of the south temple, which was discussed earlier on account of the high concentration of relief carvings. The graffiti are located on a pair of upright megaliths forming the north jamb of the entrance into the apse. Nearly forty graffiti were identified, varying in technique and detail of execution. Many of these are densely superimposed, suggesting that they probably accumulated over a span of time. The details of the boats represented vary considerably. Many are very simply executed, and may be representing small canoes or

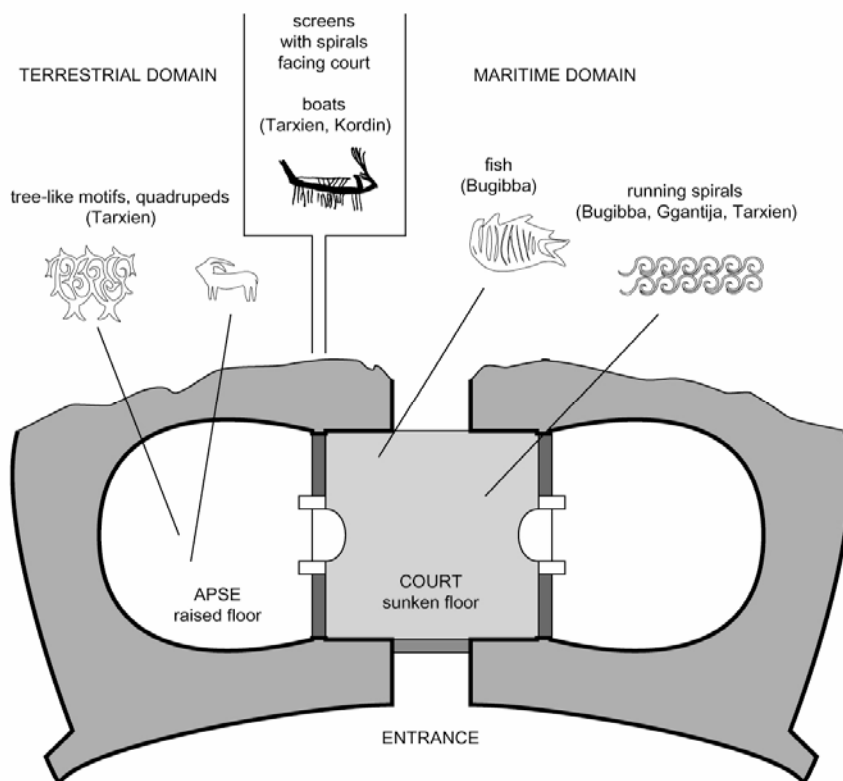


Figure 6. Schematic plan of a temple structure showing location of various motifs from different sites.

similar vessels, such as those attested in the Neolithic (Broodbank 2000, 96-101 for a recent summary and discussion of the Aegean evidence; Johnstone 1980, 56-61; Marangou 1991, 31 for sources on Neolithic evidence in Europe). A few of the graffiti have been compared to the longboats that are depicted on Early Cycladic pottery (Woolner 1957, 63) from around the mid-third millennium BCE, although they may well have developed earlier (Broodbank 2000, 99). Although doubts have been expressed about whether these graffiti could be contemporary with the temple itself (Evans 1959, 116; Ridley 1976, 90), the stratigraphic evidence and the height at which the Tarxien graffiti occur suggest that they were created before the end of the Tarxien phase, when the temple complex was still in use (Woolner 1957, 65).

The spatial context of the graffiti and the reading of the associated iconography that is being proposed here lend more plausibility to such an interpretation. Earlier it was proposed that screens such as the one across this apse might be demarcating the domain of the sea from that of the land. These representations of boats are located precisely at the juncture between these two domains, at the entrance that crosses the screen into the apse. The apparent engagement of these graffiti with this spatial dis-

course strongly suggests that they were incised by individuals who knew and understood the meaning of the spatial setting.

Another enigmatic piece of evidence may also be reconsidered in this light. In the nearby three-apsed temple known as Kordin III, dated to the Ġgantija phase (Evans 1971, 77), an intriguing slab made of hard coralline limestone lies across one of the thresholds into the side apses (fig. 7). The original excavators described this as "...a remarkable trough cut out of a single boat-shaped block... divided by cross-divisions into seven compartments" (Ashby *et al.* 1913, 42). Citing the smoothed surfaces of the trough's interior, and the presence of a smoothed stone in one of its compartments, the excavators suggested that this feature had been used for grinding grain (Ashby *et al.* 1913, 42-43). More recently it has been suggested that the hollowing out of this rather idiosyncratic trough may be the result of secondary use after the building had fallen into ruin (Evans 1971, 73). In view of these interpretations, the possibility that this feature may represent a boat has only been suggested very tentatively (Basch 1987, 395).

The context of this feature puts the question in a different perspective. Positioned across a threshold between court and apse, it lies along the structural boundary discussed earlier. It was argued above that this boundary is frequently marked by imagery related to the sea. More specifically, the boat graffiti found in an equivalent doorway at Tarxien support the idea that this mysterious boat-shaped object is in fact deliberately mimicking a boat. In some respects it may be compared to the Neolithic dugout canoes which are widely attested in Europe (Marangou 1991, 21-290). The distinctive separation of the threshold feature into seven compartments is strongly reminiscent of the compartments attested on some dugouts. Such compartments have been observed on a model from Tsangli in Thessaly, which may be a Neolithic representation of a developed dugout (Marangou 1991, 27-29), while several other examples of dugouts internally divided into compartments by partitions or bulkheads have been recorded in a range of archaeological and ethnographic contexts in north-west Europe (McGrail 1987, 76-77, fig. 6.16). The Marmotta dugout from Lake Bracciano has four such bulkheads, dividing the vessel into five compartments (Fugazzola Delpino and Mineo 1995, 227-228). These compartments are usually created by leaving reserved bulkheads during the hollowing out of the craft, and may have served to divide the boat into spaces with different functions, as well as providing seating and strengthening the hull. In the model from Tsangli, the thickening of the partition towards its base was read as an attempt to reproduce the effect created when leaving a reserved partition, rather than inserting a plank into a completely hollowed hull (Marangou 1991, 28). This characteristic also tallies well with the partitions on the threshold feature at Kordin. The smoothed surfaces on this feature may indicate that abrasion was chosen as the most practical method to hollow it out. The basic concept of hollowing out the desired form from a solid mass was essentially the same as that of creating a real dugout, only the tool-kit would have been changed to suit the different medium.

Sea-craft in the prehistoric Mediterranean represented a valuable resource, and under certain circumstances their control and use could be closely linked to prestige and status (Broodbank 2000, 99-101). In an island context, sea-craft could easily gather



Figure 7. Kordin: the boat-shaped threshold shortly after excavation (after Ashby *et al.*, 1913, pl. VII, Fig. 2).

associations of exotic knowledge and contact with other islands and beyond (Helms 1988). It has been suggested that pressure on limited resources in Late Neolithic Malta could have accentuated the value of such associations (Stoddart *et al.* 1993, 17).

The representation of sea-craft in a temple context is perhaps less surprising when considered against this background. If the reading proposed here is correct, these references to sea-craft could be a further indication of a concern with cosmology and geography. The location of these representations in a liminal context, straddling boundaries that appear to be invoking the sea, suggests a preoccupation with the significance of maritime crossings. The accumulation of superimposed graffiti at Tarxien speaks eloquently of a succession of individual actions and events, perhaps journeys fulfilled and celebrated. The polyvalent boat, receptacle and threshold at Kordin, could have invoked the movement of people and exchanges across the sea when used in ritual activity. Developing Robb's (2001, 192) suggestion that "the distinction between Maltese and other would have been constructed through the experiences of both temple ritual and overseas travel", it is suggested that the ritual engagement with the architectural space of the temple interior was itself a metaphoric journey. The crossing of spaces and boundaries within these architectural spaces may not only have recalled the islanders' experiences of land and sea, but could also have given meaning and order to those experiences.

Traces of burning that appear on the altar-like partition noted earlier at Tarxien indicate that this boundary was an important focus of ritual activity. The possible replication of elements of a temple façade in some of the details of this screen may have been a reference to the location of the temple itself, along the boundary between land and sea. Temple buildings may have been used to reify and mediate the passage across different cosmological domains, in a way that bears comparison to the 'earthnavels' of the Tewa Indians. In Tewa cosmology, these are places of encounter be-

tween different natural domains, which become foci of architectural elaboration and ritual activity (Ortiz 1969, 21-25). In the Maltese context, certain journeys across the boundary between land and sea might have required a ritual passage through the temple, which could have culminated in a ritual replication of the journey in the cosmological space of the interior. The ethnographic literature would suggest that concerns with individual affiliation (Van Gennep 1909; Whitehouse 1992), exotic knowledge (Helms 1988), pollution and danger (Douglas 1966) may all have played a part in shaping these rituals.

A final question that may be raised is that of who would have gained admittance to the interior of the temples to participate in these rituals. The limited space and the increasingly elaborate internal boundaries that characterize these buildings have prompted the suggestion that, by the final Tarxien phase of this culture, the vast majority of the population would have been excluded from these monuments (Bonanno *et al.* 1990; Stoddart *et al.* 1993, 13). In an alternative opinion, it has been pointed out that it is unlikely that access to the interior would have been limited to “just a small privileged body of priests and initiates” (Evans 1996, 44). The reading of the evidence that has been proposed here would envisage that membership of the group, individual understanding of its cosmological geography, and practices surrounding journeys across the sea were probably all rooted in some form of ritual passage through the temples. Access to the cosmological space of the interior, however controlled, infrequent or partial, would nevertheless have given members of the community shared memories and understandings of the world they inhabited.

Conclusion

The thoughts that have been expressed above are by no means intended as an exhaustive reading of the evidence. On the contrary, they are put forward as possible strands in what is certainly a more complex tapestry of meanings. Comparison with the use of iconography in other media, such as ceramics, and in other contexts, such as funerary monuments, although beyond the scope of the present paper, will certainly enrich future interpretations and raise new questions.

At the start of this paper, it was noted that recent research has increasingly underlined the importance of the engagement of Late Neolithic Malta with the outside world. The most recent contribution has suggested that the idiosyncrasy of the megalithic architecture of this period was a deliberate expression of identity and difference, and that insularity was used as a metaphor for boundedness and separation (Robb 2001, 196). It was furthermore suggested that the temple complexes may themselves have been metaphors for islands, which “provided the paradigmatic definition for the autochthonous, original inhabitable world in contrast to both the sea and alien societies” (Robb 2001, 191-2). This line of thinking has been extended further here, to a reading of the architectural order and iconography encountered within these buildings themselves. It has been argued that patterns of spatial organisation and structured representations found within the temples may be articulating the same cosmological preoccupations, through a metonymic representation of the insular landscape. The setting of temples along the boundary between land and sea may be echoed in the internal spatial order, locating ritual activity in a cosmological frame of reference. This may have provided a locus for the mediation of encounters

between different communities, across the archipelago and beyond.

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