Figurines of Malta


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CHAPTER 32

FIGURINES OF MALTA

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32.1 Introduction: Malta—the Time, Place, and Context

The Maltese islands are located in the central Mediterranean (Figure 32.1), and their small size and rocky landscape offered Neolithic farmers a challenging and restricted environment for settlement. Nevertheless, in spite of limited space and natural resources, Malta saw the development of a distinctive cultural and artistic florescence between c.5500 and 2000 BC that created a range of remarkable figurative objects which today are considered some of the ‘classics’ of prehistoric figurative art. The Maltese repertoire is as remarkable as sequences in the Balkans (including Greece), but is not generally so celebrated because it did not culminate in a revered Classical civilization, the considered foundations of European culture. By contrast with the widely acknowledged foundations of European art, the major cycle of artistic craftsmanship in Malta came to a halt c.2400 BC and was replaced by a substantially different artistic form that had apparent connections with that very same Balkan peninsula whose headland is Greece. The context in which this art developed was one of intensive cultural organization that saw the building of extravagant megalithic temple structures and complex subterranean burial hypogea (see Cilia 2004; Grima 2004, 2005; Malone 2007; Malone and Stoddart 1998, 2011; Malone et al. 2009; Stoddart and Malone 2009; Trump 2002). Thus the creation of figurative objects appears to be closely associated with ritual activity.

The human colonization of Malta took place c.5500 BC (see Stentinello type impressed pottery [Ghar Dalam]), when fully Neolithic communities reached the islands from Sicily/southern Italy. The Neolithic cultural phases that followed colonization were a period of consolidation that maintained the connection to Sicily–Italy. Evidence for this is shown by similar ceramic sequences and the collective inhumation burial ritual in rock-cut tombs, some of which were furnished with small stone statue menhirs (Figure 32.2). From a well-connected society demonstrating parallel cultural developments with
larger neighbours, the Maltese islands progressively became increasingly distinctive and stylistically separate. By c.3600 BC, Malta became culturally divergent, even isolated in some respects, and the material culture (pottery, architecture) became distinctively Maltese together with unparalleled figurative art. This separateness is revealed in the sophisticated architecture, art, and ritual that defined late Neolithic Malta and in the limited movement of exotic raw materials and goods to the archipelago from elsewhere. For over a millennium (c.3600–2450 BC) this unusual island society produced some of the finest and most imaginative artworks of the period in any part of the Mediterranean region. Why an aesthetic tradition developed or was maintained for so long, and also why it was abandoned, are subjects of much research (Bonanno 1986; Cilia 2004; Malone 2008, Maline in press; Malone et al. 2009; Stoddart and Malone 2013; Trump 2002). Whatever the final reasons may have been, it is clear that a sophisticated and complex community resided on Malta, and it demanded images for a variety of ritual purposes, closely associated with the Temple Culture that emerged in later Neolithic Malta.

There is much discussion about the conditions of the separation, namely whether it was substantially in the mind, and how that mindset was conditioned by the 80 km that separates the Maltese islands from a major landfall (Malone and Stoddart 1998, 2004; Robb 2001). There is further debate over the degree of connectivity between the nearest metaphorical continent of Sicily and the Maltese archipelago. It is unlikely that the islands could have been regularly restocked with agricultural produce in times of need, assuming that there was a reasonable-sized population on the islands. The current
discussion centres on the relationship between a construction of island identity and the regularity and frequency of contact. The degree of contact can only currently be measured by small quantities of curated exotic items (greenstone, obsidian, fine Sicilian flint—as opposed to local chert, fragments of pottery). Further fieldwork focused on settlements may provide a more reliable assessment of contacts with the nearby ‘continental’ world, unbiased by ritual elaboration. It will be interesting to see how much this newly focused fieldwork will recover ritual, and even figurines, embedded in daily life. New research is investigating biological contacts between human populations in the island and continental worlds of the Mediterranean world by examining skeletal remains for non-metric traits, stable isotopes, and DNA to assess how these contacts fluctuated over the human life course and between the sexes.

The archaeological discovery of figurative material in Malta is closely associated with the lifting of artefacts from the megalithic temples, and extends back to the early nineteenth century. Two heads and various other objects were collected from Ġgantija in the 1820s (Bonanno 2004; Grima 2004, 2005; Vella 2013; Vella Gregory 2005), several figurines were found at Ħaġar Qim during the clearances by British Army Engineers under the direction of Vance and were declared to be the seven Kabiri goddesses (Vance 1842; Vella 2007: 63). In the decades thereafter, prehistoric figurative objects were

**Fig. 32.2** Earliest figurines and Zebbug statue menhirs. 1., 2., 3. Skorba Middle Neolithic terracotta figurines; 4. Stone tomb menhir from Ta Trapna; 5. Stone menhir from Brochtorff-Xaghra Circle. (Copyright C. Malone and S. Stoddart)
found as temple complexes were opened and cleared. The emptying of the Ħal Saflieni Hypogeum during the first decade of the twentieth century revealed the wealth of funerary objects (including the Sleeping Lady and several small figures, heads, and symbolic objects totalling some seventeen figurative examples) (Zammit 1910, 1924, 1925, 1928). Interventions by Thomas Ashby and E. T. Peet between 1908 and 1912 (Ashby et al. 1913) attempted to understand the earlier work at several sites (Kordin III, Mnajdra and Ħaġar Qim) and added some figurine fragments to the national assemblage. The excavations at Tarxien temple between 1915 and 1920 were the first really systematic work on temples, directed by Temi Zammit, and they unearthed numerous fragments of figurines (with fifty examples) which, most importantly, were recorded within the context in which they were deposited (Zammit 1916–1717a, 1916–1917b, 1917–1918–1919, 1920, 1920–1921, 1930).

Stabilization work at Ħaġar Qim in the 1940s revealed a cache of worn stone statues hidden beneath a step, and these further added to the range of recorded material from this site (twenty-three examples) (Baldacchino 1949–1950). David Trump's work at Skorba temple not only demonstrated the stratigraphic and chronological framework of early Malta but also discovered the Neolithic pre-temple phases and the earliest figurative material on the islands (Trump 1966), amounting to nine examples. Only recently has new work been undertaken, most prominently at the Brochtorff-Xaghra Circle funerary cave site, where an unprecedented range of figurative material was recovered in association with human remains (Malone et al. 2009). This excavation has not only substantially increased the number of figurines, producing some 40 per cent of a total of c.250 examples, but has revolutionized knowledge of those at a smaller scale, including the only examples of worked bone. The prehistoric figurines of early Malta have come to symbolize the island's origins, with popular ephemera, phone cards, postage stamps, contemporary art, exhibitions, visitor centres, and national identity closely linked to the prehistoric art (Malone and Stoddart 1995; Stoddart 2013; Vella Gregory 2005).

### 32.2 Maltese Figurative Art—Range and Interpretation

Maltese prehistoric figurines include human and animal representation, and also a range of metamorphosed curiosities that are broadly figurative in conception. The main flowering of artistic production occurred in the Temple Culture, and later was replaced by schematic disc figurines in the Bronze Age (see Figure 32.3). The character of many of the anthropomorphic figurines is mostly of obese or steatopygous naked forms, which gave rise to the notion of a Maltese Goddess cult. These ideas began in the nineteenth century following the discovery of images at Ħaġar Qim around 1840. Thereafter, discussions of early Maltese figurines were elaborated by a succession of variously romantic, classical, and religious scholars and curators, until finally Charles Singer and Temi
Zammit (1924), and later Luigi Ugolini (1934 [2012]), carried out more objective analysis and divided the objects into male and female categories, and Zammit at least remained cautious assigning gender to some objects. Over recent decades the figurines have been included in Mediterranean-wide discussions of the rise of figurative art, and more particularly the mother goddess cult that some scholars have attached to Neolithic imagery. As the following sections will demonstrate, rather few of the Maltese figurines actually demonstrate distinct gender attributes.

Marija Gimbutas overlooked the ambiguity of gender and included Maltese objects in her wide-ranging study of goddesses and gods in the territory she described as ‘Old Europe’ (Gimbutas 1982, 1989, 1991; Malone 1998; Townsend 1999; Veen 1992, 1994; Veen and van der Blom 1989, 1992, 2008; Vella 2007). From the safe distance of California, she was content to interpret the material from Malta without actually examining it properly or understanding the detailed context from which much of it came. Further, she aggregated all the figurative material of Neolithic Southeast Europe with the Maltese and other equally distinct geographical areas, even in the absence of any clear linkage. Thus began a very persuasive, if misguided, and popular assumption that Maltese figurines were the product of a widespread goddess cult that was fully interpretable in substantially feminist terms. From this has developed a very strong New Age following (Rountree 1999). By the same logic, Gimbutas and her followers have assumed that the Maltese temples that house many figurines were dedicated to a fertility cult and the worship of the mother goddess. These assumptions have been placed under detailed scientific scrutiny and critique for some time, but Malta has generally remained peripheral to the debate (Bailey 2005; Meskell 1995), with some exceptions (Malone 1998; Malone et al. 1995a; Vella Gregory 2005).

The typical figurines from Neolithic Malta are anthropomorphic representations that fall into distinct and contrasting categories, including human (female, male, ungendered, etc.)
schematic, realistic, dressed, naked, seated, lying). Semi-anthropomorphic elements are present in some zoomorphic figurines, particularly heads and posture, perhaps symbolizing a metamorphosis between human, animal, and other, sometimes sinister, forms (or malformed creatures). There is diversity in the detail of the figurines, especially in hair, posture, position of arms, legs and skirts, and also in the scale and sidedness (right or left) of the objects. Animals divide between domestic stock (bulls, sheep-goat, pig), birds, and a variety of cold-blooded reptiles-snakes, fish and turtles. There are very few instances in European prehistory where this range of symbolic imagery is represented in figurative form, and it makes Malta unusual as a context from which to explore a symbolic and ritual Neolithic world. This world may have contained a layered cosmology represented by creatures from subterranean-submarine, to terrestrial and heavenly, aerial zones (Malone 2008; Stoddart 2002 cf. Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005: 23–8), even if this interpretation has perhaps been overplayed in some contexts outside Malta.

32.3 The Evolution of Neolithic Figurines in Malta

The earliest figurative material in Malta is associated with the impressed ware pottery tradition of Għar Dalam—the first securely demonstrated Neolithic presence on Malta c.5500–4800 BC. Schematic animal heads on pottery, distinguished by roulette impressions (of the Stentinello pottery style), have been found in a number of settlement locations. Human imagery first occurred in Malta in the later Neolithic Red Skorba phase (c.4400–4100 BC). The scarce figurines (Figure 32.2) are very schematic, angular, sexually explicit, and based on a double triangle form, emphasizing projecting breasts and buttocks, and a pubic triangle. Heads are very stylized triangular shapes with the slightest indications of eyes and nose. Clearly these small (c.8 cm high) figurines represented the female form, and the excavator (Trump 1966) accepted that the objects were female and potentially of a ritual nature (Figure 32.2). In Italy, the contemporary Diana Bellavista ‘cultures’ sometimes created schematic images (Holmes and Whitehouse 1998) that provide a parallel to the diminutive statue menhir forms that emerged in Malta in the Zebbuġ phase (4100–3800 BC) immediately following the Red Skorba. The two menhirs from tombs were probably schematic grave markers. The larger, from Ta Trapna (Figure 32.2.4), is worked on a flattish stone and shows a head with headdress, suggested by a plait or cord carved at the back (Evans 1971). The smaller example from the Brochtorff-Xaghra Circle shows only a face on a rough pillar-shaped stone (Malone et al. 1995b, 2009, figures 10.46–47; Trump 2002) (Figure 32.2.5). Similar stick-like figures are known from pottery decoration and a crude stone from Taċ Ċawla settlement on Gozo, The Temple Period from c.3600 to 2450 BC represents the florescence of figurative imagery in prehistoric Malta. The bulk of material derives from the Tarxien phase
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(3000–2450 BC), and there are no securely dated images from the earlier centuries of this episode in the fourth millennium BC. Almost all the figurative material has been found in megalithic temple structures and burial hypogea, since settlements have hardly been explored.

The figurines associated with the temples were carved and modelled in local materials, soft globigerina limestone, small pieces of gypsum and stalagmite, baked clay-terracotta, bone, and shell. The images fall into distinct groups in terms of size and character, ranging from miniature, small, and large in scale, and anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, or ‘other’ (i.e. monstrous and imaginative) in personality. The style of Maltese anthropomorphic figurines has a particular form that is very distinct when compared with others from the Neolithic Mediterranean. In particular, two forms stand out: obese and mostly seated images, or more formal skirted images. These have been considered the ‘classic’ or ‘canon’-like Maltese form (Townsend 2007). Uniquely, some of the larger stone figures had removable heads, which seem to have been interchangeable and possibly operated with strings, like puppets (Vella 2007: 63) (Figure 32.4). Further distinctions can be discerned from the anthropomorphic images, which include gendered (mostly female) naked fired clay figures, with modelled breasts and incised triangular pubis. The ‘Venus’ of Haġar Qim (Figure 32.5.8, 32.5.9) is the most impressive and lifelike, while the Sleeping Lady of Hal Saflieni (Figure 32.7.1, 32.7.2) represents a well-endowed and skirted female lying on a carefully modelled bed. The gender of other figures is more ambiguous, and, in particular, male gender is schematic and restricted to phallic models in fired clay and stone (Figure 32.6), although some of these objects have questionable designation.

Dress is another distinctive element of Maltese figures, with a characteristic pleated skirt represented on typically standing figures. The most notable figure is the more than life-size 1.2 m high remnant found built into the Tarxien temples (Figure 32.9.6, 32.9.7), and large figures were also built into temples at Tas Silġ and Haġar Qim (Figure 32.9.4, 32.9.5). These apparently ungendered skirted figures were represented in a commanding sitting or standing posture. The pleated flounced skirts are an intriguing detail, especially since few figurines from prehistoric Europe portray explicit costume. There are parallels to such skirts portrayed on the high-status Mesopotamian donor figures and in Egypt from more or less contemporary contexts, but there is currently no demonstrated link between these totally different cultures and regions. Further detail of costume represents belts, girdles, and necklaces, and these are similar to some of the well-detailed north Italian statue menhirs and Balkan Neolithic figurines. Hair and headdress are also represented on several figures and provide a significant range of style that is also most unusual for prehistoric figurines. Several categories of hair are discernible—short bobbed cuts, plaits, ‘v’ pointed pony-tails, curls and corrugated waves, as well as straight strands—and there is sufficient range (from over forty surviving examples) to imply that hair style and head covering were visually significant in early Malta. Some heads (see Figure 32.8.4, 32.8.5) appear to be covered in headdresses and cloaks, which could suggest special ritual dress (Stoddart and Malone 2008, Malone in press). It is highly probable that the hair style conformed to a special sacred code.
FIG. 32.4 Larger anthropomorphic figures and dynamic heads. 1. Stone head from Ġgantija G/s2, 18 cm high; 2. Stone head from Hal Saflieni S/s38, 10.9 cm high; 3. Stone head from Hal Saflieni S/s39, 9.1 cm high; 4. Stone figure from ħal Saflieni S/s40, 38.9 cm high; 5., 6., 7., 8., 9. Stone figure from Ħaġar Qim Q/s14. 23.5 cm high, showing neck cavity and string holes to operate moveable head. (Copyright C. Malone and S. Stoddart)
FIG. 32.6 Stick figures, phalli, bone carpal heads. 1. Triple stone closure slab, possible schematic phallic or anthropomorphic images from Tarxien T/s19; 2. Double phallic closure slab from Tarxien T/s18a; 3. Miniature stone carving showing portal into building with two figures and offering bowls T/s17; 4. Carved head on animal carpal bone BR793; 5. Carved head on animal carpal bone BR684; 7. Stone phallus T/s52; 8. Stone phallus T/s20c; 9. Stone phallus with dimples T/s20b. (Copyright C. Malone and S. Stoddart)
FIG. 32.7 Twin and bed figures. 1., 2. Terracotta ‘Sleeping Lady’ from Hal Saflieni S/p1000; 3., 5. Terracotta bed figure showing face down figure H/p1001; 4., 7. Stone double bed figures from Brochtorff-Xaghra Circle. 7. Details of ‘baby’. 8., 9. ‘Protectress’ stone figure from Tarxien T/s28a showing small figures in bed base and skirt. 10., 11. Fragment of stone ‘protectress’ with detail of small figures in bed base from Tarxien T/s30. (Copyright C. Malone and S. Stoddart)
Fig. 32.8 Stick figures from the Brochtorff-Xaghra Circle. 1. Group of six stick figures and three other images and small ochre pot from the Brochtorff-Xaghra Circle; 2. Detail of head with circlet; 3. head on pillar; 4. head with schematic ponytail; 5. Stick figure rough-out and cowl headdress; 6. stick figure with elaborate hair and crown/circlet. (Copyright C. Malone and S. Stoddart)
FIG. 32.9 Massive figures. 1. Terracotta figure, reconstructed, from Tarxien T/p1006, approximately 60 cm tall. 2. Reconstruction drawing of large stone figure from Brochtorf-Xaghra Circle approximately 50 cm high. 3. Details of fragments of Xaghra-Brochtorf circle showing midriff and hands, and skirt. 4., 5. Damaged stone figure from Tas-Silg 97 cm high. 6., 7. Large stone figures from Tarxien approximately 120 cm high. (Copyright C. Malone and S. Stoddart)
After the Temple Period the Bronze Age Tarxien Cemetery Culture saw the introduction of very different figurines and art styles (Evans 1971: plates 55–58, Figure 32.3.1–3, 32.3.6). Stylized forms of terracotta disc figurines, more comparable to Aegean and Mycenaean types, were deposited in reused sites, associated with cremation burial. The change may indicate a cultural break from the previous Temple Period or a dramatic change in site use and cultural-religious expression (Cazzella and Recchia 2006). Deposits at Tas Silġ suggest continuity that may bridge the end of the Temple Period. Nevertheless, the Bronze Age cultures of Malta demonstrate many elements in common with Italy, the central Mediterranean, and the western Aegean after c.2100 BC. Figurines comprise fragments of disc-body decorated with incised geometric and concentric patterns or protruding breasts, occasionally with knob-like heads and legs extending below the disc.

### 32.4 Categories of Figurines

#### 32.4.1 Small Terracotta Human Figures

The most characteristic figurine form from Malta is the obese naked figure. The small (4–10 cm wide) figurines were made from well-burnished, baked clay. The context of the small figurines is either temples or burial sites, and the total assemblage of recognizable fragments is less than fifty, plus a number of heads and limbs. Few figurines are complete since they were formed from roughly worked sausages of clay that easily broke apart. The figures were modelled into the characteristic form (Figure 32.5.3, 32.5.4, 32.5.5) of smooth ‘violin’ shaped back-buttocks, ample thighs and calves, and diminutive feet. The upper torso is often depicted with horizontal lines suggesting fat, but rarely are explicit breasts shown. The arms may be crossed or stretched out, resting on the thighs. Where heads survive, they are supported on a long neck, and the simply modelled faces are sometimes tilted upwards. The figurines are invariably shown naked, and carved from stone or modelled in clay. The context of these small objects was unclear in the past, but the detailed recording of the Brochtorff-Xaghra Circle indicates they were placed in specific burial zones among inhumations, presumably as modest gravegoods (Malone et al. 2009: 311–12, figures 10.71a and b). Elsewhere, the context and association of these apparently disposable figures remains unclear.

#### 32.4.2 Skirted Figures

These are another characteristic form. They are usually on a larger scale than the naked terracotta forms and are normally self-standing, ungendered, and made from stone or terracotta. These larger skirted figures seem to have been designed for placement in public view in temples on altars or benches, and most appear to have had heavy use,
Some curious fragments of skirted, terracotta figures were retrieved from the Tarxien temple complex. These were modelled around an armature of straw-twigs, and may have been remodelled on different occasions, as shown by layers in the broken sections. The most intact, and now restored, example (see Figure 32.9.1) portrays a standing figure of about 60 cm high, which, in its reconstructed state suggests a wide pleated skirt extended to the ground (although this is not confirmed). A cord around the waist is indicated at the front, while the figure is shown naked above and appears to be ungendered, with arms and hands likely to have been linked at the waist. The head (12 cm high) is well preserved and shows an impassive face, complete with mouth, nose, eyes, and brows under extremely elaborate hair (Vella Gregory 2005: 140–2). The hair is divided into a fringe at the brow, and arranged into distinct crimped lines of horizontal corrugated waves either side of the head, while the top of the head shows clearly marked strands of arranged hair radiating from the crown. The second figure (almost all skirt) was about 19 cm in height, without any further detail of the body. A possible head for this figure (measuring 9.3 cm high) portrays a finely modelled face (mouth, nose, eyes) and a detailed hair arrangement. Possibly the statues were already broken when they were deposited, but unfortunately little is known about them and no parallels have yet been found. Given the size, formal stance, and clothing it seems possible that such figurines were representations of the ritual specialists who operated the temple complexes. Equally they may have represented participants or donors in the complex ritual activity that undoubtedly took place at temple sites like Tarxien (Trump 2002; Zammit 1930; Zammit and Singer 1924).

32.4.3 Skirted Stick Figures

Another form of skirted figure is the stick or column figure. The most prominent examples are the cache of six stick figures (Figure 32.8) recovered from the Brochtorff-Xaghra Circle cave burial complex. Their association and placement strongly implies that they were used in funerary ritual, since they were found tightly interweaved, close to other important objects at the core area of the funerary site. The associations included a massive stone bowl, a number of unusual objects (a small ochre pot, large shell scoop, terracotta sieve, and double seated figurines) (Malone et al. 2009: figures 10.61–66). While these curious objects could be seen as a throw-back to the earliest statue mehirs, they also form a distinct category of stick figures that had carefully modelled heads on angular stylized 'bodies'. The Brochtorff-Xaghra objects may represent a sophisticated version of the small bone carpal 'heads' (Figures 32.6.5 and 32.6.6) and other column-figure or 'phallic forms' (see Figure 32.6.7, 32.6.8, 32.6.9) that were crafted and deposited at various sites. It may be implied from such objects that skirts and headdress/hair were important symbols in the prehistoric Maltese imagination. Formed into functional stick form, the 'figurines' were suitable to hold in the hand, or place upright in supports or
soft ground during ceremonies, and presumably packed away after use. The cache was
finished at different levels, ranging from a crude rough-out to a highly detailed figure
with headdress/crown, necklace, skirt, and belt (Figure 32.8.6), and the pieces show
either hair or a cowl-like head covering. Three other figures were packed together in
the cache: a pig head with tusks, a curious two-pronged head with a bobbed haircut,
and a finely carved head on a pillar (Malone et al. 2009: figure 10.63) (see Figure 32.8.1,
32.8.3). Their significance individually or collectively still remains obscure, but their
close association (probably packed in a bag or box in antiquity) and their context at the
ritual heart of a large burial complex confirms their role in funerary ritual (Malone et al.
2009: figure 10.64).

The stick figure form is known from other objects, and is possibly symbolized in
the architectural components of some temples, where standing stone pillars or ‘Betyl’
remain in situ. Examples still exist at Haġar Qim, Ġgantija, and the Brochtorff Circle,
but whether they had anthropomorphic meaning is not known. However, at a mini-
tature scale, several pillar/stick objects may be included in this general category. One
very small object from Tarxien shows two column-shaped forms in a carved entrance
(Figure 32.6.3, 32.6.4). Once identified as spindle whorls or phalli, it appears to represent
two clothed figures with hair, necklaces, and belts entering a temple door with offer-
ing bowls on the ground. The so-called ‘phallic’ representations on closure slabs from
temples (Figure 32.6.1, 32.6.2) may also represent these pillar-shaped figures schemati-
cally represented, perhaps not phalli. The small carved bone carpal heads retrieved from
the Brochtorff-Xaghra Circle through sieving represent another highly schematic rep-
resentation of human form, reduced to the carved head of an animal bone and no more
(Figure 32.6.5, 32.6.6) (Malone et al. 2009: figure 10.45).

The interpretation of stick figurines remains uncertain, but given the link with tem-
ple buildings and funerary contexts, the column-shaped figures could represent either
a formal dress of a long, belted garment covering the body required for temple ritual, or
burial shrouds and indirectly the realm of ancestors.

32.4.4 Bed Figures

Some of the most graphic and engaging figurines from Malta are those represented
sitting or lying on beds or couches. This is an unusual posture for prehistoric figu-
rines before the first millennium BC (most ‘bed’ figures date from the first millen-
nium BC, such as Etruscan coffin representations, Egyptian and Phrygian examples
[Baughan 2013], and elsewhere by the Iron Age, beds and couches, such as the Hallstatt
period Hochtorf burial [Germany], which were included in high status tombs) and
might imply notions of death and afterlife.

In Malta, large stone or smaller stone or terracotta bed figurines are known. Of the
former category, two unique limestone objects from an extra-mural deposit at Tarxien
(now measuring 20 x 21 cm: [Figure 32.7.8, 32.7.9]; and 18 x 24 cm [Figure 32.7.10, 32.7.11])
show skirt details and multiple figures embedded within the pleats and legs of the figure.
A central depression on the top surface suggests they had rotating heads/torsos, and were thus manipulated in a dynamic manner (Malone 2008; Vella Gregory 2005: 138–9). The larger and more complete object had two plump legs (now broken) extending down in front of the bed. The skirt and bed below were carved to suggest two levels of smaller figures, four in the upper register of the skirt, and several squatting within the bed frame below. The second of these objects (Figure 32.7.1, 32.7.11) is far less complete but operated in a similar manner, and it preserves part of a pivot hole on the upper surface that probably supported a rotating body/head. This image has wider, hoop-topped pleats on the skirt carved with relief figures in the base part of the bed frame. The similarities between these two complicated multi-layered figures might suggest a graphic representation of ancestral or genealogical concerns, or a hierarchy of deities guarding successive generations of the living or dead. The notion of ‘protectors’ or guardians is thus compelling (Bonanno 2004: 290; Vella Gregory 2005).

The much smaller but celebrated bed figures come not from temples but from the two known burial hypogea. Three came from Ħal Saflieni and one from the Brochtorff-Xaghra Circle. The graphic representations of beds and sleep may imply notions of an afterlife. The Sleeping Lady (Figure 32.7.1, 32.7.2) was found in a deep storage area at the base of the Hal Safieni hypogoeum during the final stages of excavation by Zammit (Zammit 1910, 1925, 1928). This terracotta object (measuring 6 cm high × 12 cm long × 6.8 cm wide) portrays a very ample female figure, a skirt covering the hips and upper legs, but naked above, lying on her side, the head resting on her hands with long bobbed hair pulled, or even shaved, from the forehead. The bed is highly detailed, with legs indicated at each corner and ‘constructed’ from a series of supporting struts and planks, incised to suggest fibres or mattress. The other two examples from Hal Safieni were located in broadly the same context. One stone object shows a simpler form of bed and on the upper surface a broken/worn lozenge or fish-shaped projection. It might once have been the base of a now broken figure. The third ochred terracotta statuette (Figure 32.7.3, 32.7.5) shows a plump and detailed skirted figure lying face-down (4 × 9 × 5.6 cm). The posture might imply a dead/sleeping individual, head resting on a small plinth, and arms and legs both outstretched.

Finally, the fourth known small bed figure (Figure 32.7.4, 32.7.6, 32.7.7) was retrieved from the ritual core of the Brochtorff-Xaghra Circle caves, in close proximity to the cache of figures discussed above and a massive stone bowl. The statuette is carved from soft globigerina limestone and retains traces of red ochre and black paint. Two seated figures are represented seated, upright, awake (?) and squashed together, their buttocks wrapped in one extended pleated skirt. The upper surface of the bed is decorated with curvilinear patterns implying an elaborate tapestry/carpet. Projecting below the skirt, which is hitched up to expose the legs, are two pairs of obese calves and tiny feet. The upper bodies are shown as naked and very plump. One head survives with a well-defined hairdo and both figures have angular pointed pony-tails. On the lap of the left-hand figure sits a small figure (?baby—see Figure 32.7.7), also dressed in a skirt, while the right-hand figure cradles a cup. The figures measure 14.1 cm wide by about 6.2 cm deep and rises 9 cm from the bed surface. The bed is very detailed indeed (several levels
of strut and support imply a well-sprung bed which measures $13.7 \times 8.6 \times 2$ cm high). The imagery is graphic but the meaning remains obscure for this, and indeed all the bed objects (Malone 2008; Malone et al. 2009: figures 10.54–6), although there must be a close link with ideas of death, eternal sleep, and generational succession (suggested by the baby figure and the small images in the skirts of the Tarxien figures).

Finally, built into the structure of Haġar Qim temple are the remnants of large twinned figures, similar in posture to the Xaghra twins. Measuring about 1.5 m wide, it is likely the figures stood at least 1.70 m high, possibly seated on a bench-like base. These figures were probably visible only from a restricted and possibly secret room formed within the outer walls of the temple. It is tempting to speculate about the significance of this twinned person or deity. Twins were significant in myths associated with the early Indo-European world, and it is tempting to speculate what such twinned images meant to the Temple Culture of early Malta.

32.4.5 Dynamic Figures and Large Statues

Large stone figurines, perhaps better called statues or statuettes, are known from several temple sites and also from the hypogea. In most instances these figures were carved in the round, and intended for public view as self-standing images. Virtually none appear to have been carved with a head, and instead the surviving examples have a depression or hole in the upper neck, with smaller holes for cords being evident. Separate interchangeable heads seem to have been set into the neck hole and presumably manipulated with strings, like puppets, to make the figures dynamic and ‘alive’ (see details in Figure 32.4.4–9). A large cache of seven worn figures was retrieved from beneath a step during restoration works at Haġar Qim temple in 1949. Other fragments and components have come from Ħal Saflieni, and two heads from Ġgantija (very eroded and found in the nineteenth century: see Figure 32.4.1). The heads from Ħal Saflieni (Figure 32.4.2, 32.4.3 measuring 9–10 cm tall) reveal that the moveable heads had long rounded necks suitable to rotate within the neck holes of the statues. Within some temple structures (specifically Tarxien, Mnajdra, Haġar Qim), small hidden rooms and ample internal benches or shelves suggest likely locations for these theatrical puppet-like objects. Hidden spaces set behind such areas would have enabled an operator to pull the strings and enliven the ritual action with theatrical oracular pronouncements.

Very large, almost architectural, but possibly intentionally damaged, stone relief figures were retrieved from two sites, Tarxien and Tas Silġ (Vella Gregory 2005: figure 96). The Tarxien example was built into the internal apse wall of the temple and stood on a crudely carved plinth. Two obese calves in relief emerge from beneath a typical pleated skirt to support a massive figure, with wide skirt-covered hips, but lost from the waist up (even though reconstructions have implied that more survives). The figure (now measuring c.120 cm high and 142 cm wide, but perhaps over 2 m originally: see Monsarrat 2004: 289) was large by any prehistoric standard (Figure 32.9.6, 32.9.7). It was carved
on a structural megalith, mostly in relief, and was visible to anyone entering the first court of the southwest temple. It stood adjacent to a miniature decorated altar formed like a temple and it faced the opposite apse, which was furnished with blocks carved with reliefs of animal processions. This association of human and animal imagery, coupled with deposits of animal bone, suggests explicit symbolic meaning further emphasized by animal remains and images throughout the Tarxien temple complex (Malone in press). The Tas Silġ relief was located in the temple complex (Figure 32.9.4, 32.9.5), embedded within later Phoenician structures. The figure is skirted (measuring 97 × 48 cm) and carved in relief on a large flat-backed, probably structural, slab. The upper half has been severely damaged, either intentionally in later prehistory through iconoclasm inflicted at the end of the Temple Period, or more recently through aggressive agricultural activity (Malone and Stoddart 2013; Vella 1999). Much greater and possibly intentional damage was inflicted on a large statue from the Brochtorff-Xaghra Circle in Gozo. It was found in some forty fragments scattered over and in the final burials of the site. This limestone figure was particularly finely carved with realistic hands and highly detailed and patterned skirt pleats, coloured with yellow ochre. Since the object fragments were excavated from a deep deposit, they escaped the normal weathering that other prehistoric sculptures suffered, and in spite of their fragmentary state they reveal the remarkable quality that the Neolithic sculptors were able to create (Malone et al. 2009: 10.48–52.) (Figure 32.9.2, 32.9.3).

### 32.4.6 Abbreviated and Symbolic Figurines

While much of the figurative imagery of early Malta is recognizably anthropomorphic and almost realistic, some objects are more abbreviated and stylistic. This category includes models of semi-human form, often with deformed body parts, swollen genitalia, and foetus-like images, suggestive of pathologies, childbirth, hallucination, and bodily transformation. Some objects were associated with specific areas of temples close to altars and storage places (Vella 2006, 2007), perhaps implying they were talismans of some sort, placed to ward off the threats of death and disease. Mnajdra temple was a significant focus for these depositions (Figure 32.10.15). Some objects may represent pathological conditions, and a series of small clay twists (Figure 32.10.7) could represent foetuses (Bonanno 2004; Vella Gregory 2007). A pathological theme is repeated in objects from Tarxien and Hal Saflieni, where some models represent outsized breasts, buttocks, stomachs, genitalia, and graphic representations of disease and health problems (e.g. the curious star-shaped figure with a huge projecting stomach [Figure 32.10.8], or monsters [a turtle-like figure Figure 32.10.9]). Human heads are occasionally represented on potsherds (Figure 32.10.16), as well as detailed modelled forms. Most figurines in this abbreviated category were modelled in clay, with a few carved from natural nodules and stalagmites (Figure 32.10.13), which add texture and realism to the objects, while others are just odd (Figure 32.10.14). Another
category of abbreviated figure represents distorted phallic forms, worked generally from stone. Some are dimpled and could also imply disease or concerns with infertility (Evans 1971: figure 5.9). Some of these objects could be metaphors for maleness and masculinity, abbreviated and amusing in their detail, while others are unpleasant and pathological.

32.4.7 Animal and Other Figures

Not all figurines are anthropomorphic in Malta, and an important subcategory shows representations of three types of animal: domestic stock, birds, shells and cold-blooded reptiles and fish. Domestic animals are represented in many prehistoric societies, but the other creatures are less frequent, although Gimbutas did develop ideas about various goddesses and gods relating to snakes and birds in her southeast European thesis (Gimbutas 1982, 1991; Grima 2003). The domestic species represented in Malta are bulls, sheep-goats and pigs, and although the ovicaprids were probably the most frequent species in reality, it is bulls and their horns that captivated the artistic imagination. Bull images at Tarxien temple especially appear to have had ritual significance with two low-relief images set over a small door to a hidden room in the complex, together with a sow and piglets. There are also examples of terracotta figurines of bulls (Mġarr, Figure 32.10.4), or bulls carved as stone beads (from Hal Saflieni, Figure 32.10.1). Modelled heads of sheep-goats are also found on decorated ceramic handles (Figure 32.10.2, 32.10.5) from various temple and funerary sites, and are closely linked to food remains found in temple sites.

Birds represent a different category of creature—wild, free to fly, and feathered—and in Malta, regular migratory visitors. Ducks and other birds were carved and modelled from stone, shell, and clay into beads and buttons, and also incised on pottery (Figure 32.10.6). Most of the buttons come from funerary contexts, while pottery images are from temples. Bird figurines/images and beads (Figure 32.10.6) could be linked with notions of flight or passage to the afterlife, perhaps induced by shamanic ritual into altered states of consciousness (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2005: 67), although bird sightings are also linked to divination. Equally unusual are the figurines of cold-blooded creatures (snakes, snails [Figure 32.20.3]; lizards [Figure 32.10.10]; fish [Figure 32.10.12]; curious fish-like creatures such as turtles [Figure 32.10.9]; and a sea monster Figure 32.10.11]). Relief images (fish at Buġibba, snails at Santa Verna and snakes at Ġgantija) suggest that some sites were clearly focused on particular animal emblems. The link suggested by these cold-blooded creatures and their subterranean/submarine worlds may symbolize notions of death, rebirth, temptation, and so on, enduring beliefs formalized in myth in many cultures. In early Malta the range of animal representations in ritual contexts provides a rich imagery of a prehistoric cosmology, of a spirit world that haunted the ancient imagination.
Fig. 32.10 Animal and other figures. 1. Stone bead of bull from Ħal Saflieni S/s9. 2. Terracotta handle with ram head, Mgarr Mg/p9. 3. Terracotta snail model, Brocthorff-Xaghra circle. 4. Terracotta cow, Mgarr, Mg/p1000. 5. Terracotta ram head from ceramic handle. 6. Carved bone bird/duck ‘V’ perforated button from Ħal Saflieni, S/b4. 7. Terracotta clay twist (?foetus) from
32.5 Conclusions

The Neolithic figurines of Malta account for one of the most varied and best-contextualized assemblages in prehistoric central-western Europe, especially when compared with the record from Italy (see Chapter 34, this volume). The importance of context cannot be overstated (Malone 2007; Malone et al. 2007), since here we have the opportunity to place the figurative assemblage more or less with its cultural association, whether temple or tomb. Figurines were either visible or hidden, which might suggest that objects had specific ritual or ideological significance, although precisely what that was is now lost to us. Some of the large figures with moveable heads were very worn and their base plinths rounded and broken through constant movement to and fro from shelf to display bench over years of use. In contrast, the smaller items mostly had a single moment of use, before being hidden in tombs or votive deposits. Many contexts were labyrinthine temple complexes or underground hypogea/caves, the hidden nature of which further enriches the symbolic dimension of the figurative material and its deposition. The animal and monstrous images give additional insight into the creative imagination of the early Maltese community, while the distinct variations in scale, theme, gender, dress, posture, and style of the human figures implies intentional and patterned activity and rich symbolic meaning.

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Suggested Reading

The two essential sources for Maltese prehistoric figurines are Vella Gregory (2005) and Malone et al. (2009). The first is a comprehensive visual catalogue of the human form. The second is
the detailed descriptive and interpretative assessment of the largest corpus of figurines from one site, in this case funerary. The older volume of Ridley (1976) gives greater coverage of the non-figurative arts against which the figurines should be set. Stoddart and Malone (2008) give a sense of the physical and numerical scale of the figurine corpus over time. The leading interpretative work is provided by Malone (1998, 2008), Grima (2001, 2003), and Stoddart et al. (1993). In all these accounts, social anthropological principles are applied to spatial context.

References


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