

The Medical History of the Maltese Islands: Introduction

The Maltese Islands: Historical Background

There is archaeological evidence to suggest that Stone Age Man inhabited the Maltese Archipelago during the Quaternary Period when the Island area was linked to the Hyblean Plateau of Sicily and hence formed the southernmost point of the European continent. The evidence for this has been the subject of controversy¹. It is reasonable to suppose that hunter-gatherer man in Sicily would follow the southern migration of the deer herds and establish a community in the southernmost tip of the Quaternary European landmass. The presence of Palaeolithic man in the Maltese Islands is necessarily limited because a hunter-gatherer community, unlike later Neolithic man, leaves very little impact on the environment. The evidence for the presence of man during the Pleistocene period in the Maltese Islands is based on (1) the excavation of skeletal material and man-made artefacts in Pleistocene deposits from Ghar Dalam [Malta]; and (2) the description of prehistoric cave art typical of a hunter-gatherer community at Ghar Hasan [Malta]. The archaeological record therefore suggests that man crossed to the Islands at least during the fourth glacial or Final Wurm of the Upper Pleistocene circa 23000-

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10000 years BP. During this period, the human culture was a Late Palaeolithic one characterised by a hunter-gatherer society.



Palaeolithic Man in Malta

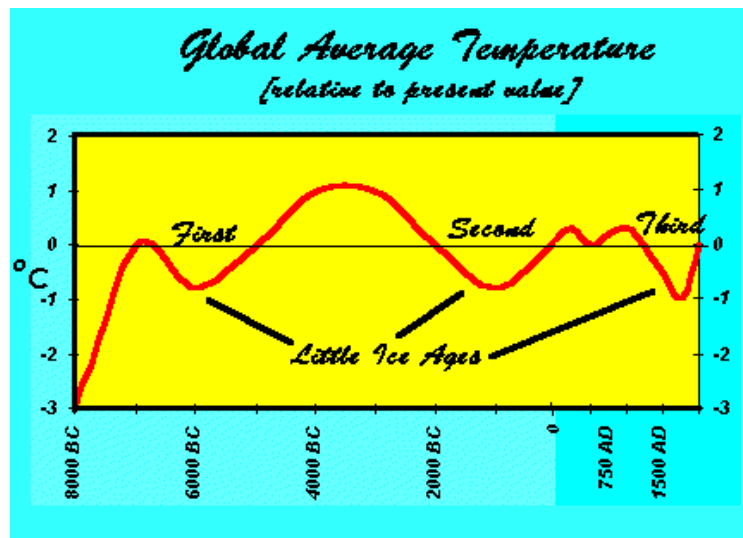
[drawing by A. Forestier: *Illustrated London News* 28th February 1925]

A definite presence of man in the Maltese Islands has been set by calibrated radiocarbon dating at circa 7,000 years ago (c.5000-4100 BC). The exact origin of the Early Neolithic Maltese is uncertain, but archaeological remains suggest that the first settlers in the Islands came from nearby Sicily towards the end of the fifth millennium BC a period that fits the time scale of the spread of early

¹ A. Mifsud & S. Mifsud: *Dossier Malta. Evidence for the Magdalenian*. Proprint Co. Ltd., Malta, 1997; C. Savona-Ventura: Palaeolithic Man in Malta. *The Sunday Times [of Malta]*, 20 July 1997, p.18, 3 August 1997, p.17; 17 August 1997, p.44

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farming in Europe. This period also coincided with the improvement of climatic conditions following a minor Ice Age; the cold and dry atmospheric conditions of the latter period were replaced by a warmer and wetter climate, which permitted the cultivation of crops.



These immigrants crossed from Sicily on sufficiently sturdy and reliable sea-craft and settled on the Islands. These communities brought with them an agriculture economy. Excavation at various early Neolithic sites in Malta and Gozo, particularly at Skorpa (Malta), have definitely established that during this period man had domesticated goat, sheep, cattle, pig and probably the dog. In addition he cultivated lentil of the Neolithic Anatolian type (*Lens esculenta*), a hulled variety of barley, Emmer Wheat (*Triticum dicoccum*) and also

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probably Club Wheat (*Triticum compactum*). The Early Neolithic period (Ghar Dalam Phase circa 7000-6500 BP) was associated with pottery characterised by geometric patterns impressed or incised on the surface of the soft clay before firing. This impressed ware has been described to have parallels to Neolithic pottery excavated at Stentinello and Monte Kronio in Sicily. The Ghar Dalam Phase pottery excavated from Ghajn Abdul in Gozo has been described to have even purer Stentinello properties. This Early Neolithic impressed ware pottery was replaced in subsequent years by a rather dull undecorated pottery of greyish hue (Grey Skorba Phase circa 6500-6400 BP), which eventually was refined by the addition of a red coating (Red Skorba Phase circa 6400-6100 BP).

Man the farmer was very much concerned with survival and very conscious of the cyclical process of reproduction of his crops and stock, and of his own species. He thus appeared to have developed in the last phase of the period circa 4400-4100 BC, a fertility cult in an effort to promote and encourage the reproductive cycle. What have survived of this cult are the figurative representations around which these rites took place. These include the small fragmentary statuettes, which appear to emphasise the female sexual characteristics, and rubbed down animal bones, which have been interpreted as phallic symbols. The figurative representations bear a striking resemblance to

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the *Shemsu Hor* figurines associated with the culture at Naqada of pre-dynastic Egypt c.3000 BC. The *Shemsu Hor* or "Serpent Priests" culture has its origins in the Middle East around 5000 BC. The similarity of the statuettes from Skorba and Naqada present possible cultural links that need to be explored².



Skorba figurine
4400-4100 BC



Naqada figurine
c.3000 BC

By the fourth millennium BC another wave of immigrants reached the Islands. The new agricultural population, after a modest start inspired by the cultural background imported from its original homeland, was gradually set on a path of very independent cultural development. The arrival of Neolithic man to the Maltese Islands resulted in an alteration on the environment through the introduction of farming and husbandry. Neolithic man introduced and domesticated several animal

² D.H. Trump: *Skorba. Excavations carried out on behalf of the National Museum of Malta 1961-1963*. University Press, Oxford, 1966; C. Savona-Ventura: *I crani di Malta*. *Hera*, October 2001 22:p.81

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species - notably the mouflon, the ibex, the pig, and the cow/ox. These all subsequently had to have a deleterious effect on the environment.



Tarxien Temple friezes

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The archaeological remains of the Temple Period culture exhibit a marked degree of technological expertise in relation to the building technology, shipping and astronomy. They also apparently developed elaborate mythological concepts that were supported by professional shamans. Late Neolithic man (c.4100-2500 BC) had a more progressive culture that was characterised by the enormous megalithic 'temples', underground hypogea/cave-tombs and settlement remains. The megalithic temples have been associated with a progressive Fertility Cult. It has been suggested that the deity had furthermore an interest in death as well as fertility. The Death Cult reached its peak in the sanctuary of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum.



Hagar Qim temple



Hal Saflieni hypogeum

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The Late Neolithic culture came to an abrupt end when it disappeared obscurely. The Maltese Islands were repopulated, possibly after an interval of several scores of years, by an entirely different people carrying a totally different culture. These were, in contrast with their predecessors, a warlike people using copper and bronze tools and weapons. During the Bronze Age, the Maltese Islands were probably relatively more thinly populated than earlier, and successive waves of colonists reached the Islands, probably from Sicily. The first phase of the Bronze Age (circa 2300-1500 BC) is represented by a cremation cemetery at Tarxien. The second phase (circa 1500-700 BC) takes its name from a Bronze Age village at Borg in-Nadur, which was fortified by a massive wall of “cyclopean” style on one side.

Bronze man showed little sign of exceptional technical expertise or wealth further than their use of metal. These people left pottery and clay idols, some of which are highly stylised with affinities to Mycenaean idols and Anatolian and Cycladic types. An intrusive cultural group (circa 900-700 BC) was the Bahrija Phase, the third and final phase, whose pottery suggests an origin or a strong cultural attachment from the Iron Age of southern Italy, Apulia or Calabria³.

³ A. Bonanno: *The Archaeology of Gozo: from Prehistoric to Arab Times*. In: *Gozo: The Roots of an Island*. (ed. C. Cini), Said International, Malta, 1990, p. 11-46

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CULTURAL PERIODS	PHASES	DATING
PALAEOLITHIC	Ghar Dalam <i>Pitymys melitensis</i>	c.23000-10000 BP
MESOLITHIC	Ghar Dalam <i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	c. 10000-7000 BP
EARLY NEOLITHIC	Ghar Dalam pottery phase	5000-4500 BC
	Grey Skorba pottery phase	4500-4400 BC
	Red Skorba pottery phase	4400-4100 BC
LATE NEOLITHIC (Temple Period)	Zebbug-Gzibbu pottery phase	4100-3800 BC
	Mgarr pottery phase	3800-3600 BC
	Ggantija pottery phase	3600-3300/3000 BC
	Hal Saflieni pottery phase	c.3300-3000 BC
	Tarxien pottery phase	3300/3000-2500 BC
BRONZE (& Iron) AGE	Tarxien Cemetery pottery phase	2500-1500 BC
	Borg in-Nadur pottery phase	c.1500-700 BC
	Bahrija pottery phase	c.900-700 BC

TABLE 1: MALTESE PREHISTORIC CULTURAL SEQUENCE

Towards the end of the Bronze Age period the Maltese population apparently came into regular contact with Mediterranean seafaring nations and cultures. Following the Prehistoric Period, Maltese history can be conveniently divided into four basic periods that transgress a timeline of about 3000 years:

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1. Ancient history taking up to the ninth century A.D. by which time Malta had witnessed the arrival of the Phoenicians, the Cartaginians, the Romans & Byzantines, and the Arabs.
2. Medieval history leading to the sixteenth century. During these centuries, Malta changed hands a number of times and was dominated by the Arabs, the Normans, the Angevins, the Aragonese, and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem.
3. Modern History follows the Great Siege in the mid-sixteenth century up to the expulsion of the Order by the French in 1798, and of the latter in 1800.
4. Contemporary History is the final phase leading up to recent events, with the islands falling under British dominion until the attainment of Independence within the Commonwealth in 1964 and the declaration of a Republic ten years later.

The central position in the Mediterranean occupied by the Maltese Archipelago made the islands an important meeting place for the various Mediterranean cultures throughout their history. The cultural history of the Archipelago reflects the cultural developments that were developing in the Mediterranean basin and Middle Eastern countries.

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PERIODS	PHASES	DATING
PHOENICIO-PUNIC	Phoenician	c.700-550 BC
	Punic	c.550-218 BC
LATE ROMAN	Roman Empire	c.218 BC-535 AD
BYZANTINE	Byzantine (Paleo-Christian)	c.535-870 AD
ARAB	Arab	c.870-1090 AD
LATIN	Normans	1090-1194 AD
	Swabians	1194-1256 AD
	Angevins	1256-1282 AD
	Aragonese	1283-1410 AD
	Castillians	1412-1530 AD
LATE MEDIEVAL To EARLY MODERN	Order of the Knights of St John Of Jerusalem	Ceded 1530 AD Up to 1798 AD
CONTEMPORARY	French	1798-1800 AD
	British	1800-1964 AD
	Independent & Republic	after 1964

TABLE 2: MALTESE POLITICAL SEQUENCE