

Ggantija and ta' Marziena. Preservation and presentation of Gozo's neolithic heritage

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S U M M A R Y

In lieu of the recent dwindling numbers of tourists flocking to Malta annually, The Malta Tourism Authority and Heritage Malta are emphasizing the need to attract “quality tourists” to the Maltese islands. Malta’s old image of “sun, sea, and sand” and four star hotels is slowly being replaced by cultural tourism, which involves reallocation of funding to develop and sustain cultural heritage sites for tourism. This paper presents two Neolithic temple sites in Gozo, Malta that lie at opposite ends of the preservation-presentation spectrum due to public interest and site accessibility. The first, Ggantija, is a UNESCO Heritage Site, and has seen extensive excavation, the artifacts of which are housed in the National Archaeology Museum in Valletta, Malta and in the Archaeology Museum in Victoria (Rabat), Gozo. The second, Ta' Marziena, is located on privately owned farmland and has never been excavated. Additionally addressed is the impact of invented heritage on preservation by local villagers and New Age religionists, and the role of tourist photography and postcards in presentation. I propose a method of incorporating the several lesser Neolithic temple sites of Gozo into a cultural tourism route through the island.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Keywords

Anthropology of tourism, goddess cult, Malta, Mediterranean archaeology, megalithic temples, museum exhibitions, Prehistoric archaeology

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Introduction

“Certainly travel is more than the seeing of sights, it is a change that goes on, deep and permanent, in the ideas of living.”

(Miriam Beard)

In 1964, Malta became an independent republic after thousands of years of colonization, first by the Phoenicians, then Romans, Arabs, Knights, Turks, and finally, the Brits. The first people to inhabit Malta were probably early seamen from Sicily. (13) They came to Malta around 5000 BC, living in caves such as Ghar Dalam, that have proven to be rich in Prehistoric artifacts and ossuaries. The first of the megalithic temple complexes was erected over one thousand years after initial occupation, and the temple-building culture went into decline around 2300 BC, directly after the height of construction. (20) These dates make these unique kidney-shaped temples older than Stonehenge and the pyramids at Giza. Ggantija, the best-preserved temple complex located in Xaghra, Gozo, is a UNESCO Heritage site and is considered to be the oldest free-standing structure in the world.



Figure 1: Megaliths of Ggantija's second temple as seen from the west.



Figure 2: Interior of the megalithic temple at Ta' Marziena.

Although Malta is now politically independent, they are economically reliant upon a new form of colonization in the manner of mass tourism. Being a small, densely inhabited archipelago, their local industries are limited to small farms and vineyards, fishing, salt production, and limestone quarries. (10) Therefore, to maintain political independence, and thus identity, the tourism and hospitality industry must be avant-garde in their attempts to entice tourists worldwide to the islands, and the leisurely “sun, sea, and sand” approach is no longer bringing in the quantity nor the quality of tourists needed to sustain the Maltese nation. (8,9) Hence, the reformed strategy of the MTA is to push “quality” and cultural tourism, hoping that these tourists will be less invasive culturally and environmentally than the northern European pleasure seekers who have populated the islands since the 1950s. (8,9) This effort includes Internet advertisement of Gozo as a culture separate from Malta, with pristine farmlands, quiet harbors, unique heritage sites and museums, wine-tasting events, local festas, and scuba diving (Map). (8,13)

The term “quality tourism” as defined by the MTA implies tourists who are non-invasive because they reside in four-star hotels and relax at the beaches owned by those establishments, rarely interacting with the Maltese population as a whole, yet bringing large amounts of money to the country. This in some ways preserves the identity of modern Maltese by keeping strict separation of the two entities, however if this were the sole source of tourism, the Maltese culture would be shared only minimally with the inquiring Other. With the influx of cultural tourism, the Other has the opportunity to learn about (and record photographically and textually in travelogues and research papers) local culture first-hand by interacting with the local population and by experiencing, to some individualized degree, heritage sites that are integrated into the Maltese landscape, ancient and modern. This is particularly the case with Gozo, whose virginal appeal is an integral part of the MTA's strategic plan for increased tourism throughout the country, and thus why it is important to emphasize the cultural relevance, preservation, and presentation of Gozo's Neolithic temple and burial complexes. (9,13)

Methodology

I spent one month in the Maltese islands, the vast majority of which was in Gozo. I lived in Xlendi, on the southwestern shore of Gozo, for three weeks and three days from mid July to August, and in Xaghra, in the north-central part of the island, for four days. During this time, I interviewed an employee of Heritage Malta, a member of Heritage Malta, a

museum employee for Heritage Malta, and three employees of the MTA. Research results are based primarily on personal observations made during my stay in Malta, and on the aforementioned interviews. I visited the Tarxien temple complex and the hal Saflieni Hypogeum in Paola, Malta, and the National Archaeology Museum in Valletta, Malta. In Gozo, I visited the Archaeology Museum in Victoria (Rabat), the Ggantija temple complex in Xaghra, the last remaining menhir (Il-Hagra l-Wieqfa, literally “the standing stone”) in Qala, and two lesser-known temple sites, Santa Verna, west of Xaghra, and Ta' Marziena, near Fontana.

Research Preservation

The Ggantija temple complex was first excavated by Otto Bayer in 1927 with the help of Gozitan convicts and was funded entirely out of his own pocket. The temples were then “left to the mercy of endless generations of children and to the inclemency of all weathers.” (20) The government purchased the site in 1933, and in 1949 it was opened to the public, during which time the temples were “restored.” 1980 saw the complex as the first of the Maltese megalithic temple sites to be added to the UNESCO World Heritage List. In 2003, Heritage Malta was established and assumed responsibility for the maintenance of Ggantija and government-owned heritage sites on the islands of Malta. (7) The complex is comprised of two conjoined temples, the south-facing one being significantly older than the other, and both are open to the public with a modest entrance fee of 1.50 Maltese pounds (€4.00).

Funding is undoubtedly essential to the preservation of large sites, and once a site has gained international notoriety, it becomes easier to access funding. Last year there was a sponsorship agreement between Heritage Malta and the International Vodafone Group Foundation in the amount of 202,000 Maltese pounds (€600,000), 100,000 pounds of which is designated specifically for the preservation of Ggantija. Included in this investment is the laser scanning of the entire temple complex, Phase 1 of which is already completed. (19) This endeavor makes possible the digital archiving of the site, which will preserve the visual aspects of the temple itself for museum and distance research purposes. However, laser scanning cannot duplicate the feeling of sacred space that Ggantija commands, overlooking fields quilted on valleys and cathedrals that grow directly out of limestone cliffs (Fig. 1).

Unfortunately, Heritage Malta is strongly considering the placement of a tent or covering of some sort over the entire 5500-year-old complex to impede deterioration. (15)



Figure 3: Bird blind astride the megalithic structures of Ta' Marziena . Colorful plastic shotgun shells littered the interior, evidence of the transformation of an ancient temple into a modern function facilitating the national pastime.

This is done at a few ancient temple sites in Greece, and much to the detracting of the atmosphere of the site as a sacred place. The effect cheapens the experience and gives the temple an overall unnatural feeling.

Although these temples would have been roofed originally, the material, color, and ominous presence of a tent does not relay the idea that this is a place of unique permanence and worthy of preservation, although further preservation is indeed the intention. Attempts to turn back the hands of archaeological time are futile. Realistically, most ancient temple sites in a state of disrepair were not destroyed by the effects of rain, wind, and harsh sun. They were ruined by manmade political conflicts, such as the case with the Athenian Parthenon, and natural disasters such as earthquakes and volcanoes, in which case an awning will certainly not prevent damage or subsequent looting by mal-intentioned or ignorant thieves. (12) In Gozo, one still occasionally hears members of the older farming generation boasting about breaking up and removing large piles of megaliths from the premises, further evidence of heritage destruction at the hands of naïvete. (16)

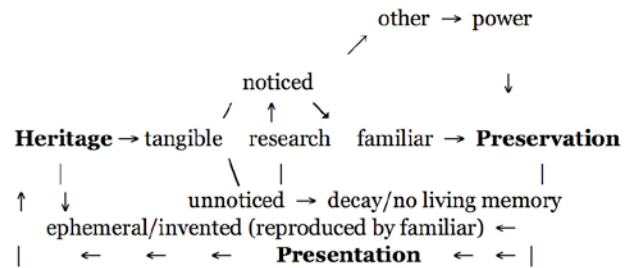
Ta' Marziena was found with the help of an annotated map filled in by Reuben Grima of Heritage Malta, and lies on a hilltop in a privately owned field outside Fontana, near Victoria (Rabat). (14) The megaliths are almost indistinguishable due to the covering of prickly pear cactus plants and carob trees (Fig. 2). When the megaliths are discerned from their surroundings, it quickly becomes obvious that it is the temple site. Presumably the farmer, or possibly his ancestor(s), is responsible for the bird blind that was constructed with smaller rocks on top of some of the existing megaliths (Fig. 3), an ideal perch for hunting local and migrating species, the national pastime of Malta. These rocks may have originally been cyclopean, "drystone walling of large pieces of rock," that were taken out of context to construct a new edifice, altering the form and function of the site. (17) Ta' Marziena has never been excavated, and as of now, there are no definite plans to procure the site from the current landowner. Therefore, no known artifacts have been recovered from Ta' Marziena , however the possibility that ceramic vessels and/or figures from the site are hoarded in a private collection is great, as this is a common occurrence with the lesser known Neolithic sites. (16)

At Santa Verna west of Xaghra , also in the middle of a privately owned farm, there were potsherds strewn about the megaliths, as there were near the "cart-ruts" at Ta' Cenc. This alludes to the possibility of a still artifactually rich heritage site, albeit pilfering may have taken its toll. Having said this,

I also found potsherds outside Ggantija, and my fellow researcher Adam Thompson found a chert flake at the Tarxien complex, both of which have been excavated extensively.

Imaged heritage is another way in which preservation of Gozitan heritage is accomplished through folk tales (13) In George Camilleri's collection of folk renderings, he relays a story behind the megalithic remains of Borg Gharib ("rock pile of the foreigner"). An Arab youth tried to uncloak the mysterious rider from Gharb who came to Qala every morning to light the torch beneath the statue of Our Lady. The boy was dragged to death by the rider's horse, and his body lay unattended by the side of the road in fear of revenge of the rider on anyone who tried to bury him. After his corpse began to stink, the local villagers of Ghainsielem pushed large stones over it. The story is not far from scholarly opinion that it served as a Neolithic burial site. Similarly, the folk tale of the origin of the menhir at Qala is that it was carried from the coastal cliffs by a giantess, nurtured by broad beans (unlike Samson's hair) to serve as a chair for her to rest upon. A drought fell upon the island, and there were no longer enough broad beans to support her great size and strength. Villagers began to mock her, asking her to move the stone, knowing that she could not. In shame, she ran away into the countryside, never to be seen again. (2) In these stories, villagers unfamiliar with the theories of archaeologists, or preceding their arrival, assumed their own myths to explain the mysteries associated with the formerly unexplainable. Indeed, villagers similarly believed Ggantija to have been constructed by giants, hence the name. These stories preserve the still mysterious origins and aura surrounding Gozo's Neolithic sites.

A modern form of imagined heritage lies in the revival of the Earth mother/Great goddess cult in New Age religions. The sculptures recovered from temple and burial sites in Malta and Gozo often depict obese human figures, previously understood as female. The Sleeping Lady from the Hypogeum and the Venus of Malta from Hagar Qim are two of the few figurines that are obviously female (no distinctly female figurines have been found in Gozo); the others are androgynous, exhibiting wide hips and full thighs but lacking breasts, as well as heads in some cases, and others are too fragmented to determine gender, if one was ever implied.⁶ How different from the obvious portrayal of gender in human form in Bronze Age and Classical sculpture from Greece, Rome, and Egypt. The Earth mother/Great goddess worship of late is based on interpretations of prehistoric figurines such as the Venus of Willendorff, and theories of the design of Stonehenge, the most famous megalithic site in Europe, formulated by scholars such as Anthony Perks of the University of



Scheme 1: Model of effects of preservation and presentation on heritage.



Map 1: Malta (www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/europe/malta_pol84.jpg).

British Columbia. (4) The gynecologist and endocrinologist claims that the “outer circles of stones match the locations of the labia minora and labia majora, and an altar stone sits where the clitoris would be,” coinciding with this prevailing belief that the goddess mother was accredited with giving birth to the lifeforms on which Neolithic people would have depended for food and shelter. (3) However, the flocks of New Age tourists to Malta, aided by uninformed Internet sites and dilettantes of prehistoric art, carry on a probably false legacy of worship of the female body in the Maltese islands.

In regards to physical preservation, Reuben Grima claims that the most important aspect of his job with Heritage Malta is to ensure the enjoyment of Neolithic sites for future generations. (14) If one person’s enjoyment inhibits the preservation and potential enjoyment for the future, the site will lose public appeal and educational influence. Therefore, preservation efforts must be the keystone to effective presentation (Scheme 1).

Presentation

Ggantija and Ta’ Marziena could not be more different spacially, although they both sit astride hilltops at 130 m, as does nearby Santa Verna. Additionally both structural remains stare across valleys to the next humble village and lofty cathedral. However, Ggantija is open, breathing accessibility and far-sighted vision reminiscent of the Parthenon of the Athenian Acropolis, with large ovalsque apses leading back to altars that jut against towering megaliths. It is difficult to imagine how the space would have been different when it was roofed originally, closing off the penetration of the strong Maltese sun. When exiting the site, the walled path leading back to Xaghra is lined with fresh fruit and vegetables from the adjacent farm and vineyard. There is a coin slotted box where tourists can insert a 25-cent piece and help themselves to produce.

Ta’ Marziena is secluded on a tilled plateau outside Fontana, and is obscured from the vision of passing traffic at the bottom of the hill by cacti and carob trees. When circling the discernable megaliths, a small path comes into view to the left of the shotgun shell-littered bird blind, and one must duck under spiny cacti to follow it, leading to the interior of what would have been the central apse of the temple. The space is intimate and esoteric, juxtaposing the living natural overgrowth with prehistoric relics of men long dead. Although unknown to the vast majority of tourists, and perhaps because of this, Ta’ Marziena incites a spiritual reverence in the way of the Mayan site Calakmul.

Hidden in the depths of a nature preserve in the Yucatan jungle, trees envelop standing stelae and grow atop towers of ancient stone steps. In both cases, the search for the site was an integral part of the experience, and the resulting invaluable discovery was worth any physical inconvenience during the journey.

The Archaeology Museum in the citadel in Victoria (Rabat) houses most of the artifacts collected from sites in Gozo, many of which came from Brocktorff Circle, the burial site accompanying Ggantija. The museum suffers a lack of federal funding, made obvious by dim lighting and the absence of display cases for stone slabs, which lie sadly on a wooden beam on the museum floor. The Neolithic figurines, tools, and clay pots, however, are well exhibited, and there is signage explaining the dating methods and distinction between temple-building periods. Conversely, the National Museum of Archaeology in Valletta, Malta is very didactic with reconstructions of the Hypogeum under the plexiglass floor. Exhibits of Neolithic sculpture, tools, and pots are slightly overcrowded, but provide excellent examples to the majority of Malta’s cultural tourist population. The curator of Gozo’s archaeology museum explained to me that no matter how many tourists come to the museum paying entrance fees, it would not be substantial to sustain the museum, which must rely heavily on private donations and government subsidies. It would seem that funds, as limited as they might be, are either not allocated proportionally or are not always handled appropriately, given the sibling rivalry between the islands and thus between the two museum collections.

When discussing the use of photography as presentation of cultural elements, there are inherently aspects of preservation involved as well. Photography essentially stops the movement of time and space, and thus the evolution of culture, so the viewer receives a sample presentation of how life, monuments, landscape, and people appeared (often in conjunction) at that time and in that place. The idea of preservation and presentation in photography goes back to Dimitrios Konstantinou, a Greek photographer in the mid 19th century who worked in close conjunction with the Greek Archaeological Society to imagistically document antiquities in its collection and various Athenian monuments. However, he also had a gallery and studio where he sold prints en masse to foreign tourists, so the records were dispersed all over Europe and America. (18) Photography in Malta began roughly a decade previously, with the British photographer Reverend George W. Bridges, who was traveling from Italy to Sicily to Malta to the Near East, compiling records of archaeological monuments with calotypes in each area. (18) Today, tourists take digital or film photographs of the great temple sites in Malta and Gozo, or they buy post-



Map 2: Gozo (www.carnaval.com/malta/gozo/gozo_cities.jpg).

cards to share their experiences with friends and family, or to retain memories of their foreign experiences for later recollection. (13) Postcards and tourist photography also tend to decontextualize the signified, thus unifying the signifier and signified, making the represented and idealized symbol into reality. (11,13)

Conclusions

Although modern Gozitans and institutions such as the MTA and Heritage Malta are genuinely concerned with the preservation and presentation of their heritage, be it Neolithic, maritime or agricultural, I believe more steps must be taken to preserve and particularly to present the lesser Neolithic temple sites to cultural tourists. (13) I propose the blazing of a Neolithic heritage trail in Gozo, leading from site to site around the small island. Tourists could have the option of walking, cycling, or horseback riding along the trail, having the opportunity to successively view obscure sites that are difficult to find, in conjunction with the famed Ggantija. To deter littering from water bottles (Malta uses reverse osmosis for all drinking and fresh water, and in the summer heat, trail participants would need plenty of liquids), tourists would need to bring their own flasks or canteens, and water kiosks would fill them periodically along the trail. Farmers could sell fresh fruit and vegetables to tourists in the manner that the neighboring farmer to Ggantija does (see Presentation). The trail could start at Ggantija, which is on the bus route and has parking available, then go west to Ghar ta' Gejzu and Santa Verna, the Neolithic caves near Victoria (Rabat), then south to Ta' Marziena. From there, the trail would go southeast to Borg tal-imramma, the burial ground of Borg Gharib, and the menhir in Qala, as well as the "cart-ruts" at Ghainsielem and Ta' Cenc. Also near Ghainsielem are the ruins of l-Imrejsbiet and tal-Qaghan. In a 1993 survey, 91% of Maltese believed that tourism is beneficial for the maintenance of archaeological sites (Bramwell, from the Secretariat to Tourism). (1) With support from the overwhelming majority, it may not be a lucid dream to execute this idea. Written permission from area landowners would be a necessity of course, but the local economic gain would far outweigh any inconveniences of foot-traffic on privately-owned property.

Ideally, the government would eventually be able to purchase these heritage sites from the landowners so that Heritage Malta could assume preservation responsibilities. In the past, procurement of sites from farmers has been problematic. Once the landowners are aware that they have something of value, they raise the price to some exorbitant amount that the Maltese government cannot afford. (16)

Also, there is almost certainly ego involved in the claimed rights to ownership of a unique heritage site. "Bragging rights" are indubitably invaluable in small, intimate communities. So although landowners may be reluctant to part with their property for a number of reasons, they may not be opposed to tourist foot-traffic, provided they are given some financial restitution for their hospitality.

If the MTA's push for "quality tourism" changed to "responsible tourism," the implications would also change, from a few secluded tourists with great financial status to a respectful, inquiring tourist with genuine interest in Gozo's and Malta's cultures across time. "Responsible tourism" would potentially attract a "wider range of visitors," while still bringing money, and thus employment opportunities, into the country. (5,13) These are the groups and individuals who will ultimately make the difference in Malta's future of political independence and financial self-sufficiency, while enabling native Maltese to maintain their own cultural identity. Although culture, by definition, is perpetually in a state of constant evolution, from a historical and socio-political perspective, the Maltese have had thousands of years of experience in the maintenance of their unique identity and resilience to the powers of foreign influence. (13)

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