

# Midwifery and neolithic Malta: interpreting and Contextualizing two terracotta figurines

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## ABSTRACT

The Maltese archipelago has a 5,000 year (pre)history of statuettes, votive offerings, and midwifery. Taking two examples of terracotta female figurines from the Neolithic, this study explores the possibilities for meaning and interpretation of these statuettes which lie outside the norm of prehistoric Maltese figurines. One figurine from the Tarxien temple complex shows a pregnant female whose body contains bits of bone and shell placed into particular anatomical parts while the clay was still wet. The other figurine examined is another pregnant female figurine, but this example was found with five clay “twists” that are commonly recognized as fetuses in varying stages of development. The usual interpretation of all prehistoric female figurines as representations of the “Great Mother Goddess” is herein avoided as an overarching theory with inadequate supporting evidence or anthropological value. Using the archaeological record, material culture studies, and ethnographic data, this paper proposes that these unique sculptures served as objects of sorcery by midwives on behalf of her client(s).

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### ***Introduction***

The small archipelago of the Maltese islands is known for its megalithic temples dating to the fourth millennium BC. Many of these sites and nearby burial grounds have yielded small anthropomorphic limestone and terracotta figurines, most of which are androgynous. Despite their absence of primary and secondary sexual characteristics, they are most commonly labeled as depictions of a Mother Goddess. There are certainly a few that do distinctly represent voluptuous females, such as the “Sleeping Lady” and the “Venus of Malta.” The majority of the figurines were fashioned with great care out of clay, with details ranging from precise intricacies of hair and textiles to vague, stylized human forms.

Two of these figurines sit somewhere in the margins outside the corpus of Malta’s Neolithic sculptures. One was found by Themistokles Zammit in 1915 in a trash heap outside the Tarxien temple complex; it was fired with bits of shell and bone wedged into the wet clay.

The other was found by a Dr. Ashby in 1910 in a pit at the Mnajdra temple site, along with five clay “twists.” Both sculptures have well-articulated breasts, vagina, and spinal column, despite their having been formed in a “crude” fashion. Neither sculpture depicts facial features or legs in the least, although they are free-standing. Interpretations of these figures vary from evidence of fertility rites to depictions of pathological conditions to cultic voodoo dolls. Given their find spots and materials and techniques for construction, this paper proposes that the creators of the figurines may have been midwives making offerings on behalf of their female clients.

The Tarxien Woman (5.9 x 3.5 x 3 cm) is free-standing and holds her head with her left hand and her pubis with her right hand (Fig. 1a, b). She possesses large pendulous breasts, her abdominal area is swollen, and a water-drop shaped incision was made to indicate the navel. The spinal column is prominently seen from the reverse with eight vertebrae articulated, and horizontal lines were incised outward from the spine, perhaps to indicate ribs. There are sixteen shell or bone flakes inserted throughout the figurine: one in the mouth, two in the sternum, two in the groin (left and right sides), one in each axilla, one above the vulva, one in each shoulder blade, one in the nape of the neck, one above the coccyx, one in the middle back, one above the left kidney, one near the anus, and one beneath the right shoulder blade.

The Mnajdra Woman (5.2 x 2.6 x 2.8 cm) was discovered beneath the floor in the south temple’s inner right-hand apse (Fig. 2a, b). As with the Tarxien Woman, she has pendulous breasts, a swollen abdomen, incised vaginal indication, and an exaggerated spinal column with rib-lines extending from it. Twelve vertebrae are articulated with eight ribs. The figure was also found with five small lumps of clay whose ends are twisted together (Fig. 2c). These “twists” are interpreted as representations of fetuses at varying stages of development from about ten to fourteen weeks old.

The roughly worked clay in both the Tarxien and Mnajdra Women suggests that they were not created by the same strata of artists responsible for the more realistic representations of the human form in Neolithic Malta. Zammit describes the figures as being “so alike as to suggest that they were the work of the same artist” ; however, there is no way of knowing this without accurate dates or the presence of inscriptions, and the Neolithic period spans millennia in Malta. Although we cannot know if they were created by the same individual, it is possible to deduce

their function and the role that the artist may have played within the community through a careful examination of the sculptures and their contexts.

### ***Examining Material Culture***

Using material culture to discern the individuals who comprised prehistoric societies is one of few options when approaching the problem of gaining knowledge without the assistance of a written record. Funerary and settlement contexts also offer some vague evidence to ascertain details as to the lives of individuals in Neolithic Malta. Burials in kidney-shaped shaft graves provide information suggesting that there was no differentiation between age, sex, or class within the funerary hypogea. The ossuaries consisted of bones that imply undifferentiated mass placement, with little indication of hierarchy or singular placement within a niche or catacomb. This suggests that most people were viewed as equal contributors to this society, although the data cannot prove this with any certainty. The seemingly random or haphazard placement of the bones may have been the result of spring flooding over the millennia, or the burial patterns simply may not reflect the actuality of Neolithic social structure. Settlement patterns are the least understood component of the structured landscape in Malta, but they indicate small farming communities with modest domestic structures similar to those found in modern Gozo. These limited inferences are in sharp contrast with the data available from the richly decorated temple precincts and fecundity of material goods found within burial and religious contexts. These examples of material culture produced by the Neolithic inhabitants have drawn the attention of archaeologists and art historians across Europe and the United States.

Examining material culture and iconography can provide a more democratic understanding of ancient cultures. People create objects as implemental or aesthetic devices, and many times these functions merge, no longer two distinct categories. As “integrated component[s] of social life,” objects have the power to “link generations and [they] are fundamental to mediating tradition.” They also represent social constructs such as gendered differences, and this is essential when examining the object as something produced by an individual. In terms of prehistoric archaeology, “material culture can be used to focus analysis on how society needs and constructs meaning around and attitudes toward fundamental differences between people.” Decoding Maltese material culture from the Neolithic is necessary to reconstruct the lives of people and how their actions impacted the archaeological record.

## ***Interpretations of Neolithic Maltese Figurines***

Themistokles Zammit, a Maltese archaeologist in the early twentieth century, excavated many of the megalithic temples and hypogea on Malta and Gozo. He also conducted detailed studies of the figurines associated with the Neolithic. He provides an objective description of the temple constructions and the artifacts associated with them. Since his reports were published, most scholars and dilettantes have seen the artifacts as evidence of a predominant fertility cult associated with the worship of a Great Mother Goddess throughout the Near East and the Mediterranean basin. One scholar even proposed that when viewed aerially, the temple walls outline the silhouette of the corpulent Goddess herself. This suggestion has been rejected because of the necessity of an aerial view and the differences of seeing an architectural plan and actually experiencing the space by movement through it, as well as the fact that the plans themselves changed throughout time with additions and alterations. These preconceived notions of female fertility as the prevailing religion throughout Europe and southwest Asia “seem to place more interpretive weight on the evidence than it can be expected to bear.”

The cult statue at the Tarxien temple complex is interpreted by some as a representation of the Great Earth Mother, despite its lack of specifically female indicators. It is interesting to note that Zammit did not assign a gender to the statue. He describes its extant fragment as “a draped colossal stone statue, of which only the shins and the feet are left... A pleated skirt comes down to below the knees and two fat pear-shaped shins show the extreme fatness of the figure.” It is a leap in logic and a vast assumption on the part of interpreters to say definitively that this sculpture fragment is decidedly female, let alone a representation of a Mother Goddess.

Along the same lines, the stone and terracotta figurines are also usually interpreted as depictions of the Mother Goddess, despite the fact that most of them are also ambiguously sexed. The Mother Goddess interpretations offer “no explanation for the existence of three different groups of figurines,” namely, male, female, and androgynous. The few that are definitively female, such as the Sleeping Lady, the Venus of Malta, and the two figurines under present discussion, are hailed as evidence of Goddess worship (Fig. 3). The interpretations support a hypothesis that has been embraced by New Age eco-feminists who look to Neolithic Europe as having been comprised of utopian matricentric cultures that were inherently pacifistic because of their egalitarian and non-hierarchical social structures.

However, Zammit reports ample evidence of animal sacrifice at the temple altars, in addition to possible evidence of human sacrifice. This certainly negates the label of a pacifistic culture. There are also many examples of stone and terracotta phalli, which suggest that explicit sexual characteristics were not limited to the female sculptures.

In a thoroughly contradictory statement, goddess-worship proponent Christina Biaggi states: “The nude figurines, like the clothed ones, were sculpted from globigerina limestone. They all represented an immensely fat deity – huge torsos, buttocks, thighs, legs and arms – but with tiny hands and feet. They lack sexual characteristics, female or male. Whether standing or seated the Goddess figurines are sculpted in the stylized poses...” The author designates the role of “Goddess” to figurines that she also states are asexual. Additionally she asserts that the Sleeping Lady is a priestess “engaged in dream incubation. This process allows her, in her sleep, to accept instructions, information, or messages from the Goddess.” This interpretation is based more on the author’s desire to fabricate a new religion rather than to make a pedagogic assessment of an artifact. The piece was found in the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, so it seems more likely that the sculpture is depicting sleep as a metaphor for death, not an oracular epiphany. Keeping the piece within its context is essential to interpreting ancient art as accurately as possible.

Peter Ucko defines three methods to deduce interpretations of prehistoric figurines: a detailed examination of the figurines themselves, archaeological context, and historical/ethnographic material from the area concerned. He asserts that it is “necessary to interpret each figurine, and each group of figurines, in their own right and to avoid generalizing from one figurine or group of figurines to all figurines in general.” Because the Tarxien and Mnajdra Women were discovered in rubbish heaps at or near temple precincts, the possibility that they were used in initiation rites or as children’s toys is unlikely. Zammit suggests that these two sculptures depict abdominal tumors or a form of Filariasis. However, this statement does not account for the five fetuses associated with the Mnajdra Woman. Extreme obesity must also be ruled out because of the presence of the emphasized spinal column and rear ribs on both figurines. Additionally, the idea that they represent a Mother Goddess, if any of the figurines from Malta do, is also unlikely due to the fact that their materials and fashioning are so different from other contemporaneous figurines. However, their possible function in some aspect of a childbirth ritual is relevant considering the state of pregnancy that they both represent and the presence of the fetus-like terracottas found with the Mnajdra Woman.

Isabelle Vella Gregory has proposed noteworthy interpretations of the Mnajdra Woman and the Tarxien Woman as depicting pregnancy and possibly witchcraft. Zammit also proposed a secondary interpretation of witchcraft for the Tarxien Woman. Along with the five clay “twists,” the Mnajdra Woman is seen as an instructive device created by a woman or a midwife to explore the consequences of pregnancy and miscarriage. She sees this figurine as evidence that: “Prehistoric women chose to embody in clay significant events in their lives: giving birth and possibly miscarriage. These representations also shed light on another aspect of women’s lives – the transmission of knowledge and the creation of a community feeling among women as they spoke about and shared their experiences of their lived bodies.”

However, if the Mnajdra Woman once functioned as an instructional device, it seems more likely that the find spot would have been nearer a settlement area than a religious one.

As for the Tarxien Woman, Gregory and Zammit interpret her with the shell and bone inserts as evidence of magical practices. The shell and bone pieces could function as either wishing ill will upon a pregnant woman or as apotropaic devices to protect or heal her from maleficent forces. Zammit also associated many of the interior rooms within the temples with a healing deity. The interpretation of the Tarxien Woman as an apotropaic device corresponds nicely with the gesture the figurine makes. As mentioned previously, she holds her head with one hand and her pubis with the other, perhaps signifying a unification of mind and body that is essential to the health of an unborn child throughout the gestation period.

The role of fertility may have been important enough in prehistoric Malta to make its presence known within aspects of material culture such as the figurines. As an autonomous agriculturally-based island community, it would have been essential to survival to maintain a stable population. If the population were to grow beyond the islands’ means, the inhabitants would be forced to compete for food and other resources. On the other hand, if the population were to decline rapidly, there would be an insufficient labor force to maintain the fields and food production. This implies that the community would have supported the health of a woman during pregnancy so that her offspring would have the best chances of optimum health. Unhealthy persons would unnecessarily add to the population without contributing to society as a whole.

It is not uncommon in island communities to control the birth rate by means of infanticide, and sometimes this is incorporated into the local religious sphere in the form of ritual sacrifice, as may be evidenced by the charred human and animal remains found at altars at Tarxien. Because healthy gestation would have played such an important role in the maintenance of an autonomous agricultural society, the role of midwives may have been of equal importance.

### ***The Artist and (Her?) Intention***

Maltese scholar Anthony Bonanno points out the necessity of looking to the creator of the individual pieces to contextualize the power of the artistic product. He claims that the difference between art and craft lies in the aesthetic value, function, and mass reproduction of the piece. The creator of mass produced clay figurines could have “easily been a master craftsman supplying the community with these standardized figurines...” However, the Sleeping Lady, “has all the prerogatives of an art object: originality of concept, formal language, masterful modeling and aesthetic beauty. Its creator was an artist in his own right and it should be interesting if someone with the right art-historical background and sensitivity could identify other pieces by the same hand, thereby making it possible to reconstruct further his artistic personality.”

From an art historical perspective, problems with this statement abound. Firstly, the notions of beauty and quality are subjective and ethnocentric; we have no idea how the Neolithic peoples of Malta considered beauty on a cultural level, let alone on an individual level. Perhaps they valued the ability to mass produce objects that appear remarkably similar. Another problem is that these pieces span prehistoric millennia. It may not be appropriate to contrast two different styles of sculpture, especially in terms of aesthetics and quality, when the pieces may be easily separated by over a thousand years. And finally, Bonanno implies that the figurines were created by male master sculptors or craftsmen who occupied a fairly prestigious role in Neolithic society. This assumption deletes the possibility of women having played significant roles in art production. There is no reason to assume that prehistoric women did not have the “power to express themselves in an autonomous way in some areas of their lives.” Nevertheless, Bonanno’s assertion that the artist’s intention is essential to comprehension of the function of these individual pieces is certainly relevant within the context of what little is known of the belief systems of the Neolithic Maltese.

In order to discern the artists' intentions in creating the Mnajdra and Tarxien Women, or any figurines for that matter, some characteristics must be re-emphasized. As previously stated, the figurines are made of roughly worked clay with nonexistent facial features in relative contrast to contemporaneous sculptures. While the Mnajdra Woman is accompanied by five clay twists probably representing fetuses, the Tarxien Woman has sixteen shell and bone pieces that were intentionally placed throughout her body. This again forces these figurines outside the larger corpus of contemporaneous female sculptures. Both sculptures strongly resemble pregnant women and have emphasized spinal columns, back ribs, and primary and secondary sexual characteristics. They were both discovered in rubbish heaps near or at temple precincts, implying that they served some sort of religious function relating to pregnancy and childbirth. Events surrounding the birth of a child were often "accompanied by ritual and cult practices, designed to ensure good health for the mother and child."

In terms of looking at material culture to establish how ancient people viewed the birthing process, we have few if any alternatives without textual evidence. We do not have documentary evidence, nor can we interview the prehistoric people of Malta to obtain pertinent information. As previously mentioned, settlement and burial evidence offer little data pertinent to this problem. Although "reliable information on birth in prehistoric Malta remains scarce," the artifacts depicting processes of pregnancy and birth or miscarriage can be studied to "illuminate the cultural construction of birth – the system-specific definition of the birth process, a society's philosophy of birth, and the way in which the society enacts and practices the event." The objects under discussion were fashioned by someone wishing to convey a message about the experience of specific women undergoing the process of reproduction.

Because pregnancy is a physical process that is experienced exclusively by women, it is possible that these sculptures were votives offered by women for the purpose of adjuring the assistance of a supernatural force to ensure healthy offspring. The creators of the figurines may perhaps have been the pregnant women depicting themselves in a terracotta self-portrait to be offered at the temple. They also could have been created and/or dedicated by the male partners of the expecting women. However, it is also possible that midwives would have created small votive sculptures on behalf of their clients to ward off dangerous forces.

Superstitions revolve around scientific ignorance, but because they can create a sense of "encouragement and reassurance in time of danger, it is not difficult to see why preg-

nancy and childbirth have been associated with dozens of superstitions." Pregnant women were endangered by miscarriage, hemorrhage, and infection, and "it was little wonder that an expectant mother sought reassurance from a charm or superstitious observance." If the expecting mothers or fathers were directly responsible for the creation and/or dedication of these terracottas, it would be more appropriate to have depicted a woman holding an infant, in the typical kouroutrophic pose. However, there are no infants depicted in either sculpture, only pregnancy, and with the Mnajdra Woman, fetuses. Because the Mnajdra and Tarxien Women depict very late periods of parturition, it seems more likely that they would have been created and offered by midwives whose roles increase in activity closer to the time of labor and delivery when these dangers are more prevalent.

Midwifery is one of the oldest professions in the world, and it is predominantly practiced by women. The onset of the practice of midwifery began in the Neolithic when hunter-gatherer societies gave way to agriculturally-based villages. Modern midwives Jean Towler and Joan Bramall describe the incipient field of female health practitioners in the Neolithic: "During this period of increasing social organization, elderly women, at first from within the family and then from within the community, replaced men as attendants at birth. These 'experienced women' came to fulfil the role of midwife. Once they assumed the right to this office, they retained it, to the exclusion of men, for at least the next 10 000 years... [It] is conceivable that the 'experienced woman' would come to care professionally for other women in disease and sickness as well as in childbirth."

Historically, midwives are noted for their skill and value as health practitioners in ancient Egypt, Greece, Italy, and Israel, caring for the mother and unborn child through later periods of gestation to the point of delivery.

Even today, over eighty percent of the world's newborns are delivered by midwives. Contemporary midwives in the Western world have similar roles to those spanning geography and history, while being challenged with combating the male-dominated sphere of Western medicine.

Included in the basic caretaking of women during and after parturition are the ever-present obligations of feminist politics, "working in a society that overall treats pregnancy as a dangerous process" best treated by educated male practitioners. Although the practice of midwifery is highly regulated in modern Western cultures, one midwife practicing in San Francisco relates her experience as a realization that

the physical and spiritual collide during the process of birth. She writes, "We can intervene on labor and childbirth, but we certainly do not have total control over the experience. Labor will take the path it takes. The baby will come when it comes. Labor teaches us that ultimately we do not have control over our lives, even when it comes to our own bodies. It is a lesson in flexibility, patience, life, and death."

Despite the advances of medicine, the processes of pregnancy and birth are not entirely devoid of the dangers associated with them. In the Neolithic, certainly this awareness of risk would have been all the more present, and it would have encouraged preventions ranging from herbal remedies to more superstitious precautions.

Historically, the role of the midwife has often overlapped with that of the traditional healer. Ethnographer Barbara Tedlock summarizes a midwife's many responsibilities: "Besides the nurturing and supportive role they take with pregnant women, midwives regularly administer treatments for sterility, give massages and sweat baths, and provide herbal remedies and advice on nutrition and childcare. They know how to concoct herbal aphrodisiacs and abortives, and how to treat female ailments and children's illnesses."

Tedlock also notes that her experiences as an ethnographer led to the discovery of a correlation between the roles of midwives and shamans. She recalls, "I began to pay closer attention to the overlap between midwives and shamans. In culture after culture I have found that – like my Ojibwe grandmother – women shamans are nearly always midwives." The relationship between healer, diviner, and midwife exemplifies the presence of women in the public domain of the community. Ethnographically, these women hold relatively high social statuses. Sarah Milledge Nelson notes that men are not the only participants in the public domain, but "[w]hether as rulers, traders, healers, or even warriors, women's contributions to society often had a public aspect, separate from or in addition to a domestic one."

Especially if she had dual obligations as a shamanic healer, the Neolithic midwife would have held a similarly public role that involved participation in temple activities, such as the dedication of votives.

Prehistoric medicine was not limited to superstition exclusively, as there is evidence of the surgical process of trepanning in Neolithic European skulls. However, it is believed that in absence of a primarily scientific field of

medicine, healing processes were the result of knowledge "gleaned from a study of nature, and especially the properties of plants." Given the vast ethnographic evidence for the use of plants as medicinal remedies and the relation of healers to midwives, these women would have used a combination of their knowledge of botany and traditional religious practices to prevent and cure illnesses associated with pregnancy. For example, during the Middle Ages in Malta and Gozo, blackberry and raspberry (*Rosaceae Rubus idaeus*) extract was used to facilitate childbirth in pregnant women. This method of healing and manipulating natural forces is reminiscent of Zammit's and Isabelle Vella Gregory's interpretations of the Tarxien Woman as evidence of magic or witchcraft within the context of Neolithic Malta. It also echoes the conclusion drawn by Savona-Ventura that in Malta and Gozo, the "witch doctor" also functioned as priest, sorcerer, and physician. The same would most certainly be true for midwives.

To proceed within the bounds of this interpretation, a fine line must be drawn between magic, sorcery, and religious ritual. Ralph Merrifield defines magic as being the "use of practices intended to bring occult forces under control and so to influence events." Sorcery, on the other hand, is a term used to describe "an intermediate process in which the operator attempts to compel the cooperation of a supernatural being," while religious rite involves an operator who "approaches a supernatural being as a suppliant." Because the Mnajdra and Tarxien Women were found inside or near temple precincts where religion was practiced, it is conceivable that they are examples of sorcery, instead of magic or religious ritual. If they were objects of magic, their find spots would probably have been closer to settlement areas. Likewise, if they were products of religious rites, they would not have been manipulated in the ways that they are, namely, consisting of multiple media or dependent sculptural complements.

These processes of creation involved premeditative thought not found in the other figurines that are more regularized in their overly stylized depictions of the human form that were unearthed in similar environments. Conversely, the manipulation of these two figurines implies an intermediary effort correlative to sorcery by these definitions.

In terms specifically applicable to the Mnajdra woman and her accompanying fetuses, the importance of "twistedness" warrants discussion within the context of ancient witchcraft and sorcery. The act of twisting was associated with binding an object to a spell. Interestingly, twisting is also associated with snakes and healing. The Greek god of

healing Aesklepios was depicted with snakes, as was the Minoan goddess of healing and various healing cults of the Semitic peoples of Asia Minor. This association has prevailed into the modern era with the symbol for healthcare practitioners represented as two snakes entwined around a staff. Because serpents and the act of twisting or binding are important in magical medicine and witchcraft, Zammit's and Gregory's interpretations of the Tarxien Woman as dealing with witchcraft or sorcery may be as applicable to the Mnajdra Woman and her twisted fetuses of clay.

Anthropologists have the advantage of looking the people they research in the eye. Archaeologists and ancient art historians lack this access, but we can utilize anthropological field work to our own advantages. Although it may not provide typological parallels, "it alone can give an indication of the range of practices that people living in the remote time of prehistory may have had." In terms of diachronically analogous situations with the functions of material culture within the same region, the analogue "does not necessarily imply the same reason for their use in prehistoric times, but it may suggest the type of explanations that the archaeologist should consider."

For example, one once-commonly held wives' tale declares an association between a particular Neolithic structure and a good omen in childbirth. According to Gozitan folklore, pregnant women, especially from the village of Xaghra, would sit upon the dolmen of Sansuna to ensure a safe delivery. This is because of a popular legend that tells of a giantess who, while carrying her baby on her back, carried the lintel stone on her head and the two post stones in either hand. After placing the megaliths on the ground in the form of the dolmen that still remains, she had a seat large enough for her to rest upon while nursing her newborn baby. Despite the influence of Catholicism, this belief in the magic of the dolmen was still held until relatively recently by some residents of the small island. In an interview with an Antoana Bajada, an 84-year old retired midwife in Xaghra, it became apparent that although village women may have believed in the power of the dolmen, the two midwives of the village knew better. When Ms. Bajada began practicing midwifery in 1948, Gozo did not yet have electricity or running water, and the islanders' superstitions were still dominant over the teachings of the church.

Ethnographic studies in modern Malta and Gozo suggest that some of the traditions from the Neolithic may still be present, despite centuries of occupation by Phoenicians, Romans, Ottomans, Arabians, and British. Just as worshippers possibly adjured the assistance of a healing deity

in Neolithic times through votive offerings, this was also a common practice in the islands under the guise of Catholicism until the mid-1930s. Ethnographer Paul Cassar claims that ex-votos were offered to the Virgin Mary in exchange for her assistance in healing seemingly incurable illnesses. One report is of a moribund woman whose parents offered a silver ex-voto to the Virgin, and she regained consciousness and speech the next day. Another report describes a man who lost his eyesight from measles, and his mother made a pair of silver eyes and offered them to the Virgin. Not only did the man's blindness remiss, but all the other symptoms of measles were immediately cured. Because the votive offering of anatomical parts was outlawed in churches in 1935, mothers grateful for a healthy childbirth still offer babies' clothing to the tomb of the Holy Hermit Kurraw in Gozo. It is interesting that in popular folk-belief in Malta and Gozo, many people believe that illnesses are punishments from God for their sins. Therefore, to be cured, they must appeal to the deity in the form of presenting him/her with material objects relevant to the medical condition. Cassar asserts that these accounts of votive offerings "throw an illuminating sidelight on the part played by religious belief in the history of healing in the Maltese Islands since prehistoric times."

The ethnographic evidence suggests that Maltese healing traditions may be similar to those that existed thousands of years ago. However, the commonality of votive offerings is still slightly different from the "curious" conditions of the Mnajdra and Tarxien Women. These terracottas are probably the product of an action that sits outside the bounds of religious ritual, where the worshipper approaches the deity as a supplicant, penitent and humble. The midwife, who may have also had shamanic healing responsibilities, possibly served as an intermediary between her client and her deity. The manipulations made to the figurines suggest that sorcery was involved in their production and dedication.

## Conclusions

This paper has presented evidence using iconography, archaeological context, and ethnographic evidence to propose an interpretation of two terracotta figurines from Malta. The interpretation is in line with the associations of witchcraft that Themistokles Zammit and Isabelle Vella Gregory present in their discussions of the figurines, as well as those of pregnancy and midwifery mentioned by Gregory. The sculptures were found within a temple environment, suggesting a religious context of some sort. The sculptures represent pregnancy and/or fetuses, not kouros

trophic poses, so it is possible that they were both dedicated by midwives on behalf of specific pregnant women with whom they were working. The midwives may have also been healers or had some shamanic powers, as is evidenced by ethnographic accounts. It is also possible that the creator(s) of these two sculptures may have had a public presence within the Neolithic agricultural community of Malta, especially if her roles included both midwife and healer or shaman. The level of manipulation performed in the production of the sculptures, including the insertion of shell and bone fragments in the Tarxien Woman and the addition of twisted clay fetuses alongside the Mnajdra Woman, implies an element of sorcery instead of magic or religious rite. Both sculptures probably represent apotropaic devices to protect a pregnant woman. The sculptor of the Tarxien Woman may have used the shell and bone pieces to ward off evil forces from areas of the body that were considered especially vulnerable during pregnancy. Similarly, the Mnajdra Woman's creator may have fashioned the five clay fetuses in effort to prevent the pregnant woman from miscarrying for a sixth time.

Further research should consider the specific placements of the shell and bone pieces of the Tarxien Woman. An anatomical study of the sixteen fragments could perhaps discern whether or not they were placed strategically or if their locations are arbitrary. If they were placed strategically, it should be interesting to correlate each piece with an anatomical function or superstition thereof. In terms of ethnography, it should also be of great importance to this topic of research to conduct further anthropological fieldwork in Malta and Gozo in order to record the experiences and knowledge of the few remaining traditional midwives. In the island of Gozo, only two traditional midwives remain, and the amount of memory trauma due to advanced age is certainly an impediment to the researcher attempting to recover fragments of memories.

Although the population is overwhelmingly Catholic, as mentioned previously, some traditions have been maintained over the centuries and perhaps over the millennia. This suggests that the modern cultural construction of birth and superstitions regarding pregnancy and miscarriage could shed light on similar processes that occurred during the Neolithic.

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