
”Temples” or merely Buildings for Congregation? The prehistoric megalithic structures of Malta.

Anthony Bonanno*¹

¹University of Malta [Malta] – Msida MSD 2080MALTA, Malta

Abstract

The paper will unfold under the headings specified in the official announcement of the above section.

Definition: We are dealing with two types of structures: a) a score of megalithic structures erected above ground according to a substantially standard format but following an evolutionary development marked by increasing complexity in ground plan and in elevation; b) two underground structures (*hypogea*), one consisting of a natural cave system to which separate megalithic structures were added in a different geomaterial, the other almost entirely carved out of the living rock to form a negative architecture reproducing architectonic elements from the above-ground structures discussed in a).

The methodology of construction of a) and the carving of b) will be extensively discussed under this and under the following headings.

Economic sphere: both structural typologies imply a huge investment and expenditure in terms of time, human muscle and endurance, and coordination of effort of a limited population with an agricultural economic orientation. This economy was sufficiently robust to permit this expenditure.

Technical sphere: discussion of questions of procurement of building materials, their manipulation with specific tools (some of which have been identified in the archaeological record) and their erection in accordance to a pre-established architectural design, revealing a precocious understanding of the inherent qualities of the building materials and their structural capabilities.

Social sphere: the outstanding dimensions of the building blocks and the size and complexity of the structural design imply the existence of a ranked social structure consisting of the upper echelon of an elite group coordinating the building process and, after completion of the same, the management of the structures and the rituals taking place within and outside them, and, on the lower echelon, the *hoi polloi*, who supply the labour force during the building process and the surplus of the agricultural economy for the enactment of rituals in both above ground and subterranean spheres.

Symbolic sphere: this prehistoric culture has left us a rich repertoire of abstract art, mainly, an array of differentiated patterns of spirals whose meaning may not be possible to decipher, and an equally rich repertoire of figurative art of both human and animal representations. The animal representations could be associated with animal sacrificial rites. The human ones are somewhat more difficult to pin down, for which one may propose different symbolic meanings for different typologies.

*Speaker

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