

Neolithic sites of Malta

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The island of Malta, the larger inhabited island in the eponymous nation, has five World Heritage listed Neolithic sites. Two of these are caves (one being highly significantly human modified) whilst the other three are stone temples. In December 2018, my family and I visited both underground sites and two of the temples.

The earliest of the sites, a Neolithic habitation cave known as Ghar Dalam Cave is situated halfway down the side of a gentle valley leading to a low point in the cliffs on the south-eastern coastline of the island. Dating of the bones found in the lowest stratum of the depositions layers in Ghar Dalam reveals that habitation commenced in approximately 7,400 BCE and ceased in approximately 5,400 BCE. Ghar Dalam is 144 m deep (with about the first third accessible for visitors) into the slope from the overhang at the mouth of the cave. The palaeontological excavations which have been undertaken within Ghar Dalam have revealed significant deposits of the bones of unusual fauna which no longer exists on Malta.



Above: Looking into Ghar Dalam
Left: The stratum in Ghar Dalam showing the levels in the excavation
Above right: Model of Hagar Qim
Lower right: Model of Mnajdra
(Author's photos)

At the entrance to the reserve within which Ghar Dalam is located, there is a small museum essentially in two parts. The first is given over to interpretive material explaining the little known of the Neolithic inhabitants of the cave. The explanation is necessarily limited as there is no record of whence these Neolithic people came nor is there anything to explain their disappearance at some time in the period between approximately 3,000 BCE and 2,800 BCE. These peoples, inhabitants of the island for some 4,500 years or so, left no written record of any type and, as a consequence, they remain an enigma to us.

The second element of the museum at Ghar Dalam comprises a spectacular collection of bones of fauna long disappeared from the landscape. The bones (not all found in the cave) range from small fragments to complete skeletons of animals such as a miniature elephant that had inhabited the Maltese islands. This collection was well interpreted. Indeed, the collection was of such breadth that one was left with a sense of intellectual indigestion in trying to understand the whole of the material on display!

The next two sites we visited, after leaving Ghar Dalam, were temple complexes which had been constructed some 450 m apart, on a windswept escarpment above the sea on the southern edge of the island. When arriving at these sites - they are in a common fenced reserve - one parks near the comparatively new museum constructed only some 100 m or so to the east of the younger of the two temples, the Hagar Qim Temple. Before moving to describe the two temples, it is appropriate to note that the museum comprehensively explains what the archaeologists and palaeontologists have been able to establish concerning these two temples and such information as has been able to be gleaned about what might have been the ritual practices in each of them.



The museum, the artefacts contained in it, and the interpretive material were almost worth the visit by themselves. Both Neolithic structures are now protected from damage by weathering.

Mnajdra, the slightly older of the two temples, is closer to the edge of the escarpment to the sea. It is located down a gentle slope accessed by a well-constructed paved pathway leading across the low coastal heath separating the two structures. Mnajdra is dated at approximately 3,600 BCE. It is an impressive arrangement of a number of small interconnected rooms within their common perimeter wall.



Above: The path from Hagar Qim looking to Mjandra

Below: Main entrance to Mnajdra

Right: The suburban street entrance to the Hypogeum

(Author's photos)



The structure of Hagar Qim is somewhat more complex than that of Mnajdra. A plan of its arrangement discloses that there were effectively two separate enclosures for this temple. The reason for this evolution in structure is unclear. Hagar Qim also dates from 3,600 BCE. Hagar Qim has the largest of the stones that has been placed at the two complexes, with one of the stones, over 5 m high, estimated to weigh 57 tonnes.

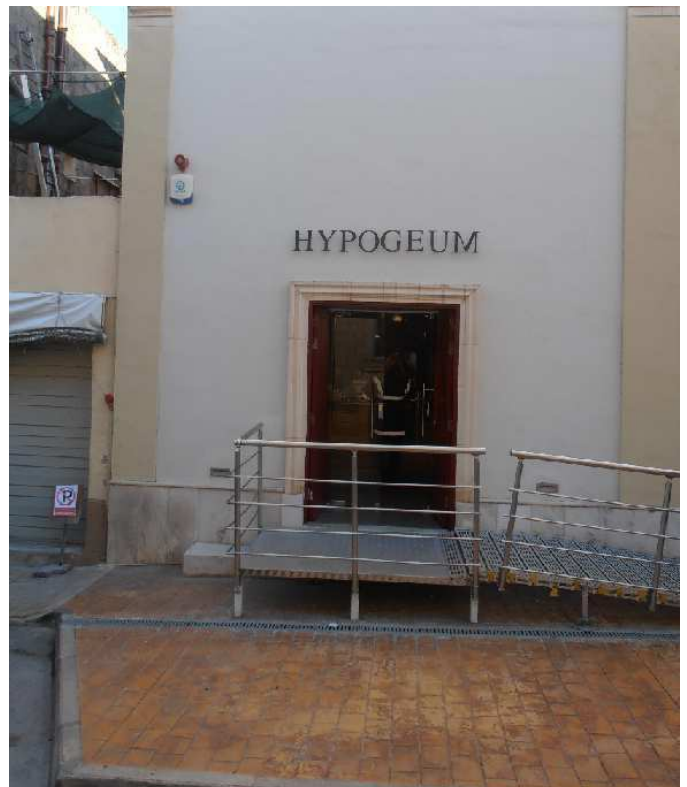
All the stones of each of these temples are limestone, reflective of the fact that much of the geologic structure of the whole island is of this material.

There is no readily available evidence as to where the stones for these two temples were quarried or how the builders of the structures managed to convey them to their present location. This is, as it were, a subsidiary enigma to the arrival of, and the fate subsequently befalling, the Neolithic builders and worshippers at these structures.

As is not uncommon in ancient structures of this nature, a number of apertures and their alignments coincide with solar events - leading to some speculation that there were calendar or season marking associations with the nature of the structures.

Impressive and fascinating though the three Neolithic sites we visited on our afternoon tour on our arrival in Malta were, Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, visited the following day, eclipsed them all.

Its entrance is located through an unobtrusive and modestly signed doorway on a quiet suburban side street some 7 kilometres from the centre of the mediaeval fortifications of Valletta.



Access to Hal Saflieni Hypogeum is restricted and tightly controlled. This was not the case prior 1991. However, in that year, Heritage Malta realised the cumulative damage that was being caused by the lack of restrictions on visitor numbers impacting on the internal micro-climate generally (and, specifically, on the red ochre paintings) and closed the site for nine years. During this period, works were undertaken that have, effectively, hermetically sealed the site (so that entry and egress is now effected via airlocks) and installed a sophisticated internal climate monitoring system.

When Hal Saflieni Hypogeum reopened for visitors in 2000, it was on a much more controlled and restrictive basis. Now, access is permitted in small groups only (maximum 10 people) and for a guided tour of some 50 minutes duration. Tours are spaced at one hour intervals with 6 tours per day - meaning a maximum of 66 people, including a single guide per tour group, go through Hal Saflieni Hypogeum each day. It is also to be observed that, as part of these major protective conservation measures, a new, five minute audio-visual presentation was developed and is delivered to each tour group before it enters Hal Saflieni Hypogeum proper.

Although the vast bulk of the tourists coming to Malta are drawn by the spectacular and intact mediaeval fortifications of Fort St Elmo and Fort St Angelo and the Grand Harbour of Valletta, there is great cultural reward for those who research a little deeper when planning their trip and take the trouble to go online to book a tour of Hal Saflieni Hypogeum. Tours are usually booked out at peak visitor periods (in summer or at Christmas or Easter) many months in advance. For our visit between Christmas and New Year, I needed to book three months or so in advance to be able to obtain sufficient places on a tour for the five of us, and even then, there was only one option available during our three day visit to Malta.

Visiting Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, the oldest (dating from at least 4,000 BCE), intact Neolithic structure known was revelatory. Although the Neolithic peoples who inhabited Malta for some three millennia have left us with no explanation as to the method of their arrival, or the reason for their disappearance, that which they have left in their habitation sites and structures truly warrant their celebration as being worthy of World Heritage status.



Hal Saflieni Hypogeum remained undiscovered for thousands of years as its entrance had, apparently, collapsed. It was only in 1902 that it was discovered. Because of the low rainfall on Malta, each new suburban house had had a cistern/well dug to capture such precious rain as actually fell. This system operated until comparatively recently. From 1982, the pressure on water supply has been relieved by desalination plants. In the era of discovery, one where the urban area of Valletta was expanding, workers constructing a cistern for a new dwelling on what was then the fringes of the city, broke through into Hal Saflieni Hypogeum - by accident leading to the discovery of this spectacular underground structure.



The well entrance that caused discovery of the Hypogeum

(Photo Heritage Malta)

Pottery remnants were discovered in Hal Saflieni Hypogeum during various archaeological excavations and many human skeletal remains were discovered leading to the hypothesis that it had been a funerary temple for the interring of the dead.

The Neolithic excavators, working with only rock or bone hand tools, have taken advantage of various fault lines in the rock (between the two types of limestone material below the surface) to maximise structural stability. However, this has also contributed to the slightly anarchic layout of the three levels and the excavated structures within each of them.

A bowl discovered during excavation at the Hypogeum

(Photo Heritage Malta)

Why the fuss, you might ask?

When you enter the airlock to go down into the uppermost of the three lower levels of Hal Saflieni Hypogeum, you are entering what is understood to be a funerary temple excavated from its humble small cave beginnings, over a period of hundreds of years - commencing in about 4,000 BCE. From this, Hal Saflieni Hypogeum became, by the labours of its Neolithic excavators, a spectacular three level subterranean temple complex.

It is also believed there was a surface level monumental structure which, from the few remains that have been able to be found at about the present street level, would have been the largest structure on the site.

Hal Saflieni Hypogeum had been excavated over three levels. The upper portion of the first level, some two metres or so below the current street level, had been excavated from within the promontory in the landscape upon which it is located. The upper level has a number of chambers, through the roof of one can be observed the entrance aperture when those digging the cistern broke through.

Much of the structure, including the main chamber and the area beyond it, known as the Holy of Holies, has been carved out of the living limestone to mimic doorways, lintels, columns and other structural elements that would have been features of aboveground complexes (and were subsequently reflected in the structures at Hagar Qim and Mnajdra). At several locations there remain visible red ochre spiral designs on roof and wall elements.



The Holy of Holies (Photo Heritage Malta)



Above: Red ochre spirals

Left: An upright and lintel likely carved on site

(Photos Heritage Malta)

In the upper level, there is a feature of an upright stone some two high with a lintel from it to an adjoining rock shelf. These two elements appear to have been carved in situ and there erected.

The middle and lower levels were excavated by the Neolithic builders over the 500 or so years following completion of the upper level. The later excavations into the lower level are of similar complexity. The middle level is slightly larger than the upper level whilst the lowest level is of much smaller dimension.

However little is known about the ritual and practices at these temples, it is clear that an element of the worship related to an earth mother goddess - again, a common theme across much of the time within which these Neolithic inhabitants of Malta have erected their various structures.

Prime examples of this have been found in Hal Saflieni Hypogeum. The small, headless statue (9 cm tall) and the reclining figure (12 cm long) are believed to date from ~ 3,500 BCE. The style of the first of these statues has much in common with other deity statues of a similar nature found elsewhere in Europe from similar dates.

No photography is allowed so the only images taken away by visitors are those on postcards or in the comprehensive guide published by Heritage Malta as part of its series about the major heritage sites of the nation.

The collective view of all five of us was that it was worth visiting Malta just for Hal Saflieni Hypogeum!



Above and below: Statues found in the Hypogeum and now housed in the National Museum of Archaeology.

Left: Museum explanation of lower statue

(Author's photos)

'THE SLEEPING LADY'
c. 3000 B.C.

This unique creation represents a singular achievement in Maltese prehistoric art. This beautifully rendered figure of the reclining lady was discovered in a pit in one of the painted galleries of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum. Often hailed as a 'sleeping mother goddess', the figure may well be an eloquent representation of Death or the eternal sleep.

