MORTUARY CUSTOMS IN PREHISTORIC MALTA: EXCAVATIONS AT THE BROCHTORFF CIRCLE AT XAGĦRA (1987-94) EDITED BY CAROLINE MALONE, SIMON STODDART, ANTHONY BONANNO AND DAVID TRUMP WITH TANCRED GOUDER AND ANTHONY PACE

McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research. 2009. 521 pp, 331 figs, 43 tables. ISBN 978-1-902937-49-6, hb, £95

The Maltese islands are famous for their remarkable prehistoric stone temples which have intrigued archaeologists because of their megalithic construction and sophisticated architecture. Sites such as Ġgantija, Ħaġar Qim, Tarxien and the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum provide a fascinating insight into the ritual elaborations of an apparently isolated Mediterranean island culture in the late 4th-early 3rd millennia BC. With the advent of radiocarbon dating, it became clear that, whilst these monuments could no longer be considered as inspirations for western European Neolithic chambered tombs, yet they were still among the earliest examples of megalithic architecture in the world.

Well-preserved archaeological deposits from the time of the temple complexes are a rarity, so this excavation report on a relatively undisturbed hypogeum or underground cemetery at Xagħra on Gozo is a major contribution to knowledge, providing a firm chronological sequence, a stratified material culture assemblage, a large sample of human remains, and an insight into mortuary practices. The excavation was carried out in 1987-1994 by Caroline Malone, Simon Stoddart and their Maltese and British colleagues.

This is an attractive, substantial and well-illustrated excavation report on the underground cemetery originally known as the Brochtorff Circle and initially investigated in the 1820s. Fortunately those early excavations caused relatively little damage to the stratified deposits within the artificially modified burial caves at the centre of the circle, so the modern excavations provide a remarkable insight into Temple-period demography and funerary customs. After the first chapter’s introduction, the monograph covers the natural environment of the islands, primarily through geology, soils and mollusca, followed by the domestic environment of the settled landscape and the ritual environment of nearby monuments.

After a chapter on survey and excavation methods, the Circle’s archaeological sequence is described, first with an overview of the entire sequence and then with three substantial chapters on each of the main phases. The first of these is the Żebbuġ phase (c 4100-3700 BC), consisting of a rock-cut tomb already published by the team in Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society (Malone et al. 1995) but included in the monograph for completeness. The next describes the main period of activity at the site in the Tarxien phase (c 3100-2400 BC), when the Circle became a large underground cemetery formed by two main chambers, a West and East Cave, accessed from the entrance of the surrounding stone circle wall over a stone threshold and down a flight of steps. Both of the caves were modified to include niches, megaliths and dressed-stone furniture although most of these architectural features had been subsequently robbed and broken up in prehistory as well as more recently. Within the centre of the complex, at the foot of the steps from the threshold was a sacristy-like space labelled the ‘Shrine’. The third period of activity at the site was during the Early Bronze Age in the Tarxien Cemetery phase (c 2000-1500
BC) and consists of occupation debris, mixed with residual Tarxien-phase material in upper deposits within the complex.

Subsequent chapters examine the copious material culture (pottery, lithics, worked limestone, shells and beads, worked bone and figurative sculpture), human and animal remains, and radiocarbon dates. These are followed by a transcribed symposium and a concluding chapter. Ten appendices cover scientific analyses and catalogues on geological, micromorphological and other aspects of post-excavation investigation.

The human remains are the most significant feature of this site: most are disarticulated or in various stages of disarticulation, providing an MNI (minimum number of individuals) of 822 individuals. They were excavated from a deep sequence of layers within the cave complex, the roof of which had long ago collapsed so allowing open-area excavation of these subterranean deposits. There are also some remarkable finds from these layers: stone fragments of a standing skirted fat lady in stone over 0.6m high, a miniature sculpture of a seated pair of fat ladies, a cache of nine probably male figurines with carved heads on schematic bodies, and a 1m-diameter stone bowl, broken into many pieces but still in situ. The dressed masonry is also impressive, particularly the surviving setting called the southern screen; this was just one architectural element among many, the remainder mostly robbed out or broken. Reconstruction drawings in the book’s concluding chapter offer useful views of how the West and East Caves may have looked during the Tarxien phase. There is also an impressive array of smaller stone, bone and terracotta figurines, pendants and beads, amongst a large assemblage of ceramics. It is particularly interesting that there is only a handful of likely imports from outside the Maltese islands amongst 76,000 sherds.

The largely disarticulated human remains provide insights into the processes of their manipulation in mortuary rites. These are discussed in detail in the concluding chapter and follow the notion that these remains were periodically reworked into new packages of limbs and skulls in rituals dedicated to the ancestors. The excavators suspect that burial activities within the Tarxien phase may have lasted only 200 years, initiated by intact male burials, with the niches filling first with bodies and then the display of massed burials in the centre of the site. The dismembering may have taken place over the course of staged ceremonies in which the full range of ages and sexes is represented among the dead.

With only 2% of the human remains in full articulation and most of the remainder entirely disarticulated, it is interesting that there are many hands, feet and torsos in which the bones have remained in full or approximate position. This is particularly noticeable in the plans for the third to sixth layers of the ‘Shrine’, whilst the uppermost seventh layer consists largely of skulls and upper body parts suggesting that some of the bodies may have been sitting upright. The presence of detached limbs and hands and feet still in articulation is an indicator that dismembering took place whilst bones were still held in place by soft tissues, a common aspect of broken-up mummies (Maureille and Sellier 1996). This raises the possibility that the bodies were dismembered not as new, fleshed corpses nor as defleshed skeletons but as long-dead corpses desiccated through natural mummification within the protective environment of this cave-like burial site. It may not be entirely fanciful to suggest that some of these individuals were even artificially mummified; three of the fully articulated skeletons are tightly crouched, suggestive of wrapping or bundle burial. Of course, the effect of the Caves’ dry conditions for long-term survival of soft tissues may well have been appreciated by these prehistoric people, thereby blurring our distinction between natural and artificial processes.

Although the authors have not considered the possibility of mummification and subsequent detachment of body parts as a part of the mortuary processes on this site, it might explain the
degree of disturbance of human remains, architectural furnishings and artefacts as an act of destruction at the end of the Tarxien phase. The authors note the smashing of the skirted figurine into scores of pieces as ‘an act of closure, completion or traumatic social change’. It might well be that the bodies – lying or seated in various stages of mummification, natural or otherwise – were also subjected to fragmentation in a violent closing event.

It is a credit to the quality of excavation, recording and reporting that this alternative hypothesis can be explored. Whether or not this question of mortuary custom can be fully answered, this is an extremely important research monograph for anyone interested in Maltese prehistory. It takes research and understanding of the cultural sequence to a new level and provides a research resource for centuries to come. This excellent book will also be of general interest to everyone interested in human osteology, ancient demography and funerary archaeology.

References


Mike Parker Pearson
Institute of Archaeology, University College London

Review submitted: August 2012

The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor